

UNRAVELLED

SEEKING GOD WHEN OUR PLANS FALL APART

What happens when our world falls apart? How do we press onward when our tightly-knit plans unravel into loose ends? What do we become when our identity—or the path we’re on—comes undone? What if all this is not the end we fear it will be?

In our unraveling, sometimes life surprises us with unexpected joy, love, and hope—with a new beginning we couldn’t have imagined. Sometimes we need god to unravel us, for we long to be changed. Throughout this summer we will explore biblical stories of unraveled shame, identity, fear, grief, dreams, and expectations. These are stories where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling of our plans—and us—into something new.

August 11, 2019 (NRSV) – John 20:19-29 **Doubting Thomas: When the Unimaginable Happens**

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin^[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the

nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Footnotes:

a. John 20:24 Gk *Didymus*

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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Theme Connections

Sometimes unraveling leads us to our deepest pain. Jesus dies, leaving Thomas and the rest of the disciples alone. Thomas isolates himself from the disciples, perhaps plunged deep into despair and grief. After all of his worst fears have finally come true, Thomas is too blinded by hopelessness to believe in Jesus’ return. Yet, his despair unravels when he touches Jesus’ wounds and can finally see, and believe in, God’s presence after death.



From the Artist – Lauren Wright Pittman reflects on her painting, “Grieving Thomas”

When the unimaginable happens, we can find ourselves drowning in doubt. We flail, reaching for something to bolster our faith in a sovereign, living God. Here we see Thomas needing tangibility: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas has just experienced the death of his teacher, close companion, and the long-awaited Messiah. Reeling in grief, Thomas needs a buoy to keep him afloat. Jesus offers Thomas peace, meeting him where he is instead of offering condemnation or a condescending nickname. He welcomes Thomas to do what he needs to find footing, but we aren’t told that Thomas actually acts upon the invitation. Instead, he says, “My Lord and my God!” Thomas is separated from Christ in death and all he asks is to be close to him again. Instead of poking Christ’s wounds in doubt, he reclaims relationship with Jesus.

When I visited India, I learned of “St. Thomas Christians.” It is said that during Thomas’ extensive travels he began several churches in southern India. To this day people proudly identify with his name. These Indian Christians do not define Thomas by his doubt; that define their own faith by his ministry. They know Christ because of Thomas. Thomas moved forward from that place of doubt, and his impact stretched to the far southern tip of India.

I chose to depict Thomas rubbing his eyes as he awakens from his grief to the reality that Christ has not left him. Lotus flowers (a symbol for India) swirl around his head in the waters that image the depth of his mourning. His ministry blooms out of this raw, authentic moment of appropriate doubt.

Guiding Questions

- What has unraveled and/or is unraveling in this story?
- Why is Thomas isolated from the other disciples when Jesus appears? Where is he? What is he doing and why?
- In verses 21 and 26, the Greek word for “peace” is Eirene, stemming from the verb, eiro, which means to join or bind together that which has been separated. How does this definition for peace impact your reading of this story? What is being bound together?
- Thomas seeks tangibility to bolster his faith. Belief is shaped by lived experience. Reflect on a moment or memory when you have tangibly experienced God through sight, touch, or sound.

Prayer *O God, when I am unraveled by brokenness, breathe your peace into my lungs so I might feel and know you are near. Amen.*