

More Wood for the Fire

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John 20:19-31

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When I was about 16, I spent 2 weeks working in the kitchen at a summer camp, and it was an incredible two weeks full of playing in the lake and the woods, practical jokes and dance parties with wonderful new friends, and very honest questions about God and faith, kind of like the ones you've been asking in confirmation all year. How do we make sense of God and science? If God is so great, why are there so many bad things happening in the world?

On the last night of camp, we sat around the campfire. I did not want to leave this place where I felt so close to God and to my friends. As we sat there, one of the counselors gathered us and said, "I've been thinking about this fire. It's a beautiful fire that burns warm for a while, but now the fire begins to die down, and only the coals are left. And you can try to blow on the coals to make the flames come up again. But that will only work for another minute or two, and then they will die down again. If you really want the fire to keep going, you have to get more wood. Same thing with our faith. We will come to places in our faith where we need to stop blowing on the old coals, the things that used to give us faith. We need to get more wood, to keep feeding our faith with new fuel, so that it continues to grow, and doesn't burn out."

This idea has been a touchstone in my life, something I've come back to again and again at moments when my faith shifted. There was once a time where particular worship songs or particular Bible stories or particular ways of praying made me feel alive with God's presence. When I was in high school, it was the idea that Jesus accepts me no matter how successful I am. When I was overwhelmed with homework and activities and the pressure to measure up, I used to return again and again to the hope that God's grace was sufficient for me even if I failed at the rest. And this was so meaningful.

Until one day it wasn't. Because I wasn't sure if that God even existed anymore, or cared about me, or paid attention to all the injustice in the world. And so for a time, the wood that fed the fire was the realization that Jesus, like me, questioned God. That Jesus said, "Father, take away this cup from me." And even "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." That I wasn't alone in my doubt and anger. That I was maybe even especially close to Jesus just at the moment I felt so far away.

And I confess I wonder if I'm coming to one of those places of change again. Because the headlines every morning seem to threaten my faith. Another attack on a place of worship this week. The hatred and violence and injustice seems overwhelming. For now, I'm turning to a new place, the Old Testament prophets who call for God's justice and declare God's anger with oppression and injustice.

All of this is a way of saying that every time it felt like my faith was a dying ember, God has provided more wood to get the fire going again.

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It seems to me that the disciple Thomas is a great example of what it means to know when it's time to stop blowing on the dying coals, and to get more fuel. He often gets a bad rap and people call him "Doubting Thomas." But he sounds to me like a normal, sensible person. Someone we can relate to. It's not really his fault that he wasn't in the room that evening when Jesus showed up the first time. All the other disciples were up there locked in the room, afraid, but he wasn't. Maybe while they were huddled away, he was still doing the work! Whatever the reason, he didn't see Jesus, and he understandably questions their story that Jesus is still alive. "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." Maybe he's not questioning so much as reaching out for what he needs for that next step in his journey as a disciple of Jesus. He needs not just a story about Jesus, but an encounter with Jesus; not just rumors of a Holy Spirit, but a God who shows up in the flesh and lets us see and hear and touch.

Another way of saying it is that he needs more wood for the fire.

I've always loved that when Jesus shows up a week later, he never criticizes Thomas for needing that. He just offers him what he needs, saying, "Put your finger here, and see my hands."

But what stood out to me this week is that it's not just Jesus—not just the all-understanding God—who accepts Thomas' doubts and meets him there. It's also the community of disciples. They didn't throw him out, ask him to leave, or require that he eat his words. They just let him keep hanging out with them, and it's because they continue to welcome him that Thomas is around to meet Jesus in a new way that next week. The community's faithfulness provides a space where Thomas can receive the grace of God, receive the fuel for the fire.

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Ian, Kaylea, Nicholas, Emma, Adam: you have all worked hard this year in confirmation class. You've spent many early Sunday mornings in the tower room, eaten many donuts, cookies, and whatever snacks could be found up there to keep you awake through discussions of the Trinity, of sin, of baptism. And you have each written statements of faith that reflect what's important to you about your faith today.

I hope you'll keep holding on to those things that give you faith, that connect you to God. But maybe tomorrow, or in a few months, or a few years, you'll look back at this day, or look back at what you wrote, and it will sound hollow or naïve or just *not you*. Or maybe you'll be in a place for a while where you just don't even look back at all, where other parts of your life captivate your heart and church fades into the background...

If there's one thing I want you to hear today, it's this: that God is big enough to walk alongside us even through the shifts and changes and turns of our lives. That Jesus can meet you in new ways when you need new ways of meeting him.

I want you to know that at some point, you'll need to stop blowing on the same old dying coals of youth group or service or forgiveness or whatever, and get more wood for the fire. At some point, your music or your sports or your friends will consume your life and you'll feel they're the

only community that matters. At some point, you'll learn a whole new scientific world and you'll wonder how God fits in. At some point, you'll fall in love and out of love and have your heart broken and wonder if God still cares. At some point, you'll hear the story of an immigrant friend and become so angry or impassioned about society and politics and wonder if the church will seem irrelevant to the real issues of justice out there.

You'll come to your unless. "Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Unless you give me a sign, I won't believe. Unless you heal my relative's illness, I can't believe. Unless you fix the broken heart, prevent the failing grade, end the injustice, I won't believe.

When this happens, that is okay. That is normal.

When this happens, I want you do to what Thomas did. Say it out loud. Say it out loud to your faith community and to God. Give the faith community the chance to keep on welcoming you anyway, keep on loving you even as your faith is shifting beneath your feet. Give Jesus a chance to show up and provide the answer to your *unless*.

Because it's the moment we come to the unless that we're knocked off balance enough to see that God is bigger than we previously realized. Thomas saw that Jesus was not only a teacher and healer and friend, but that he was God, with the power to rise from the dead. And after the encounter, Thomas wrote a new Statement of Faith. Did you catch it? It's only 5 words and it doesn't reference the Trinity or include a Bible verse.

But it's a powerful reflection nonetheless. "My Lord and my God." Thomas' statement of faith reflects his new understanding that Jesus is his Lord and his God, the one he wants to follow, the one in whom he trusts. That's a statement that can last through as some of the other things change.

And I hope it's true for all of you. May Jesus, the God who meets us in our fear or doubt or frustration or transition, always be your Lord and your God.