Thomas Believes April 14, 2024

**Bible Verses:** John 20:24-31

**Spark Story Bible:** pages 492 to 495

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Overall Lesson Takeaways

* **It’s OK to doubt!**

Although we called this lesson “Thomas Believes”, virtually everyone knows this story as “Doubting Thomas” – and traditionally this passage has been used as an example of how we should just believe in Jesus rather than doubting. I tend to see it differently: doubt and belief *are* used as opposites throughout the Gospel, but Jesus doesn’t shun Thomas or deny him an opportunity to experience his presence after the resurrection. Instead, Jesus gives Thomas the proof he was looking for – leading to Thomas’ exclamation “My Lord and my God!” All of us have doubts from time to time about our faith, and many older kids (or even adults) struggle with the idea of Jesus being resurrected from the dead, but Jesus’ love for Thomas is greater than any of his doubts – and the same is true for each one of us!

* **We believe in lots of things without seeing them.**

The Gospel of John is very interested in the question of believing without seeing, likely because virtually everyone who read or heard the gospel would never have had an opportunity to meet Jesus. It can be hard to believe in things that we cannot see – we human beings like tangible proof! – but not everything that is real or important to us can be seen, touched, or heard. Take friendship, for example: all of us have people we would describe as being our friends – but what is it that makes them your friends? Do all your friends treat you the same way, or say the same things to you? The other common example that is used is love – all of us believe that love is a real thing, but what gives us that belief? We may believe in God because of blessings in our lives, from reading the Bible, going to church, etc. – but we will never have proof in the way that Thomas did… but that does not make God and God’s love any less real!

* **God is always with us, even though we can’t see God.**

One of the most challenging aspects of our faith – particularly for children since they are developmentally highly literal thinkers – is that we are constantly talking about someone we cannot see or hear. Jesus was *Emmanuel*, “God with us” – but he lived almost 2,000 years ago and even two years can feel like an eternity to kids! Nonetheless, we trust God is always there for us – especially during times of struggle or sadness. A famous inscription from a prisoner during the Holocaust puts it best: “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. And I believe in love, even when there’s no one there. And I believe in God, even when he is silent.”

Checking In

**Before the reading:**

* **Check in with the kids – welcoming any newcomers warmly.**
	+ Younger kids: Gardening season – do you have a favorite flower?
	+ Older kids: Highs and Lows from the past week
* **When was the last time you were really surprised by something? Do you like surprises, or do you always like to know what’s going on?**

Bible Lesson / Discussion

**Reading the Bible:**

* For the next two Sundays we’re learning about Jesus appearing to the disciples after Easter – and they were really surprised to see him!
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!

**Questions About the Passage** (see next page for PreK/K questions)

* Thomas wouldn’t believe the other disciples about Jesus being alive, even though they said he was. Why do you think Thomas didn’t believe them?
* Thomas wanted to see the wounds from Jesus’ death on the cross as proof he was alive – if you could ask Jesus anything, what would you ask him?

**Connections to Our Lives**

* Jesus shows Thomas he is still alive – and teaches him about believing things, even when you can’t see them. Can you think of anything you believe in, even though you can’t see it? What makes you believe?
* Has there ever been a time when it was hard for you to know God was with you? Was there anything that helped you trust or believe that?

**Biblical/Church Connections**

* Today our 8th graders are celebrating Confirmation, a time when youth confirm their faith in the promises given during their baptism: that they are known and loved by God, and that they want to follow Jesus as best they can. How do you try to follow Jesus’ teachings in your own life?

**Alternate Preschool and K/1st Questions**

Younger ages, particularly those in our preschool class, may have a hard time discussing the biblical text for very long (if at all). My hope is that these questions (and especially the activity) can help with engagement!

**Opening Questions / Activity**

* **Take some time to welcome / get to know the kids!**
	+ We’re into gardening season… do you have a favorite flower?
	+ One of the people in our Bible passage today had a really big surprise… do you like surprises? When was the last time you were really surprised by something?

**Warm Up Game – Blindfolded Drawing**

* Thomas, one of the disciples, really wants to see Jesus after Easter – but I thought it might be fun to play a silly game where we can’t see what we’re drawing!
* Have the kids close their eyes and ask them to try to draw a few things without looking (make sure there’s no peeking!)
	+ Triangle
	+ Heart
	+ Tree
	+ Person
* Play as long as kids are having fun, then transition to the Bible questions.

**Bible Discussion/Questions**

* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!
* Thomas was really surprised to see Jesus after Easter – and it made him really happy! Who are people you get excited to see when you haven’t seen them in a long time?
* Jesus lets Thomas know that he is always with him, even when Thomas can’t see him – and that God’s love is always with him too! How does it make you feel knowing God’s love is with you no matter where you go?

People of Faith

In addition to reading our weekly Bible story, I'd love for our older grade school students to learn more about people whose lives were changed by their faith in Jesus. We'll lift up a new person each Sunday, trying to connect their story to our Bible passage as much as possible!

**Ding Limei**

As we remember the spread of the early church and the challenges those earliest disciples often faced, one modern example is the witness of Ding Limei – a Christian evangelist who travelled across China spreading the gospel.

Born in 1871 in the Chinese province of Shandong, Limei grew up in a Christian household – something that was extremely rare in China at the time. Although little is known about his early life, he was sent at the age of 13 to study at a Presbyterian school – eventually graduating and serving as a teacher for several years before he decided to study theology and become a pastor at the age of 26.

Two years later, in 1898, Limei was officially ordained and he returned home to his native Shandong province, travelling and preaching the gospel. The start of his ministry, though, unfortunately coincided with a massive anti-foreigner, anti-Christian movement in China called the “Boxer Rebellion” (1899-1901). Limei would be arrested and beaten five separate times due to sharing his Christian faith – along with being jailed for 40 days.

At the conclusion of the Boxer Rebellion, Limei emerged with an even greater desire to preach about Jesus. He committed to visit every province in China (18 then, 34 now) as an itinerant preacher, and his preaching soon began to attract hundreds and perhaps even thousands of people to the Christian faith. It is said that he convinced almost 300 people to become pastors themselves, and after almost two decades he was able to visit all 18 provinces in a country slightly larger than the United States!

Eventually, Limei shifted back into his original passion of teaching – working at a newly created seminary in Shandong. Colleagues would later note that he kept a prayer journal of almost 5,000 people whom he prayed for by name each day – an amazing example of the faith and caring which inspired him all throughout his life and ministry.

Crafts / Activities

**Thomas Believes Blind Drawing**

**(Ages 5+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Crayons/Markers/Colored Pencils

Instructions:

* This activity is trying to play on the “believing without seeing” idea that is present in the Thomas story – have kids pick an object/person in the room and ask them to draw it on their paper without looking down!

**Thomas Believes Puzzle**

**(Ages 5+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This puzzle is fairly simple – have kids look at code near the bottom of the page to decipher the symbols and spell “Jesus is alive!”

**Thomas Believes Word Search**

**(Ages 5+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This is a fairly typical word search using ten different words lifted up throughout the passage – words can be found in all directions, including diagonal and backwards.

Biblical Background – Thomas Believes[[1]](#footnote-2)

The story of “Doubting Thomas” is part of a wider series of post-resurrection stories in which Jesus appears to the disciples, often in physical form. These post-resurrection stories were clearly highly valued by the Gospel writers and the early church – Matthew, Luke, and John each include them, and a later writer almost certainly added a handful of appearances to the original ending of the Gospel of Mark.

Despite appearing in every Gospel, though, one of the fascinating aspects of these accounts is that there really isn’t much overlap between the stories that the gospel writers cite. “Doubting Thomas” only appears in John. The “Road to Emmaus” only appears in Luke. “The Great Commissioning” only appears in Matthew (until cited by the later addition to Mark). The Gospel of John alludes to making decisions about which stories to include in John 20:30, and it certainly seems as though the other Gospel writers may have done the same – including stories after Jesus’ resurrection that helped drive home Jesus’ identity and the subsequent mission for the disciples.

John’s Gospel is, of course, strikingly different in content and tone from the other gospels, so it’s no surprise that passages like “Doubting Thomas” only appear within John’s text. Some scholars, though, have questioned whether there is more going on here than meets the eye – Thomas seems to have been revered as an important figure in a late 1st/early 2nd century branch of Christianity called “Gnostic Christianity”, in which lessons from Jesus were intended to lead to the enlightenment of the hearer. Gnostics emphasized the spiritual over the physical – was John trying to dispel this idea by having Thomas physically touch Jesus’ wounds and affirm Jesus’ physical resurrection?

Regardless, the passage has taken on a second life as an encapsulation of times when we doubt the veracity of our faith – doubts that have clearly existed even from the earliest days of the church! Rather than scold Thomas for his doubt, then, perhaps we can take heart in watching Jesus welcome him still, doubts and all. We, like Thomas, do not need to have our faith completely figured out – instead, we trust that Jesus’ love is greater than our doubts.

1. Your ability to share this info with kids will vary depending on their age – this section is mainly written for teachers and parents to learn a bit more about the background to each week's passage! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)