



RISING STRONG

PREACHING RESOURCES

WEEK 1 PREACHING RESOURCES: RISING FROM SKEPTICISM (THOMAS)

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: JOHN 20:24-28

Focus Statement: The journey from unbelief to belief requires a grace-filled encounter with the living Christ.

ME: Think of a time when you experienced significant doubt; in the workplace, in relationships, in God, etc. Doubts may be small or large. What helped you move from doubt to belief? Where did you go? Who did you talk to? Who did you call on? What was their response?

WE: As human beings, we all experience doubt. In what ways will you invite the congregation to think about their doubt and its impact on their life? How have these experiences shaped their journey of faith?

GOD: Thomas was not with the the disciples when the resurrected Jesus appeared among them for the first time (John 20:19-23). The disciples told Thomas what had happened but he wouldn't believe what he was told. He had to experience it for himself (v. 25). (Note: Consult John 11:1-6 and John 14 for a deeper perspective on Thomas' character and some of his ongoing, yet honest and relatable struggles.) A week later, Jesus appears again. Thomas' doubt is not met with condemnation or judgment. Jesus is not threatened or agitated. In fact, Jesus gives Thomas exactly what he asks for. Jesus is gracious with Thomas. Jesus honors Thomas' doubt. Jesus responds with time and space, kindness, and compassion.

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In verse 29 (beyond suggested scripture reading), Jesus says to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This verse often leads people to see Thomas’ doubt as a sin and “believing without seeing” as the ideal, preferred way to come to faith. Whether or not this is true, Jesus’ response to Thomas’ skepticism transforms him and raises him to a place of trusting belief. Consider different stories people in your congregation may have been told about what true or real belief is and how those stories have shaped their own experiences. For example, has having doubts led them to believe they are not “faithful enough”? How has believing this about themselves limited their participation in the community, affected their ability to be honest about their struggles, or their willingness to put themselves out there?

Skepticism and doubt can be limiting if we remain stuck in it and ashamed of it. But for Thomas, the redemption from skepticism came in putting it out in the open, asking for what he needed, and allowing the encounter with Jesus to transform him. His encounter with Jesus in his doubt allows him to believe and propels him to carry out the Jesus’ mission in India for years to come. Although scripture does not give us much more detail about Thomas’ story, we do know that he continued to be among the disciples when the risen Jesus fed them breakfast by the sea (John 21:1-4) and in the upper room praying after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:12-14). Not only did Thomas come to believe, but he continued to be one of the twelve apostles of Jesus and a full member and leader of the early church community. Sources outside of the Bible indicate that Thomas travelled to India, preaching the gospel, and starting the church there before dying for his faith. (Read more about it here: <https://seedbed.com/saint-thomas-preaches-the-gospel-in-india/>) Thomas certainly rose strong! If God could work through this once “doubting” disciple, imagine how God can raise us strong from our places of doubt, skepticism, and other struggles of faith. God is not done with us yet!

YOU: Invite the congregation to consider some of the following: In a season of doubt, what do you need from God? How do you ask for what you need, and do you believe God will respond?

WE: Invite the congregation to consider: If you/we are in a season of doubt, can God still use us? What are your congregation’s doubts about itself, its future, and God’s work among you? How can you ask for God’s reassurance or act faithfully in spite of your doubts?

And/or, especially if your community is not in a season of doubt, how can you embody the Risen Christ for others in their doubt? When people encounter you — do they come to believe? Especially in seasons of loss, grief, and great change, doubt and skepticism can overwhelm. How might your community help others rise up from doubt to belief? How can you be the grace-filled response for others that Jesus was for Thomas?

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WEEK 2 PREACHING RESOURCES: RISING FROM DENIAL (PETER)

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: JOHN 21:15-19

Focus Statement: The love and forgiveness of God is what enables us to rise above our mistakes and become more faithful disciples.

ME: Consider sharing one of the following: Was there a mistake that you made on your journey of life or faith where you were forgiven and shown love? What does forgiveness and love look like for you? Share a time when you experienced this. Or, share a mistake where you have hurt or betrayed another. (As always, be cautious about confidentiality and do not use an example from within your current church community). How did forgiving them change you?

WE: Invite people to think about a time when they were given a second chance and the impact it had on their life. Often times, the world and culture-at-large do not encourage us to be very generous with our second chances. We sometimes close off opportunities for healed relationships or hold grudges. Why is that? Invite the congregation to consider an example of a time when we denied God in our poor treatment of another, or our unwillingness to give others a second chance?

GOD: Peter makes a big mistake and denies that he even knows Jesus three separate times (John 18:15-18). Briefly recap this story for your congregation to set the context.

Despite this lack of faithfulness and friendship, Jesus still invites Peter into discipleship. In fact, the risen Jesus meets him and the other disciples with a gesture of companionship and abundance -- fish and breakfast (John 21:1-14). Peter's imperfect love for Jesus does not seem to change Jesus' unchanging love for Peter or God's love for imperfect humanity.

Forgiveness allows us to journey from the moments where we deny Jesus, or make other big, relationship-harming mistakes to reconciliation with God and renewed faithfulness. In John 20:22, Jesus says that if you forgive someone else's sin, they are forgiven through the Holy Spirit. Our forgiveness allows the power of God to move, change, and reconcile.

The power of Jesus' forgiveness is evident in his willingness to feed Peter and address him as friend, even after Peter's denial. Yet our passage (John 21:15-19) shows that on the other side of forgiveness, Jesus calls and empowers Peter to a changed and renewed life of servant leadership (feeding and tending Jesus' own "sheep" as shepherd to a flock). Often we think of forgiveness as the solution to a problem, but this passage shows how forgiveness is a first step, a foundation that frees Peter for a life of faith and a key leadership role in the early church. God not only promises us reconciliation/justification (a healed relationship through forgiveness) but also redemption/sanctification (a changed life through the Holy Spirit, in which we actively participate).

Peter's denial of Jesus' does not define him. It never did. Long before Jesus' death and resurrection, he called Peter the rock upon which he will build the church (Matthew 16:18). In our passage (John 21:15-19), we see Jesus commissioning Peter to be this rock, and if we look ahead (for example, to Acts 15:7-11) we can see Peter living in his strength as this rock of the church. How often we do we let our mistakes define us or derail us from living the lives we were made for? How might the example of Peter, who accepted the full power of Jesus' forgiveness to move forward in following God's call on his life, inspire us?

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YOU: Invite the congregation in a call to action. How would you begin to forgive someone today? What would be your first steps in moving toward this? What does it look like to love the way Jesus wants us to love both others and ourselves? You might explore why forgiveness is hard or doesn't always happen right away. Most often, it is a process. What freedom might be found for us or others in the act of forgiveness? How might we accept the forgiveness that Jesus offers us for the mistakes that are holding us back? Often it starts with awareness of the mistake, and bringing it to God in confession (sometimes sharing with a trusted friend of faith, who will remind you that you are forgiven, can help). Like Jesus called Peter to feed and tend his sheep, if he truly loved him, what action might Jesus be calling you to take in order to fully embrace and embody your forgiven-ness?

WE: Where in our world or communities today do we need to see forgiveness or second chances? What is required in order to get there? If we offered it, what would that grace enable us to become? How may our story of forgiveness inspire others to move forward from their mistakes in lives that serve Jesus?

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WEEK 3 PREACHING RESOURCES: RISING FROM HATRED (SAUL/PAUL)

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: ACTS 9:1-22

Focus Statement: In a divided world, hatred can bubble up even in the hearts of those who seek to do good. The risen Christ moves us from a place of judgement to a place of connection, so that we can work together for the sake of God's kin(g)dom.

ME: Tell a story about a time when someone believed in you, and it made a difference. Or talk about a time when someone wrote you off and the impact it had. Or talk about a time when you saw a gift in someone unexpected and helped them realize it.

WE: In our culture, there is an increasing temptation to write people off or make judgments about them. What are some of those judgments? You could ask the congregation to consider a time when judgment or fear kept them from connecting, interacting with, or seeing the potential in someone. What are the reasons for this?

GOD: It's interesting that at the beginning in this text, both Ananias and Saul believe themselves to be faithful and doing what they were supposed to be doing. They both refer to the voice speaking to them as "Lord," connoting reverence toward something outside of themselves. How much time do faithful people waste judge the quality of another person's faithfulness? Saul persecuted the faith of Christians because they did not believe like him. Ananias had preconceived ideas about Saul and wanted nothing to do with him at first (v. 13-14). But God gets to decide who the instruments are going to be in God's band and the part they are supposed to play.

From our perspective, it is easy to see what Saul is doing (persecuting Christians) as hateful and we may try to convince ourselves that we are not hateful like Saul is hateful. It may be easier for people to relate to Ananias. He wanted to nothing to do with Saul, but "for the right reasons"- Saul was persecuting his people! The degree and expression of the negative feelings that Ananias has towards Saul are certainly different and less harmful than Saul's towards the Christians, but notice that in both cases God seeks to overcome the judgment and animosity with connection for the sake of the gospel, God's greater project of love. (NOTE: The preacher should take theological care to avoid anti-Semitic readings of this text: the point is not that Saul is being converted away from Judaism and to Christianity, nor is God is saying that the Christian faith is superior to Judaism and that is Saul's problem. How Saul is (mis)treating other people as he seeks to be faithful is what needs to change.)

Just as in the last two weeks of this series, it is in encounter with the risen Jesus (for Saul as a light and a voice, for Ananias, in a vision) that meets them in their sin of hatred and/or judgment and being closed off. It is an encounter with the risen Jesus that has the power to overcome these sins and raise both Saul and Ananias up to be strong, connected, and faithful followers of Jesus, working together for the sake of the gospel. You might discuss the different ways the risen Jesus interacts with each man, how each interaction was what each needed in the moment. Notice, also how at some point Jesus gives each one an instruction, a call, that they must answer for themselves, (Saul – "But get up and enter the city..." v. 6, Ananias – "Get up and go..." v. 11).

Another question to consider: What is God's method for moving toward justice and the beloved community? Is it judgment, violence, or condemnation or something else?

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Consider giving a brief overview of Paul's importance in the early church and beyond. If God could overcome Saul's violent hatred and raise him up to become Paul, this central figure in early Christianity, is there anything that God cannot forgive? Is there anyone God cannot work through? This may be a time to touch on some of the shame people hold about their "worst" or seemingly unforgivable sins and invite them to see themselves in Paul's story. Where is God calling them to "get up and go" beyond the place of their fear and judgment?

(Note: The Ananias in Acts 23 & 24 is not the same Ananias we read of in this passage. We do not hear much more about the Ananias from Acts 9, except that Paul remembers and speaks highly of him when he retells this story in Acts 22).

YOU: Ask the congregation to consider some or all of the following questions, with attention to what your congregation needs to hear at this time: How do you encourage the people in your life to respond to God's call upon them to become instruments of God — particularly the people you fear or don't prefer? Are there ways that you are prematurely condemning or judging others, and is it keeping you from seeing their God given potential? Or even interacting with them in the first place? Are you harboring hatred or judgment that could be preventing you from following God's call on your life? Imagine that other person as Jesus saying, "why do you persecute me?". How could letting go of that hatred transform and change your life?

WE: Who do we expect God to call? People just like us in our community, in our church, with our preferred set of gifts, graces, or baggage? How do we learn to hear God's truth about others, instead of prioritizing our opinions of them? What kinds of hatred/judgement do we excuse or justify? We don't decide who the instruments are. The call of the Church is to give them a space in the band and learn to use their gifts for the work of God in the world. Who is God calling your congregation to connect with?

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WEEK 4 PREACHING RESOURCES: RISING FROM QUARRELING (THE CHURCH)

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: ACTS 15:1-21

Notes: Sin and strife aren't just the purview of individuals; it is something the church struggles with as a whole and in communities. This passage on the Jerusalem council demonstrates the early church rising from a place of division/disagreement/dissension to a stronger unity.

Focus Statement: As communities work through inevitable conflicts, prioritizing grace can lead us to become stronger and healthier in our relationships with God and one another.

ME: Provide an example of a time when you experienced a difficult conflict. What happened? How did you respond? How did the other person respond? Was the outcome good or bad? Why?

WE: Conflict is inevitable in community. We don't always know how to engage in conflict in healthy or Christ-like ways in our personal lives, communities, or churches. Some of us avoid or ignore conflict, while others of us act poorly in conflict and in ways that harm, rather than heal. Explore the idea of "unity" versus uniformity. In what ways do we make it harder on ourselves and others to move on from conflict to relationship (e.g., by requiring uniformity or mistaking unity for uniformity). Invite the congregation to think of a time recently when they made it harder to move through conflict? We act as though unity is impossible in our lives, culture, and world. Is it? Is there anything that would make it more possible?

GOD: Conflict happened in this text, and it was neither ignored nor did it blow up. What can we learn? The preacher may note that the Gentiles who are the object of all the religious quarreling don't actually have a presence or voice in the conflict. This is not necessarily a way in which we should follow the early church, but it may lead us to reflect on how often we, like them, quarrel about people in our church who don't have a voice or aren't present.

The conflict at hand is whether new Gentile believers must be circumcised to be in the community of faith. Some people in the community believe this is an important ordinance that they all new believers ought to follow. Peter questions how much good it is actually doing or whether the rule is serving anyone well (v. 10). For those on both sides of the issue, the future of the church is at stake. There is legitimate fear — what might their fears be?

How did they ultimately navigate this difficult disagreement? Did they find common ground to stand on and was it enough to reach a resolve? Could verses 19-21 be understood as a compromise or perhaps, as James addressing the underlying fears of those with whom he is in conflict? In this text, it seems like the first step of engaging conflict in a Christ-like way — and letting the grace of Jesus take the lead — might include the work of identifying, understanding, and addressing our own fears, as well as the fears of the other with a grace-filled response.

Some other aspects of how this disagreement was navigated that the preacher might highlight or address could include: discussion with people who have wisdom at different levels of authority (v. 2), gathering to consider (v.6), courageous advocacy (by both sides), witnessing to and reminding of the Holy Spirit's activity up to this point (v. 8-9, 12), listening without interrupting, taking turns speaking (v. 12-13).

YOU: Conflict happens. 1 John 4:18 states: "Perfect love casts out fear." If we could engage one another's fear in conflict with a Christ-like response, would that allow us to create a path toward greater unity? Invite the congregation to think

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of a conflict they may be in right now and ask: What is the fear that fuels your position? Have you given the other party the opportunity to name theirs? Are you talking past them? How would listening to and addressing those fears in love help cast them out — as a first step toward greater understanding?

WE: How might we learn from the early church in conflict as we seek to address our own in our communities, in the church, in the UMC? How do we dig down beneath the surface of our disagreements to name the fear honestly? What care should be taken in doing so? How do we develop the courage to face conflict? How do we point to the activity of the Holy Spirit in our common life and use that information to lead with grace in conflict? How can we be an example of Christ-like love, even in our disagreements?