

## John 20: 19-31

IN JOHN IRVING'S NOVEL *A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY*, THE NARRATOR JOHN HAS A NUMBER OF CONVERSATIONS WITH HIS FRIEND OWEN MEANY ABOUT THE MEANING OF BELIEF. IN ONE SCENE AT THE SCHOOLYARD, OWEN ILLUSTRATES HIS FAITH IN GOD BY POINTING TO A GRAY GRANITE STATUE OF MARY MAGDALENE AS TWILIGHT FALLS. WHEN IT HAS BECOME SO DARK THAT THE STATUE IS NO LONGER VISIBLE, OWEN ASKS JOHN IF HE KNOWS THAT THE STATUE IS STILL THERE. JOHN SAYS THAT OF COURSE HE KNOWS. OWEN KEEPS PUSHING:

"YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE?" OWEN NAGGED AT JOHN.

"OF COURSE I HAVE NO DOUBT!" JOHN SAID.

"BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER...YOU COULD BE WRONG," OWEN SAID.

"NO, I'M NOT WRONG—SHE'S THERE, I KNOW SHE'S THERE!" JOHN YELLS AT OWEN.

"YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE'S THERE—EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE HER?" OWEN ASKS JOHN.

"YES!" JOHN SCREAMS.

"WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD," SAYS OWEN. "I CAN'T SEE HIM—BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE!"

THE CHARACTER OWEN MEANY IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE KIND OF FAITH JOHN'S GOSPEL CELEBRATES IN THE SECOND HALF OF CHAPTER 20. BECAUSE OWEN MEANY BELIEVES SO FULLY AND COMPLETELY IN GOD, HE STAKES HIS LIFE ON HIS CONVICTION. HE DOES NOT NEED TO SEE; HE DOES NOT NEED SIGNS AND WONDERS; HE BELIEVES AND ORIENTS HIS WHOLE LIFE AROUND HIS BELIEF.

*A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY* IS AN AMAZING BOOK AND THE MOVIE "SIMON BIRCH" IS BASED ON THE BOOK. GREAT MOVIE.

TO UNDERSTAND THIS KIND OF FAITH AS THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THOMAS'S ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS, WE HAVE TO NOTICE THAT PRACTICALLY EVERYONE IN JOHN 20 SEES THE RESURRECTED JESUS. SURELY MARY MAGDALENE DOES, BUT SO DO THE OTHER DISCIPLES WHO ENCOUNTER JESUS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS LATER THAT SAME DAY. THEY CONVERSE WITH HIM IN THE AFTERNOON AS MARY DID IN THE MORNING.

SO WHY SHOULD WE BE SO HARD ON THOMAS FOR DEMANDING THE SAME OPPORTUNITY TO SEE JESUS THE WAY EVERYONE ELSE HAD? WE MUST REMEMBER THERE'S A WHOLE WEEK IN BETWEEN WHEN JESUS APPEARS TO THE FIRST GROUP OF DISCIPLES (WITHOUT THOMAS, IN THE LOCKED ROOM) AND WHEN JESUS APPEARS AGAIN TO THAT SAME GROUP OF DISCIPLES (THIS TIME INCLUDING THOMAS). THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION SAYS "A WEEK LATER"; THE GREEK LITERALLY READS "AFTER 8 DAYS."

FOR WHATEVER REASON, JESUS WAITED 8 DAYS TO APPEAR TO THOMAS. AND FOR THOMAS, I IMAGINE THOSE WERE 8 LONG DAYS. EIGHT LONG DAYS OF HEARING HIS FRIENDS INSIST THAT THEY SAW JESUS. WERE HIS FRIENDS TRYING TO PULL ONE OVER ON HIM, LIKE SAYING *GULLIBLE* IS WRITTEN ON THE CEILING WHEN IT ISN'T? IF HIS FRIENDS WERE JOKING AROUND, IT WASN'T A VERY FUNNY JOKE.

OR MAYBE HIS FRIENDS WERE IMAGINING THINGS...A SORT OF COLLECTIVE HALLUCINATION BORN OUT OF THE EXTREME STRESS OF LOSING A DEAR FRIEND AND FEARING FOR THEIR OWN LIVES AT THE SAME HANDS OF THE SAME AUTHORITIES WHO HATED JESUS ENOUGH TO WANT HIM DEAD.

PERHAPS THOMAS WAS WONDERING WHETHER HE WOULD HAVE TO JUST TAKE HIS FRIENDS' WORD FOR IT IN THE END (OR NOT), OR IF HE WOULD GET TO SEE JESUS FOR HIMSELF. WONDERING WHERE JESUS WAS, WHAT JESUS WAS DOING. WONDERING IS JESUS HAD REALLY RISEN FROM THE DEAD AT ALL.

IT IS SO EASY FOR US TO CALL THOMAS A DOUBTER. BUT HIS EXPERIENCE WAS LEGITIMATELY DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF HIS CLOSEST FRIENDS. THEY HAD GOTTEN TO SEE JESUS. THOMAS HAD NOT. THOMAS WANTED THAT EXPERIENCE FOR HIMSELF. CAN WE BLAME HIM FOR THAT?

I OFTEN WONDER HOW THOMAS'S FAITH WAS FORMED IN HIS TIME OF WAITING. DID THOSE 8 DAYS CHANGE HIM?

I DON'T HAVE THE ANSWERS. BUT I DO WANT TO OFFER ONE OBSERVATION. WHATEVER ELSE THOMAS MIGHT HAVE BEEN DOING IN THOSE EIGHT DAYS, WE KNOW THIS: HE KEPT SPENDING TIME WITH HIS FRIENDS, HIS FELLOW BELIEVERS IN JESUS.

TO ME THIS FEELS LIKE A BIG DEAL. A POINT THAT GETS LITTLE ATTENTION. THOMAS KEPT SPENDING TIME WITH THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS. EVEN AFTER THEY SAID, "WE HAVE SEEN THE LORD," AND THOMAS WASN'T SO SURE. HE DIDN'T LET THEIR CERTAINTY, WHEN HE FELT NONE, TEAR APART THE RELATIONSHIPS THEY HAD BUILT. HE DIDN'T ALLOW THEM TO MAKE HIM FEEL GUILTY ABOUT HIS DOUBTS, OR ASHAMED OF THEM—OR IF HE DID FEEL GUILT OR SHAME, HE DIDN'T GO OFF TO HIDE BY HIMSELF BECAUSE OF IT.

THOMAS DIDN'T KEEP HIS REAL THOUGHTS FROM THEM. HE SAID EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS THINKING. *UNLESS I SEE, UNLESS I FEEL, UNLESS I HAVE EVIDENCE OF THIS FOR MYSELF IN A WAY I CAN UNDERSTAND, I WILL NOT BELIEVE.*

THOMAS HAD HIS DOUBTS. BUT HE WAS HONEST.

AND HIS FRIENDS, FOR THEIR PART, KEPT HANGING OUT WITH THOMAS. WE DON'T KNOW FROM THE TEXT EXACTLY HOW THEY RESPONDED TO THOMAS SAYING HE WOULDN'T BELIEVE UNTIL HE, TOO, SAW. BUT WE KNOW THEY KEPT SPENDING TIME TOGETHER. WE KNOW THIS BECAUSE WE KNOW THEY WERE ALL TOGETHER EIGHT DAYS LATER, THE NEXT TIME JESUS APPEARED.

THE OTHER DISCIPLES DIDN'T CAST HIM OUT AS AN UNBELIEVER. THEY DIDN'T FEEL THREATENED BY HIM, OR IF THEY DID FEEL THREATENED, THEY DIDN'T REJECT HIM BECAUSE OF IT.

THEY ACCEPTED HIM. THEY ACCEPTED WHERE HE WAS AT. UNBELIEF AND ALL. THEY WERE PATIENT WITH HIM.

A WOMAN WRITES ABOUT BEING INVITED TO BE PART OF HER CHURCH'S PRAYER GROUP WHICH MEANT BEING AVAILABLE RIGHT AFTER THE CHURCH SERVICE TO PRAY FOR ANYONE WHO WOULD LIKE SOME PRAYER.

SHE TOLD THE PASTOR, "THANKS FOR ASKING, BUT I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S A GOOD FIT FOR ME RIGHT NOW. TO BE HONEST, I HAVEN'T BEEN PRAYING MUCH IN MY PERSONAL LIFE, SO I DON'T KNOW IF IT FEELS RIGHT TO BE UP FRONT OFFERING TO PRAY FOR OTHERS AT CHURCH."

THE PASTOR DIDN'T MISS A BEAT IN REPLYING, "AH, FEELING GUILTY ARE WE?"

THE WOMAN WRITES, I WASN'T FEELING GUILTY. I FELT SAD THAT MY PRAYER LIFE WASN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE. AND I NEEDED PEOPLE I COULD TALK HONESTLY WITH. I NEEDED PEOPLE WHO WOULD LISTEN AND NOT JUDGE ME.

IMAGINE IF THE PASTOR INSTEAD HAD SAID, "I KNOW HOW THAT FEELS. EVERYONE GOES THROUGH TIMES WHEN THEIR PRAYER LIFE IS STRUGGLING, OR NONEXISTENT, OR JUST REALLY DIFFERENT FROM HOW IT WAS FIVE OR TEN YEARS AGO. THAT'S OKAY. LET ME KNOW IF YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT THAT MORE." SOMETHING THAT OPENS UP RELATIONSHIP. SOMETHING THAT OPENS UP OPPORTUNITIES TO KNOW EACH OTHER BETTER.

THAT'S WHAT I SEE IN THOMAS' COMMUNITY: BELIEVERS WILLING TO RECEIVE HIS HONESTY AND NOT JUDGE. AND THAT'S WHAT I SEE IN JESUS TOO.

WHERE DO WE FIND OURSELVES IN THIS STORY? WE MAY BE REJOICING, FOR HAVE SEEN JESUS AT WORK IN OUR LIVES.

SOME OF US MAY FEEL CONFUSED. WE UNDERSTAND SOME THINGS BUT FEEL TOTALLY LACKING IN UNDERSTANDING OTHERS. WE DON'T RECOGNIZE THE WAYS GOD IS WORKING IN OUR LIVES.

WE MAY FEEL DISORIENTED BECAUSE JESUS ISN'T SHOWING UP IN THE SAME WAYS HE USED TO FOR US.

IT'S OKAY TO BE IN ANY OF THESE PLACES. JESUS IS WITH US AND GENTLY GUIDES US IN A PROCESS OF LEARNING TO ARTICULATE WHAT WE NEED AND TO BRING THOSE NEEDS TO HIM AND TO THIS COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS.

LET ME ASK: HOW DO WE SHOW UP FOR THOSE WHOSE DOUBTS OR UNBELIEF FEEL STRANGE TO US?

**HOW DO WE STAY TRUE TO THE RISEN CHRIST WITHOUT DISMISSING THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING IN THEIR CHRISTIAN WALK?**

**ULTIMATELY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, IT IS THOSE WHO BELIEVE WITHOUT SEEING WHO ARE THE TRUE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. THIS IS CONFIRMED IN THE WORDS JESUS SPEAKS, "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN AND YET HAVE COME TO BELIEVE."**

**IN A PRAYER FOR *OWEN MEANY*, OWEN BELIEVES IN GOD AND GOD'S WORK IN HIS LIFE, WITHOUT CLEAR-CUT EVIDENCE OR PROOF. HIS LIFELONG FRIEND JOHN DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME SOLID CONVICTION. WHAT JOHN HAS IS A CONFIDENCE IN HIS FRIEND THAT CARRIES HIM THROUGH HIS OWN SKEPTICISM AND INTO A NEW LIFE UNTIL HE CAN BELIEVE.**

**YEARS AGO I LED AN ADULT STUDY ON WRITING/SHARING SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHIES. THERE WERE AROUND A DOZEN IN THE CLASS....MOSTLY RETIRED FOLKS....PILLARS IN THE CHURCH. PEOPLE WHO HAD WITNESSED TO ME THROUGH THEIR DEDICATION AND DISCIPLESHIP. I FELT INTIMIDATED TO BE LEADING THE CLASS..ME? LEADING A CLASS WITH THESE GIANTS IN THE FAITH. THE CLASS WAS ONE I WILL FOREVER TREASURE BECAUSE I LEARNED THAT EVEN THE MOST FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST EXPERIENCE BUMPS ALONG THE WAY.....AND YET BECAUSE OF THEIR FAITH IN CHRIST'S ABIDING PRESENCE AND THE SUPPORT OF THEIR CHURCH, THEY WERE ABLE TO GROW THROUGH IT AND BECAUSE OF IT.**

**OUR GOSPEL PASSAGE CLOSING WITH: "JESUS PROVIDED FAR MORE GOD-REVEALING SIGNS THAT ARE WRITTEN DOWN IN THIS BOOK." WHERE WILL YOU SEE THOSE SIGNS THIS WEEK? HOW WILL YOU WITNESS TO OTHERS ABOUT THE RISEN CHRIST?**