

# Advancing from Doubt to Faith by Embracing True Love

Matthew 28

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## **Packed with Excitement**

What a chapter. Matthew 28 read by our brother Oli, and that's exactly why we are here now. There would be absolutely no reason for any of us to be here if it weren't for the activities in Matthew 28, and it's packed with drama and tension and excitement and hope, and all the positive adjectives that you can think of. The angel said to the women:

*Don't be afraid, for I know that you're looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He's not here. He's risen just as he said he would. It's interesting how it was the woman who the serpent said "You certainly won't die", and now it's to the women whom the angel said "he's risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee."*

## **Men and Women that Believe and Doubt**

So a woman receiving a message and acting accordingly. A woman believing the lie and the women believing the truth, and then women running off and telling the men, initially Adam and now the disciples, these women rushing away from the tomb, signifying death to explain to the men that eternal life was now possible through Jesus. And then they run into Jesus, and he said "greetings", and they came to him and they clasped his feet and worshipped him and Jesus said, "Don't be afraid. Just go and tell my brothers to go into Galilee and there they will see me." This is the second time, in a matter of moments, that these women have been told not to be afraid, firstly by the Angels and now by Jesus

And we can only imagine the feelings that these women were

going through. Bewilderment, a relief, or fright, excitement. Because undoubtedly these are the most exciting moments that have happened on this planet as we know it so far. Jesus, clearly dead, and now alive, and he wanted to be reunited with his closest friends, his followers, those who believed in him.

And then the eleven disciples went to gallery to the mountain where Jesus had told him to go, so this message has obviously got through “meet me on a certain mountain.” Beyond their wildest dreams, the agony and the disappointment and the terror and the confusion and the sadness that they’d all experienced over the last three days, and now they’re being told to go and meet him on the mountain, just like the old days, “And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.”

Actually, that can’t be right, can it? That must be an error in the translation. “When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted”, er... some doubted, I don’t don’t quite get that. Jesus has risen from the dead, and some doubted. I wonder how that could be. Well, I’ve checked fifty-four different translations, and apart from the new life version, which says ‘some wavered’, all translations say ‘some doubted’. I don’t get it, ‘some doubted’, and the Greek word here is *distazo* (ἐδίστασαν) and it means to mentally waver in opinion. So I’m just trying to get my head around this, Jesus was dead, and now he’s alive and he’s in front of them and they’re worshipping him, and some are doubting.

### **Doubt is a Bad Thing**

Doubting is a bad thing, isn’t it? In fact, James 1.6 tells us,

*but when you ask, you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind.*

Doubt is the opposite to faith, isn't it? And we're meant to have faith that we are conditioned to have faith. So let's just try and get our heads around this.

*When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.*

So these eleven men who had been so carefully chosen by Jesus as confidants, they witnessed his death, and they meet him face to face in Galilee in a private place, only them, they worshipped him, but some doubted, some doubted, not all doubted, and we know that after Jesus' ascension that all eleven disciples were unanimous in their belief in Jesus' resurrection. So we know the positive outcome, but we appreciate that even these privileged few men didn't grasp the reality of the situation, and the outcome was now possible for mankind to have eternal life.

### **But We all Have Doubts**

So is doubt such a bad thing? Are we ashamed to share any feelings of doubt? How understanding or supportive of brothers and sisters are we if they doubt? And in fact what doubts do we have that Jesus is ever going to come back? Or 'why us' - why do we have what we perceive to be the Truth? There's so many better people out there. Do I only believe this because I was born into it? Would I have bothered if I wasn't? If we get ourselves into a bit of a fix through our bad decisions or lack of discipline, do we really think that God will help us out? Do we

think that, are we really producing enough fruit for the kingdom? How much produce have we made? What have we done with the talents that we've been given? Is it enough?

Part of the theme, of course, of yesterday is how doubt has seeped into Christianity over the years and is continuing to do so, so how some can even challenge whether Genesis 1-3 are actually reliable.

But maybe it's because we tend to look at the *good* things in our lives as evidence of God's existence on his love for us. Perhaps we don't automatically acknowledge the *bad* things which also should register immediately of God's existence and his love for us. And if one of the bad things is a sense of doubt, every now and then, how can we convert this into a positive outcome and recognise that it is still God working in our lives?

But of course, this is a very private subject, isn't it? And it's not something we tend to hear discussed very much, and I guess if we're going through it, we select very close friends of ours to chat things through. But should it be that way, because we are asked to be gentle and kind, showing mercy to all our brothers and sisters whatever the issue and following Jesus' is very high standard.

Jude is black-and-white:

*be merciful to those who doubt, save others by snatching them from the fire, to others show mercy.*

Well, we've all had very different weeks since we last broke bread last Sunday, and some of us may be in quite different places at the moment. That seems to be quite a modern phrase, a 'place

that you're in', and that's emotionally, I suppose, and as a group of people we can look around us now we we tend to be quite *stoic* on a Sunday morning at the breaking of bread because we want to be in the right frame of mind to remember Jesus. We cling onto traditional phrases like 'decently and in order', but some have had very tough weeks on others easier.

### **The Relationship Between Faith and Doubt**

Some have been in pain and others in good health. Some have been worried, others haven't. Some have been happy, others sad. Some may have had doubts and others haven't. And maybe we're not always 'in the best place' on a Sunday morning, and why should that be a surprise, because we're human beings carrying the burden of human nature. That's heavy, and that's why Jesus encourages us to offload this burden onto him. He can't handle it. We can't. And we hear that phrase 'lost their faith' in fact we heard it yesterday, and it tends to suggest that a brother or sister has given up and due to their own lack of discipline or effort have fallen off the narrow path. Faith is good doubt is bad. Faith on one hand, doubt on the other, two opposites - but are they? How do we work with those who are perceived to have lost their faith? Or *do* we work with them?

Well, thank God for the Bible on the stories of the giants in the Scriptures, characters that we put on incredibly high pedestals because of their relationship with our heavenly Father and their behaviour. But why is there so much emphasis on their lack of faith? Because in the heat of the moment, we as logical creatures who like to understand why something is happening and

work it out and being control of our own destiny, need to be reminded by the all-powerful God, that is good for us to be tested so that our characters can be moulded and refined through fire to become more acceptable, more useful, and we trust in God and not ourselves. But the trouble is, we're often not very good at it, and it's the old adage of the last thing that everyone does when a plane is going down, they *pray*, Why the last? Why not the first?

There was a famine in the land, and so Abraham went down to Egypt to live there for a while because of the famine, I'm not suggesting for one moment that Abraham didn't pray to God. But when he arrived in Egypt, he put himself into a very dangerous predicament, and he had to resort to a 'white lie' to get himself out, and the next few weeks or months were very tense. He had doubted God's ultimate ability to care and to feed him, so he made his own decision - seems like it wasn't a particularly good one that first reading - but God bailed him out. A miraculous rescue.

*The Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abraham's wife, Sarai*

Intervention at its most effective. And the overall result? Abraham's confidence in God would have been boosted massively doubt converted to faith.

*Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent. Abraham and Sarah were very old Sarah's past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, After I'm worn out of my Lord is old. Will I now have this pleasure? And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why*

*did Sarah laugh and say, “will I really have a child?”  
Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you  
at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a  
son.’*

Why did you laugh Sarah? Why did you doubt?

*And a year later, the Lord was gracious to Sarah, just  
as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he  
promised, and she became pregnant on bore a son to  
Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised  
him*

Intervention at its most effective and the overall result? Sarah’s confidence in God would have been boasted *massively*. Doubt converted to faith. And what a phrase for us to hold on to at all times.

*Is anything too hard for the Lord*

Moses at Horeb, God says, I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt.

*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the  
Israelites out of Egypt*

an immediate ‘why me?’ I think you might have the wrong person here. I’m not really up to this. There are definitely better people out there than me. What if they don’t believe me? What if they don’t listen and say ‘the Lord didn’t appear to you?’

*What’s that in your hand stuff? Throw it on the ground  
and it became a snake and Moses ran from it.*



It's interesting how snake represents sin. At least Moses was running away from sin as we all should

*reach out your hand and take it by the tail on Moses did, and it turned back from a snake to a staff.*

*This, said the Lord, is so that they may believe in the Lord, the God of their fathers*

and we have the same instance when Moses was asked to put his hand inside the cloak and it became leprous, and then it was reconverted to a normal hand. And we would've thought, wouldn't we? As we read from the comfortable chairs that we're in at the moment, that Moses, watching a bush on fire that never goes out, talking directly to somebody that he can't see, having a staff converted into a snake and back, putting his hand into his cloak and it comes out leprous and then gets reconverted again.

'What more do you want, Moses?' Pardon me, your servant, can you please send someone else?

*And then the Lord's anger burned against Moses.*

Okay,

*what about your brother Aaron? I know he can speak well, and he's already on his way to meet you, and he'll be glad to see you, and you shall speak to him and put words in his mouth and I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.*

Intervention, at its most effective, and the overall result Moses' confidence in God would have been boosted massively. Doubt converted to faith. And of course, we we understand why Moses

is on the pedestal that we put him on. His relationship with God was awesome and he achieved staggering results because of it, and God, in his mercy, gives us countless examples of this natural human trait.

Gideon, astounding amount of support that God gave this warrior that helped him through his questioning, ending up allowing him to hear a dream from one of the Midianite soldiers that we should have given him unquestionable confidence. And we have Barak and Job and David in the Psalms: does God even exist. In fact, Jeremiah even accused God of deceiving him:

*You deceived me, Lord. I was deceived. You overpowered me and prevailed. I'm ridiculed all day long. Everyone mocks me.*

Doubt is not unusual. It's not a terrible sin. It's been experienced by so many, and God has worked with doubters and brought them through to the other side.

So back to the very beginning, when they worshipped him, some doubted. Jesus didn't cry out in despair and utter frustration, as to how these doubters could not believe when a dead man was standing now alive in front of their eyes. No, he would have smiled gently with compassion and understanding as to the plight of human nature, and explained quietly

*all authority in heaven and on Earth has been given to me. So go and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything, and surely I am with you, always to the very end of the*

*age.*

## **Doubt is not a Sin**

What a concluding statement. 'Surely I am with you until the very end of the age.' There's not a hint of exasperation in Jesus' voice here. There's no judgement. There's no criticism, just reassurance with those powerful words. He was immortal now, and perhaps that gives us a clue as to how God operates with us every day. Yes, God hates sin. Of course he does, and there are many terrifying examples as to how he's dealt with sin and sinners, but ***doubt is not a sin***. It's a condition and it could be worked with and overcome.

You could go over this phrase so many times, can't you?

*When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted*

that suggests that it's possible to worship and doubt at the same time, to have questions, to need a bit more assurance. It's an amazing little phrase to record, isn't it really? And the fact that there's no criticism from Jesus means that those who didn't doubt are no better than those that did. But we need to ask him for help when suffering from this condition.

*Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit and it robbed him of his speech, and whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground, and he foams at the mouth and he gnashes his teeth and he becomes rigid, and I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit and they couldn't. "You unbelieving generation, Jesus replied. How long shall I stay with you? How long*

*shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me”, and they brought the boy to Jesus, and when the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately through the boy into a convulsion and he fell to the ground and rolled around foaming at the mouth. “How long is he being like this? Jesus asked the father. “from childhood, its often thrown him into the fire or water to kill him, but if you do anything, take pity on us and help us if you can.” “Everything is possible for one who believes”, “I do believe just help me overcome my unbelief.”*

Maybe Jesus is demonstrating a little bit of frustration in this episode. Maybe though because of the emphasis in the simplicity in which to believe, almost questioning Jesus. You know, can you really do this? Well, I’ve proved it a few thousands times before haven’t I?, and this man had nowhere to turn but to Jesus. He’d been let down by all the other avenues, just like the woman with the issue with blood, and the scene here is tense, we’re told that the teachers of the law were arguing, and the disciples were embarrassed because they can’t do it, and the man knows he’s in the very presence of someone very special, but he’s still not convinced. “Help me overcome my unbelief”, he believes, but he still wants some help to overcome his unbelief. This natural human trait of *wavering*, and this is no less a relevant plea for us today, and we know the outcome.

### **We Believe and Doubt Simultaneously**

So it’s odd, isn’t it? To believe, but not to *fully* believe, and maybe that’s the most that can be expected of us, because in the mo-

ment when there is *only* God and Jesus to turn to, *distazo* sets in, and we mentally waver in opinion.

But maybe doubt and faith can work perfectly together. In fact, is it possible or even healthy to have 100% faith at all times? Well, doesn't Paul make this very point in first Corinthians 13.2

*if I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains? But I don't have love, I'm **nothing**.*

And his absolutely puts everything in this subject into perspective. The overriding task for us all is to love God and demonstrate that by loving our neighbour and Jesus demonstrated this by his life of perfection.

Love is the culmination of all the fruits of the spirit, these props that form the structure of love, joy, peace and, of course, there's masses behind these high level words we can just rattle them off as we do now. But there's huge impact behind these words.

- joy
- peace
- forbearance
- kindness
- goodness
- faithfulness
- gentleness
- self-control

There's no mention of 100% faith here. Faith doesn't always lead to good works or to love. Love, however, can lead to an in-

crease in love. There's no limit.

It's quite hard sometimes isn't it, to actually think of this, Corinthians 13.2

*For now, we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, and then we shall see face to face. I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

A mirror, as we know, gives an imperfect reflection, and so in our current state, as imperfect beings, we never truly understand the heavenly ways, this side of the kingdom for us, is cloudy, and so when there is understanding from above as to why we waver, it's very, very reassuring for us. But we can love. And Paul sums it up, again in incredible simplicity

*And now these things, these three things remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

### **Even Greater than Faith, is Love**

Why? Because love was there first with God, he is love, and of course, we're talking agapé (ἀγάπη) love? God has given us the opportunity to have faith and hope because these things help us to appreciate what is an offer and to sustain us, but when we're in the kingdom, we won't need faith and we won't need hope. But love will never be eradicated.

*A new command I give you: love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another, and by this, everyone will know that you're my disciples. If you love one another.*

Not if you have great faith. Not if you have hope. If you *love* one another. It's sad that some people have a view of the Bible that's just a load of rules, some pretty impossible to keep, and we don't automatically like rules as human beings do we? we're naturally rebellious creatures, but the Bible is full of stories of people trying to know God, not always understanding, not always expecting to have all the answers.

### **So Where is our Focus?**

And there was an investigation carried out in the last few years by an individual in this country who wanted to look into a large number of all the Christian sects that there are, and he gave a report back on them, and it's just interesting exercise, and he reported his findings on each one, and of course, he gave a summary of our fellowship, and I don't know which fellowship he looked at, and I don't know which country in etc., but he did quite a lot of analysis, and his summing up of us was:

*a studious group who love reading their Bibles, very knowledgeable on the Scriptures, but striving to maintain purity so much that they can push people away, and as such will only get smaller as a community*

I think deep down we would rather have that reporter to have concluded in his investigation, that this is a group who demonstrate the christlike quality of love and mercy.

A friend of mine in a another fellowship, he carried out a survey because of a talk that he was doing, and so he asked a hundred different brothers and sisters what their favourite books in the Bible were, and he was surprised that sixty-five didn't re-

spond with Matthew, Mark or Luke, and when he asked them as to why he was told, 'they're not meaty enough'. That's quite revealing. Matthew, Mark, Luke are three books along with John, where we will know Jesus more than any other book. They are packed with 100% Jesus, and the vast majority of it is Jesus' behaviour.

### **Where Should it be?**

Over 20 times in the Gospels, Jesus asks people to follow him. He doesn't say, Learn the Torah perfectly, then come back and follow me. He means follow my example, and he called simple folk who had the ability to demonstrate love not the Pharisees who had the ability to teach and to pontificate. Not the teachers of the Law, who wanted utter purity, who distanced themselves from the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors and the Samaritans - Jesus touched *these* people because they were valuable to him - and this shocked everybody at the time, it was so radical. I've heard it suggested, and I think I agree with this that before Jesus came human beings didn't demonstrate agape love? It wasn't in effect in existence agape is an 'action love', the other loves: the feeling of the eros (romantic), the storge (family), they are all *feelings* love. This is an action love, altruism, compassion, care, considering others as much as yourself.

### **Agape Love**

Previous societies, from perhaps the Egyptians through to the Romans, this value wasn't promoted, maybe because it was seen as unproductive, and in fact, we know in the Roman society, the Roman society was so brutal that those that weren't valuable to



the society will literally just thrown away, unwanted babies, old people.

“Follow my example” Jesus says to the world, and Christianity has given so much benefit to mankind. So we remember Jesus. We’ve followed him here because, as Peter says, we’ve got nowhere else to go, and let’s be honest with ourselves, sometimes we don’t get much out of the daily readings, sometimes we may not really like the hymns were singing, we don’t really feel like singing hymns, sometimes we don’t really connect with the exaltation, but we can *always* follow Jesus to this place.

The taking of the emblems, as he asked us to do

*Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*

But that’s quite weird, isn’t it? That’s quite hard stuff. If we were to go out and say that in our place of work or our universities or wherever we operate on a daily basis, we would be arrested now I think, I think that came out from yesterday [a talk we listened to about Western society’s attitude to Christian beliefs].

*On hearing this, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching who can accept it?”, and aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “does this offend you? Then what if you see the son of man ascend to where he was before and the Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing, the words I have spoken to you, they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who don’t believe.”*

## **Jesus Understands How Hard that Is**

It's not natural. It's hard. But when we waver, we ask Jesus to help us. You know, unbelief, and he understands implicitly because he has experienced it himself, which is why we have that incredible episode at the very end of all his actions and activities in the Garden of Gethsemane,

*“my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, Father, if it's possible, may this cup be taken from me”*

and we know the result: the greatest pep-talk in the history of mankind.

*An angel stood by him and strengthened him*

and suddenly he was ready for the last few hours of his life, and we have it in the Psalms as well, and we get a full picture of his challenges, but there is never a hint anywhere in the Scriptures that love ever departed from him. He radiated love because it is love that connects us to our Father in Heaven.

## **Don't Waver, have Faith and Above all Love**

So we trust and we have faith, but the flesh lets us down and we waver. But love is something we must understand. for without it we are *nothing*.

So let's demonstrate our love now to the best of our ability by respecting Jesus' love for us and sharing in these emblems, as he's asked us to do.

*Jonathan Mitchell*