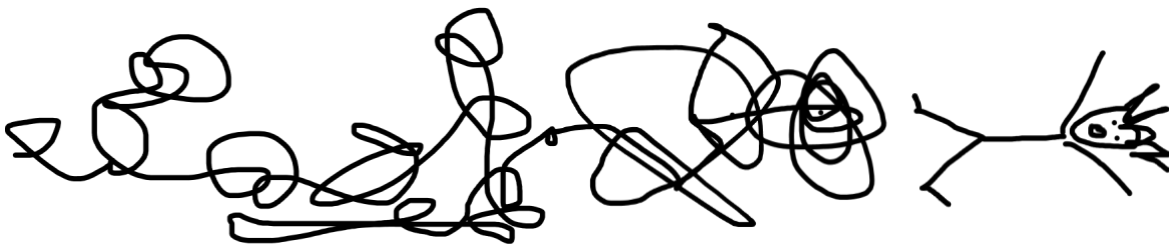


When I was a young and naïve and living a beautiful, sheltered life, this is how I imagined life would go.



I definitely had some plans and dreams and life was going to roll out in a fairly straightforward manner with maybe a few minor and manageable ups and downs.

And now looking back on my 60+ years, this is how I feel like my life has gone:



I'm not sure if one thing has gone the way I had expected or dreamed that it would at least as far as the big life events have gone – school, jobs, marriage, children, finding a place to call home, even retirement.

None of us know how long a life we have but at this age and stage I know I'm well into the last half of life and I can't shake the feeling that I've completely blown it. And it's not for lack of trying. Trying to make the right choices. Trying to discern God's will. Participating in the life of the church, volunteering, giving generously, loving others...all the things. Wanting to do and be all the right things. And this is the result? Yet, I've lived a very privileged, full and blessed life with many rich experiences and beautiful people in it but wow it has not been what I had been expecting.

And I really wanted to get up here and offer some sort of super spiritual message but I haven't been feeling super spiritual for a while now. I've been managing and negotiating an end to my marriage. It's been a couple of costly decades in every respect. I think I am broken hearted but can't quite come to terms with that yet because I am angry, so angry. I'm somewhat shut-down, aloof, embarrassed, ashamed, generally feeling like God has left the scene. So that's where I'm at – just wanted to lay that out to keep your expectations as low as possible.

I realize I'm not alone in feeling this way. Asking questions of God – Why? Why now? Where were you? You didn't show up? And it's tough not to wonder if He's real or if He cares.

Recently in an effort to shake my doubt I cracked open my Bible in search of the doubters.

Anyway – back to my doubt – why not look for some doubters in the Bible. And as it turns out Bible is full of doubting folks so let's consider a few.

First there is the obvious: Thomas! Doubting Thomas he is unfairly referred to.

After Jesus crucifixion and burial and then discovery of the empty tomb, the disciples were hiding out in a room with the doors locked and Jesus appeared to them showing them his hands and side and offering peace to them and breathing the Holy Spirit on them.

Reading the passage: John 20:24-29

*Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.*

*So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"*

*But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."*

*A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

*Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

*[Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.]* I don't know why this is here – was Matthew tired of recording events? Or is it a plea to let these records be enough and simply believe.

Ok so Thomas who new Jesus well – they spent years together during Jesus’ ministry just said ‘no I won’t believe it unless I see him for myself. By the way can you imagine Thomas’ frustration that in the 20 mins he was out doing the coffee run or whatever reason he was absent for that Jesus chose that time to show up That he missed it? Was this it for Thomas – well no because a week later Jesus shows up. But what must he have been feeling like during that week in between visits? Forgotten, Ignored, unimportant...maybe a little more doubtful? And you can’t tell me that the other disciples weren’t having a bit of a wonder while they were in that room hiding and waiting.

When Thomas gets back they run out to meet him and they are whooping and hollering and telling him that Jesus is alive. That they’ve seen him. He appeared to us in the locked room. We’ve seen him. We’ve seen his pierced hands and side. Thomas hears these claims and essentially says ---- right, I don’t believe you. Unless I see Him and touch his hands and side myself, I won’t believe he’s alive. Can we understand why Thomas might have wanted the same sort of proof the others received? To see and touch and know that Jesus is alive and confirm there was meaning in the years they just spent together?

So - even the disciples had moments of doubt.

Here's another example of doubt from someone I will call – Regular Guy.

The man who brought his son to be healed from an evil spirit but the disciples couldn’t heal him so he called out to Jesus – Mark 9:21 – Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like

this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If I can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" And then Jesus went on to heal the boy. What does that mean – I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief? This sounds like an admission of faith and doubt existing at the same time.

And finally, let's consider John the Baptist. Jesus' prophet cousin out proclaiming the good news about Jesus the Lord – whose sandals he wasn't fit to tie. Taking on the role of prophet and launching Jesus' ministry years. He was eccentric and vocal and liked to call people out on their sin. Even King Herod. Which of course eventually landed him in prison. John's followers would come to him and tell him all the stories about what Jesus was doing. John could have been expecting Jesus to do something and get him out of prison. Why wouldn't he? They were cousins!! Jesus called John the greatest among men. After a time John started to wonder if he had gotten things wrong and he sent his followers to Jesus

Read Luke 7:18-23 J

Jesus sent John's followers back and told them to report on all that they had seen and heard. But he didn't answer John's question – are you the one or should we expect someone else? Jesus ends his message back to John by saying 'Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me'. Wouldn't this leave John questioning? Maybe wondering – why won't Jesus come for me? John never left prison. He was eventually executed.

That's only three examples of various people: a disciple, a regular guy, a prophet who believed and doubted at the same time.

It seems to be that doubt is inevitable but we don't talk about it much. But it's through this questioning and wondering and rediscovering that our faith actually becomes stronger and deeper.

Fredrick Buechner says in his book *Wishful Thinking* – 'Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.

As I said, I know I'm not the only one who has the dark days or seasons – we've all had or will have time when the storms of life rage – when you've lost someone, a diagnosis shared, a job is lost, you've been held down or held back, not gotten into the school you'd hope for, your marriage is strained or broken, a friend has betrayed you, you've been injured in some way, your body is breaking down...maybe you're in the storm now. And you can't sing the songs or spend too much time with the happy people. And the helpful/not helpful comments of 'everything happens for a reason' or 'God must want to teach you something' or 'Let go and let God' statements are empty and hurtful. We doubt God is here with us, of that he's listening. We doubt that he cares or has a plan or that he's still in the business of reaching out and doing miraculous things.

But He is here in the words and actions of people around us friends and family in the village in trying to pour encouragement into us or sit with us in our grief or stand in the gap and pray for

us in the not knowing. Or he's here in the still small voice we hear inside our heads and hearts reminding us of past moments...the knowing moments when you've felt his presence before.

*Return to your own stories and to these...that are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*

Our circumstances don't define us and they don't define who God is. His silence does not mean he's absent.

Sometimes all I can do, all we can do is say 'I believe, help my unbelief' and press on.