

# Adult Teaching Resources

April 3, 2016



## Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: Conversations with Jesus (April 3-May 8)

**A Disciple We Can Like — John 20:19-31**

One Shepherd to Another — John 21:1-19

Ask the Sheep — John 10:22-30

A Serious Summary — John 13:31-35

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# A Disciple We Can Like

John 20:19-31

## FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Before the Lesson:** Make copies of the handout “Urban Legends?” for the Information session.

## Fellowship Question

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Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

When was a time you “just missed” a big event? (For example, a late flight made you miss a wedding; you went to the food vendor when the biggest play of the game happened, etc.)

What is one advertisement that you doubt could be true?

## Information

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Billy Collins wrote a poem about “just missing” a great event. It is titled, “The Sandhill Cranes of Nebraska”:

“Too bad you weren’t here six months ago, was a lament I heard on my visit to Nebraska. You could have seen the astonishing spectacle of the Sandhill cranes, thousands of them feeding and even dancing on the shores of the Platte River. There was no point in pointing out the impossibility of my being there then because I happened to be somewhere else, so I nodded and put on a look of mild disappointment if only to be part of the commiseration. It was the same look I remember wearing about six months ago in Georgia when I was told that I had just missed the spectacular annual outburst of azaleas, brilliant against the green backdrop of spring and the same in Vermont six months before that when I arrived shortly after the magnificent foliage had gloriously peaked, Mother Nature, as she is called, having touched the hills with her many-colored brush, a phenomenon that occurs, like the others, around the same time every year when I am apparently off in another state, stuck in a motel lobby with the local paper and a styrofoam cup of coffee, busily missing God knows what.”

Billy Collins, *Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems* (<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/21521016>)

Sometimes, we are in the wrong place at the right time. That happened to one of the twelve disciples. We don’t know where he was or why he wasn’t where we would expect him to be, but he missed a really big event by his absence.

## Information *continued*

Thomas was one of the Twelve disciples. Did you know that Thomas was not actually a proper name? It was a nickname that meant “twin.” If this man had a twin, we know nothing about him. We do know some things about Thomas and his character, however. For example, when Jesus’ life was being threatened, Thomas is quoted.

[Have a class member read John 11:7-16.]

How would you describe Thomas, based on this story?

We have another story in John’s gospel about Thomas.

[Have a class member read John 14:1-5.]

What can we surmise about Thomas from this passage?

We can only imagine what it was like to try to believe in and follow Jesus when he walked on the earth. There was no way to be absolutely sure that Jesus was who he said he was. Even John the Baptist, who had known Jesus all of his life and who baptized Jesus and pointed him out as, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” had his doubts as he sat in a prison cell. As John sits in his cell, Jesus is taking the countryside by storm with his teachings and miracles, including raising a widow’s only son from the dead!

[Have a class member read Luke 7:18-23.]

So, those who were closest to Jesus were certainly stepping out in faith to associate and to follow him, but in the back of their minds, they had their doubts. This must have been especially true when they saw Jesus crucified.

[Have a class member read John 20:19-23.]

If you had doubts about Jesus before, how would you feel about him now?

Here’s the problem: one of the disciples was not in the room. We can only speculate why he was not present. We can only speculate if Jesus knew Thomas was missing, or if Jesus even chose this particular time, knowing that he was missing.

[Have a class member read John 20:24-25.]

What do you think was going on inside of Thomas? Why do you think he said what he did?

[Have a class member read John 20:26-29.]

Luci Shaw interprets another story with another unbelievable event — the angel telling Mary that she will give birth to the son of God:

*“It came to me, recently, that faith is ‘a certain widening of the imagination.’ When Mary asked the Angel, ‘How shall these things be?’ she was asking God to widen her imagination.”* (Luci Shaw. *\*Polishing the Petoskey Stone: New and Selected Poems\**. Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers. 1990. p. xv.)

## Information *continued*

How do you believe this may relate to Thomas and the other disciples?

What do you think of this idea — that doubt signifies a closed imagination, but faith is a wide imagination?

Paul offers a benediction that alludes to this idea that God can do more than we can imagine.

[Have a class member read Ephesians 3:20-21.]

Why do you think it was so important to Timothy that he see the scars of Jesus?

## Transformational Exercise

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Our faith in God is limited by our limited imagination. We remain “stuck” because we cannot imagine growing deeper or having a more courageous faith. But, the acknowledgment that we are stuck may be the first step to receiving a new revelation.

“Most Christians consider being stuck a sign of failure or burnout, an indication that a person isn’t working hard enough on their spiritual life. Being stuck means getting an F on our spiritual report card....Nothing could be more untrue. Actually, *getting stuck is the prerequisite to getting unstuck* ...Getting stuck can be the best thing that could happen to us, because it forces us to stop. It halts the momentum of our lives. We have no choice but to notice what is around us, and we end up searching for Jesus. When we’re stuck, we’re much more likely to pay attention to our hunger for God and the longings and yearnings we have stifled. Sometimes, being stuck is the low point and we say, ‘Okay, I give up.’ We cannot grow without first giving up and letting go. Getting stuck forces us to see the futility of our situation and to put life into perspective so we can move on.” [Michael Yaconelli. *Messy Spirituality: God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2002. pp. 92, 93.]

In a moment of silence, I encourage you to offer your doubts — your “stuckness” — to God. In a silent prayer, offer your weaknesses to God. After a few moments for silent prayer, I will voice a prayer.

[Close in a prayer something like this: My Lord and my God, our Lord and our God, we trust you. We have belief. Help our unbelief. Amen.]

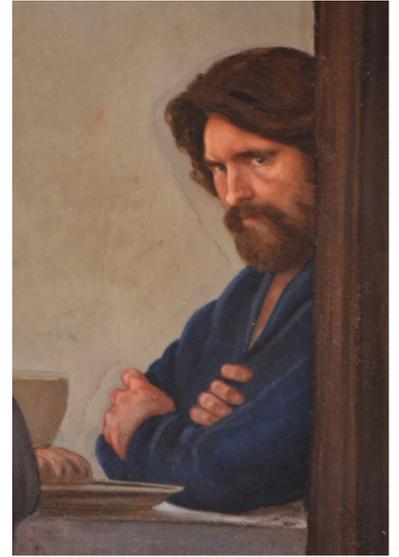
**Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan?** You may send comments to the lesson plan author at [rjordan@cbfnc.org](mailto:rjordan@cbfnc.org). Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Thomas** — The Apostle Thomas appears at the far right of Ben Long’s fresco painting at the Church of the Frescoes in Glendale Springs, N.C. A larger view would show that a rope hangs above Thomas’ head, a sign of danger.



**Fear not** — The accounts of angels urging Mary and Joseph to “fear not” are found in Luke 1:13, 30, and 2:10; as well as Matt. 28:5 and 10. It is often said that some version of “fear not” or “do not be afraid” is the most common command in the Bible, and I do not doubt it. Devotional writers and preachers who haven’t done their homework sometimes repeat a claim that the phrase occurs 365 (or 366) times in the Bible, once for every day of the year. That claim is greatly exaggerated: even in the King James Version, where it is most common, the phrase “fear not” appears just 63 times, while “do not fear” occurs 13 times. We don’t need to quote exaggerated claims, however, to believe that God offers assurance and courage for every day. Consider 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” Jesus did not come to frighten us with the threat of eternal torture, but to show us eternal love.

**An alliterative summary** — In his commentary on John for the Broadman Bible Commetary, William Hull observed that, in these few verses, Jesus *comforted, commissioned, and consecrated* his disciples. Reread the text and see if you can identify each of these important actions.

**A spiritual infusion** — The Hebrew words for “breath” and “spirit” are the same, but the Greek words used to describe Jesus’ “breathing” on the disciples to bequeath them the Spirit are different. The word used for “breathed” (*enephúsēsen*) lies beneath our English word “infuse.” This seems to be not so much a variant tradition of Pentecost as a preparatory event leading to the fuller experience with the Spirit, which would come only after Christ’s ascension — when there was no longer any apparent physical means of relating. The infusion of the Spirit that began with a gentle breath would then break forth “like the rush of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2).

**No maps** — When Jesus responded to Thomas’ request for directions in John 14:5, he did not respond as Thomas might have liked. He did not give him a road map, GPS coordinates, or a AAA Triptik with the best route highlighted in yellow. Instead, he said “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him*” (vv. 6-7).

The only thing Jesus told Thomas he could *know* was Jesus himself. If Thomas trusted in what he knew about Jesus, he would also know what he needed to know about the Father, and the way to the Father’s house. The same remains true for us.

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## How can we believe?

The wonderful thing about this story is that Jesus met Thomas right where he was, in the midst of his doubts and questions. He allowed Thomas to experience the touch of his hand and his side, and Thomas responded with faith. That's a great story. We all wish we could have been there. We wish we also had a chance to meet Jesus face to face and put our fingers in his hands and our fists in his side.

But we can't. Jesus knew it would hardly be practical for him to keep showing up in physical form to prove himself over and over and over. A day was coming when he would depart the earth and stay departed. Those who believed would have to learn to believe despite their doubts and questions. They would have to learn to live with mystery and ambiguity.

That's really at the heart of authentic faith. If we *know* everything, there's no need for faith! If we have all the answers, there's no need for trust. If we have the blueprints for heaven in hand, as some folks think they have, there's no need for hope. But Jesus does not call us to certainty as much as he calls us to *faith*, and genuine faith can only grow from the soil of uncertainty.

Frederick Buechner's comment is both trenchant and appropriate: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith: they keep it awake and moving" (*Wishful Thinking* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], p. 20).

When I was ordained in January 1973, I had just turned twenty-one years old, and I knew everything. I could tell you what heaven would look like and why the streets of gold were described as being like glass. I could tell you precisely how the atonement worked and I could assure you that God had your life planned out in every detail like book just waiting to be read.

I knew all these things because I was a naive young literalist, full of myself and full of ideals and full of something pungent that you often find in barnyards. My biggest problem was that I didn't know it yet. As I grew older, I began to suspect that life and faith and the Bible were not as simple and straightforward as I had thought them to be. For a while I stubbornly held on to the idea that I could know all the answers. The older I grew, though, the more of those answers I had to give up. I had to learn to say, "I don't know."

Old habits die hard. Even later, while working on a Ph.D. at Duke University, I remember turning in an assignment for Father Roland Murphy, a Carmelite priest and incredibly gifted Old Testament scholar. The assignment was to interpret a text from Ecclesiastes and use it as the basis for a sermon. I argued that Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, was miserable because he hoped for something beyond this life, but could not know it. In contrast, I wrote,

## The Hardest Question *continued*

because of the New Testament witness we can *know* there is a life beyond, we can *know* how to get there, we can *know* our eternity is sure.

In every sentence, Father Murphy took a red pen and marked through the word “know,” and replaced it with “believe.” He forced me to confront my own arrogance, and that experience became a pivotal step in my faith development. In our human hubris, we would like to think we can know it all, but when it comes to something as important and ultimate as our faith and our eternal future, those are things that are beyond human knowing.

Like Thomas, we just can't *know* everything we want to know. What we can *know* is Jesus. We can't *see* Jesus, nor can we *touch* him, as Thomas did. Even so, through the personal experience of prayer and trust, we can enter into relationship with Jesus. It is not a knowing that we can prove to anyone else, because it is not an *empirical* thing but an *experiential* one.

Out of our faith and trust in Christ, we come to hope in other things, and even to *believe*, but we are deluding ourselves if we think we can have certain knowledge of the spiritual world. Our *soul* understands that. That is why we get such a lift out of sunsets and rainbows and waterfalls. That is why it charges our spiritual batteries to stand in close communion with our family of faith and sing praises to the One who created us and redeemed us and sustains us. God does not speak to our soul in the rational categories of the scientist, but in the language of experience and imagination.

All of us have dragons of doubt and uncertainty within us. It is useless for us to deny that they are there. It is *helpful* for us to realize that they are *not* the enemy. They are a part of us.

There was a time when I said “I *know*.” Then there was a time when I was comfortable saying “I *believe*.” In this period of my life, I am more likely to say “I *hope*.” For me, that is not a weak statement. It requires less knowing and more faith. I have come to define faith, for me, as *hope with feet on it*. Faith is hope to the point of commitment. I hope so much in Christ that I am willing to commit my life to him. For me, that has a good taste about it. It feels right. It feeds my soul. You may think that is an acquired taste, and it is — but so are lots of other things that are good for you.

All my life I have been requesting the same thing — a baptized imagination that has a wide enough faith to see the numinous in the ordinary. Without discarding reason, or analysis, I seek from my Muse, the Holy Spirit, images that will open up reality and pull me into its center. This is the benison of the sacramental view of life. — “A Widening of the Imagination” by Luci Shaw, in *Wintersong*

So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another? Luke 7:18, 19

John, the one who while still in his mother’s womb recognized Jesus as the Messiah; the one who didn’t want to baptize Jesus because he felt unworthy to even untie his sandals; the one who pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world;” this John, the one who was convinced Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, now has doubts. John, in prison and anticipating death because of his faith, now needs reassurance that Jesus is indeed the Christ.

*...demons love darkness and hiddenness. Inner fears and struggles which remain isolated develop great power over us. But when we talk about them in a spirit of trust, they they can be looked at and dealt with. Once brought into the light of mutual love, demons lose their power and quickly leave us. — Henri Nouwen. The Road to Daybreak [http://thementoredlife.com/tag/henri-nouwen/]*

When the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen Jesus and that Jesus lives, Thomas doesn’t just say he has to see Jesus to believe He is risen. He says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Why did Thomas need to see Jesus’ wounds? One of my favorite writers, Henri Nouwen, says that ministry and healing words seem in-authentic, “unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks.”

Thomas was wounded on Good Friday when he saw his friend and teacher hung up on a cross. So he didn’t just need proof of Jesus, he needed healing. And he needed healing from someone who understood what it is to be wounded.

I think maybe it’s pretty significant that Jesus didn’t return to his disciples whole and unscathed. It wasn’t: “Yeah, I conquered death, no big deal.” But: “Man! That HURT! See these holes in my hands and feet? And check out my side!! You can put your hand in the wound, it’s so big! That was a painful mess.”... Our hope is not just in the Risen Lord, but in the Lord who is risen with wounds. [http://laurenlaughs.com/tag/doubting-thomas/]

Transitions, a sense of danger, insecurity, loneliness, which Thomas must have been experiencing, can cause doubt and fear. Adolescence, mid-life crises, menopause, empty nests, illnesses and retirement bring stresses that cause us to doubt. As we age we ask, “Is there nothing more?” and we face the three big D’s: decline, depression and death.... “Where is God in all of that carnage?” we ask. Henri Nouwen refers to this experience as ‘the absence of God’. But some of the times when God seems to be absent may actually be fulfilling his purpose. “His absence... is often so deeply felt that it leads to a new sense of His presence.” (*Reaching Out*, p.127) When we feel that God is absent, he may be more completely and sharply focused in our conscious thoughts, more so than when we take for granted that he is very near.

Henri Nouwen writes, The mystery of God’s presence, therefore, can be touched only by a deep awareness of his absence. It is in the center of our longing for the absent God that we discover his footprints... In the patient waiting for the loved one, we discover how much he has filled our lives already. Just as the love of a mother for her son can grow deeper when he is far away, just as children can learn to appreciate their parents more when they have left the home, just as lovers can rediscover each other during long periods of absence, so our intimate relationship with God can become deeper and more mature by the purifying experience of his absence. (p.128) [http://www.virtueonline.org/why-did-st-thomas-doubt]