

AUSTIN FISCHER

FOREWORD BY BRIAN ZAHND

FAITH  
IN THE  
SHADOWS

FINDING CHRIST

*in the*

MIDST OF DOUBT





out and greet this son-turned-beggar? Embracing him unreservedly? Important people do not act this way. His father should know better; his brother deserves worse.

More time passed, and as I let the painting do its proper work, my eyes were drawn, again and again, to one place in particular: the father's hands. Though not the literal center of the painting, they hold the painting together. They have gravity. Our eyes wander but always return to those hands. It's strange that something so human could point to something so divine; or maybe it isn't.

Those hands rest on the shoulders of the prodigal. They hold him close. They seem gentle but firm. They will not squeeze him into submission, but they will never let him go. Indeed, the two hands are very different. As many commentators have pointed out, one is masculine and one is feminine. The left hand is thick and muscular; the right hand is elegant and graceful. A father's hand and a mother's hand? That was Nouwen's guess.

These hands hold the painting together and perhaps they hold everything together. Perhaps the *what* and *why* of everything—from laughter to cancer to stars—is found in those gentle, firm hands. And perhaps we have no greater purpose than *to be* those hands. As Nouwen writes, "The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become the Father." Saint Paul concurs: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). We walk the world as the reconciliation of God, welcoming prodigal creation back into the arms of its maker. The story of the universe hangs in a print of a painting on a wall in my office, and this brings me to the woman in the shadows. I did not see her at first.

In seminary, I was assigned Nouwen's book, and on the first day of class, our professor had us look at the picture of Rembrandt's

painting on the front cover. Due to the poor resolution, only five figures were visible: the father, the prodigal, the older brother, and an unidentified man and woman. Three years later, I opened the box containing my recently purchased (and high quality) print, and for the first time, I saw the sixth figure.

There she was, up in the far left corner—tucked away in the shadows, the faintest light on her face. She is watching the father and prodigal embrace, but she is also watching the people who are watching the embrace—the older brother and the unidentified man and woman. Shrouded in darkness, she has one foot in the scene and one foot out. One wonders both what she sees and how she feels about what she sees. These are her secrets, and they are not disclosed cheaply. If you want to see what she sees, you must stand where she stands: on the fringes.

### **I AM A PASTOR**

I am a pastor. I did not grow up wanting to be a pastor. I wanted to be a basketball player. From the time I could walk, there was a basketball hoop set up in the living room and we (my father, my little brother, and I) raced up and down the “court” as my mother looked on in adoration, amusement, and anxiety. Many decorative trinkets were broken over the years, but my mother loved her boys and always let the game go on.

But eventually every Peter Pan has to grow up, so, realizing I might need a vocational backup plan should my basketball dreams fail, I decided I could settle for becoming a lawyer. My parents assured me this was a good idea because someone as argumentative as I am might as well get paid handsomely for it. So it was settled—I would be a lawyer.

And yet here I am, a pastor, because I followed a breadcrumb trail that led me to the feet of a crucified God and a mystery I will spend

the rest of my life making sense of because it continues to make sense of me. That is a story for another day, but suffice to say, I was not blinded on the road to Damascus. In fact, I often feel like I have more in common with Paul's bewildered companions than with Paul. I hear the voice he hears but cannot always see what he sees. There are wonders I have not been made privy to, and sometimes, even as a pastor and minister of light, I am left on the outside looking in—one foot in and one foot out.

Indeed I once sat staring at Rembrandt's painting and found, to my surprise, the center of gravity had changed. I did not look at the father's hands or the prodigal's mangy scalp or the older brother's downward gaze—I looked at the woman in the shadows. I could not stop looking at the woman in the shadows. And suddenly I found myself standing in the shadows with her, seeing the scene from behind her eyes, sharing her secrets. Better yet, I realized that I had been standing in the shadows with her for a while, that, in a certain sense, I have always stood in the shadows with her. And not wanting my faith to stay stuck in the shadows forever, I started a slow journey into the light.

### **WORSHIPING DOUBTERS**

I love being a pastor and am called to be a pastor, but at times, doubt comes more naturally for me than faith. When a child dies, I don't see a hidden joy and design behind the tragedy; I see nonsense. I don't feel divinely comforted; I feel rage. So if you need your pastor to make it all make sense, to tie all the suffering nonsense up with a tidy bow, then I will disappoint you.

There are both a blessing and a curse here. The curse is that many things I've been told are "supposed" to come naturally for pastors do not come naturally for me. The blessing is that my situation has

forced me to develop habits that can shape and sustain me as I live a life in service to a faith that does not always come naturally. What my faith lacks in ease it makes up for in grit, which is just as well because easy faith comes with its own set of problems: “Just as an athlete with natural gifts may fail to develop the fundamental skills necessary to play his or her sport after the talent fades, so people naturally disposed to faith may fail to develop the skills necessary to sustain them for a lifetime.” My bags are packed for the long haul. I hope yours are too. Because at some point in your life, I suspect you too might find yourself on the fringes of faith, and as you stand there in the shadows you will need grit. You will also need to know you are not alone and many stand with you.

When we walk down the long hallway of Christian faith, we find that many of our saints also had an inner skeptic. Think of Sarah, laughing at God’s promise to give her and Abraham a son in their advanced age. Think of Moses, the man who would argue with a burning and talking bush, insisting God had the wrong guy. Think of the despair in the lament psalms. Think of the apostles scoffing at the prospects of an empty tomb—the great apostles, first skeptics of the resurrection! Their skepticism has something to teach us, which leads us to the story of the Great Commission.

Jesus, newly risen, gathers his apostles and sends them out into the nations, making disciples and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But few recall what precedes this. The eleven apostles journey to a mountain in Galilee. They’ve been told Jesus will meet them there. They reach the top and there he is—the resurrected Christ! And what happens next is so incredibly strange: “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted” (Matthew 28:17 NIV).

Wait. How could someone stand on top of a mountain, stare into the eyes of the resurrected Christ, and still doubt? How is that possible? This is a haunting question, to be sure, but it invites another question:

Why do most of us not know this story?

Given how deeply so many struggle with skepticism and doubt, how is it possible the church has not told us this story over and over? How is it possible so many people think their doubts disqualify them from faith when some of the apostles looked into the eyes of the resurrected Christ and still doubted?

Around a third of people who leave faith do so because of skepticism and doubt. Over a third of young adult Christians feel they cannot ask their most pressing questions in church. And over a third of young adult Christians feel Christians are too confident they have all the answers. Add these numbers and something becomes very clear and very sad. Doubt makes people abandon faith, but people don't abandon faith because they have doubts. People abandon faith because they think they're not allowed to have doubts. People abandon faith because, intentionally or unintentionally, they've been forced into an impossible, unbiblical, binary choice: you can have Jesus or you can have doubts, but you cannot have both.

So what will it be? Jesus or our doubts?

Thanks be to God, this is not a decision we have to make, and this brings us back to that mountain where the risen Christ stands with the eleven apostles.

Translating the Bible into English can be a bit tricky at times, and Matthew 28:17 is one of those times. Some difficult interpretive decisions have to be made in translation, and many translations make it sound as if some of the disciples are worshipping and some are doubting—as if ten are worshipping and one is doubting (we're looking



at you, Thomas). But a strong argument can be made, on grammatical and narrative grounds, that it is best translated, “When they saw him, they worshiped him, but were not sure.”

In other words, it’s not that some worship while some doubt—it’s that all worship *and* all doubt. They all worship, even though they’re uncertain. Two thousand years ago, Jesus gathered a group of worshipping doubters on a mountain, sent them out, and the world was never the same. And this is why no one should ever think they must choose between Jesus and doubt. The church is built on people who lived the contradiction.

### **WHITE ROSES AND BRIGHT RED LIPSTICK**

On three nights in February 1943, three German university students did something simple, courageous, and reckless. Hans Scholl, Alexander Schmorell, and Willi Graf were members of The White Rose, a non-violent, anti-Nazi resistance group. Over the course of a few months, they anonymously published six different leaflets deploring Nazi tyranny, calling on Germans to rise up and rebel. “We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!”

Slinking through the shadows, they painted anti-Nazi graffiti on the sides of houses along a busy street near the University of Munich. The people of Munich woke up to “Down with Hitler,” “Freedom,” and crossed-out swastikas defacing their concrete walls. Soon after, they were discovered and beheaded.

Initially, little was made of it all. Their executions incited no rebellion. Many even felt their actions were unpatriotic. But as it often does, time changed things, and The White Rose now stands as a symbol of aggressive compassion and bravery in the face of hatred. They plastered their defiant, hopeful graffiti across a cold, concrete canvas, and though

it was little more than an act of amateur vandalism, time has chiseled it into the stone of collective memory. It's amazing what a bit of graffiti can do, and there are potential canvases everywhere.

I knew a lady in a nursing home who always wore bright red lipstick, which struck me as sad and vain. She was very elderly and sickly, and no one visited. Why did she always wear bright red lipstick?

One day I walked into her room, and as usual, she immediately reapplied a layer of lipstick. My amused judgment must have shown through because she paused mid-application, looked at me, and said, "Oh, I know it probably seems a bit vain, but the hell with it—I'm dying and it reminds me this isn't the end." And with that, she held her head high and shamelessly returned to application. She died a few months later, and I wept and laughed simultaneously when I walked by her casket and saw her—pale and gaunt but wearing a fresh coat of bright red lipstick. When I walk with people through the valley of the shadow of death, I now tell them the story of her bright red graffiti.

Some people are ashamed of their doubts, and some are proud of them. I have been both and now I try to be neither—I try to be faithful with my doubts. And so what follows is some of my graffiti, my ongoing and never-quite-finished Easter rebellion against the cold canvas of death and doubt.

The church has always been a place for skeptics and saints and skeptical saints. So wherever you find yourself on the continuum between faith and doubt, grab some paint, or bright red lipstick, or whatever you can find, and make a mess. You don't have to be Rembrandt. The walls of the kingdom of God will feature the amateur graffiti of many hope-filled vandals.

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