

Sermon 4/16/23 Doubt and Faith Scripture John 20:19-20, 24-28

Introduction

Our sermon theme this morning is (PP) Doubt and Faith.

How many of you this morning think that warm spring has come and we'll have no more snow or days of 40 degrees? Are there some doubters? There's a song in the musical Carousel that could've easily been written about Chicago and northwest Indiana. It starts out "*March came in like a lion a whipping of the waters in the bay (do you know it?); then April came and stepped aside and along came pretty little May; May was full of promises but she didn't keep them fast enough for some. For a crowd of doubting Thomas's were predicting that the summer would never come*"...

A crowd of doubting Thomases - the Bible is so true to life that the Biblical issues of ordinary people have become part of everyday conversations in our culture. Doubting Thomas is one of these. What image does that phrase bring to your mind? A "I won't believe until you show me" attitude? a pessimist? A skeptic? In Carousel some doubting Thomases didn't believe summer would come. But *they were wrong!*

In the Biblical story the original Doubting Thomas is a Biblical character, a disciple of Christ who has gotten a lot of bad press because he doubted the truth of the story that his friends had seen Christ risen from the dead. He didn't just want to believe what others told him so he told them: **(PP) Unless I see the nail prints in his hands and put my hands in the wound in his side, I will not believe."**

Thomas wanted to see the evidence for himself." Through Thomas I want us to look at honest doubt in the life of faith today **(PP)** Doubt is normal but distressing on a faith journey, particularly if we don't know how to deal with it.

This seems like an important topic to consider as we welcome new members into the church family today and we all think about the commitment of faith that is described in the membership covenant. We all are choosing to walk with God and grow in our faith as a community but such maturity is a process and may include times of doubt and struggle. One wise person has said, **(PP) Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith.** So let's consider this lifelong process of doubt and faith. **Let us Pray**



Thomas' Story

As our story opens, the disciples were still in great fear of the Jewish religious leaders. The doors to the room where they were meeting were bolted shut. The leaders had killed Jesus and then spread the lie, after Christ's resurrection, that the disciples had stolen his body.

Though some of the disciples had already seen the Lord or heard from others that he had risen, (PP) they were confused and didn't know what to do about the resurrection. They were viewing it from their own human perspective- not from the scriptures or God's perspective. So they couldn't grasp what really had just happened or what would happen next. The present reality that seemed most pressing, instead, was fear for their own lives and safety. Jesus comes into their midst, and into their fear, and immediately utters the calming word "Peace be to you." That is such a significant opening word. When he showed the disciples the nail prints and wounds of his hands and side, they were overjoyed.

But Thomas was out that day and missed it. When the disciples told him what had happened, Thomas wouldn't accept their story. To his credit we should acknowledge that since many disciples had still not believed in Christ's resurrection up to that point, Thomas reasoned they could have had some corporate emotional hallucination experience and he wanted proof before he would say that Jesus HAD risen from the dead (PP) At this point he wasn't willing to let their faith help him out of the distress of his doubt.

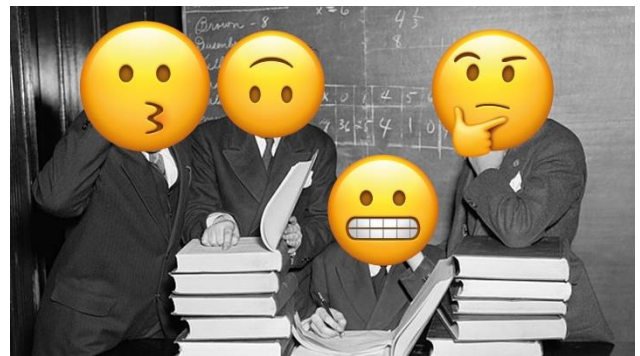
So, let me stop the story here and ask: Do you think God was disappointed and condemned Thomas for his pragmatic mind? No, I don't think so. Because, a week later when Jesus returned in another surprise visit to the disciples and Thomas WAS present, Jesus first said to them all: "Peace be with you," And then he turned and addressed Thomas personally. He could have said, "Thomas, why didn't you believe when your friends told you I am alive? Get with the program, Thomas. Noone else asked to put their hands in my nail prints and the scar in my side."

Instead, Jesus knew the need in Thomas' mind (He was Thomas's Creator after all). The Passion Translation of that encounter reads: *"Looking into Thomas's eyes, he said, "Put your finger here in the wounds of my hands. Here – put your hand into my wounded side and see for yourself. Thomas, don't give in to your doubts any longer, just believe!" [And] Thomas' response was "You are my Lord and You are my God!" Jesus replied, "Thomas, now that you've seen, you believe. But there are those who have never seen me with their eyes but have believed in me with their hearts and they will be blessed even more!" (Jn.20:27-28)*

Those words apparently pushed Thomas on his faith commitment –Christian history indicates that Thomas later went to India and planted Christian churches in the southern part of that vast Hindu country. A strong Christian community still exists in southern India today – attributed to Thomas's first visit there..

Let me share 4 simple principles on doubt and faith we can glean from Thomas's encounter with Jesus; then I will tell a story that illustrates how these principles work.

Principle 1: God has given each of us a mind and personality and some people are very pragmatic, sense- oriented people; They find truth in what they can see and touch. Others ask a multitude of questions. They want to make sense of all the Bible stories and the Christian world view. So if God



made people with these kinds of minds and personalities, God is not going to condemn them for how it affects their faith journey, **(PP)** but will meet them where they are.

Principle 2. Growth and faith is a process and questions are usually involved. James Fowler's seminal work *Stages of Faith* explains that such growth into faith includes where some people move from a faith their parents or teachers handed down to them, to one that they fully affirm on their own. That process often involves doubt and dealing with the inconsistencies one sees between what one was taught and what one perceives as adult reality. A more mature faith requires that they learn to accept the paradoxes of life (and the Bible) and understand that they probably won't find all the answers to their questions. But they can still find the reality of God in answers to prayer, in the truths the Holy Spirit reveals in the Word, And in the lives of others who are living a flourishing, Christ-honoring life by the power of the Spirit.

3. **(PP)** And that leads to **principle 3.** Have some people who understand your issues and your struggles of faith work through these issues and questions with you. Such people most often have had to work through their own struggles of faith and emerged with a vibrant, life-transforming faith of their own.

4. And finally, There is mystery and paradox. And so there will always be a critical tension between doubt and faith. There are many things we cannot adequately explain. But God has given us the Holy Spirit to companion us on our journey. The Spirit will open the scripture to us, bring us His words in the day or the night that reach out hearts, confirm the promises of God in our experience and keep us firmly anchored in Christ so we are not swayed by false teaching or rocked by calamity. In faith we can say **(PP)** **"All I know of God enables me to trust Him for what I can't yet understand."**

History attests to the fact that this kind of spiritual and emotional growth and support in faith can happen best in community. Which leads me to the final story I promised. It is a story of how one person's faith affected another's doubt. The story comes from the frontier days of our country.

There was a man whose wife was gravely ill. She needed medicine to save her life but it was wintertime and the closest town where he could get the medicine was miles away with a large lake between their homestead and the town. But he loved his wife so he set out to cross the lake, which was now covered with ice. Still, he was terrified. What if the ice broke and he fell into those frigid waters and couldn't get back to her? We call that kind of thinking catastrophising – thinking the worst without trusting God's control or sovereignty. Slowly, he began inching his way across on his hands and knees. Then all of a sudden, he felt a rumbling on the ice. That made him even more terrified. Maybe the ice was cracking. The rumbling got louder; it became thunderous. As the noise got closer, the husband looked behind him and saw a man driving a team of horses across the lake. The horses were hitched to a carriage that was loaded with boxes. After they raced past him, the husband stood up, started waking and then running – now with confidence. If one man proved that the ice could hold up under a team of horses and a carriage, it could certainly hold him up.

The application in our doubt and faith journey is – if you want to have more confidence in God, then hang around somebody or many somebodies who are riding with God and trusting him with their needs. Find those who have to deal with or have successfully dealt with the obstacles you face and can

assure you of God's deliverance and support. (Tony Evans, *Illustrations*, p. 100). Your faith will be strengthened in community.

We are a family of faith here in this church, beloved and that has been the testimony that one after another of our new members has given as their reason to join our church. They appreciate our family nature and how we pray for and support one another. And now they join that circle and will be part of our supportive network together with the rest of us.

Choosing to walk with Jesus in community does not mean we don't individually or even corporately have times of doubt and struggle and serious questioning. Our goal is to provide a safe place where we CAN share our questions and doubts and struggles honestly. No masks, no play-acting; just being real, kind and accepting of one another. This is the blessing of being a member of a church, not just talking to God on your own in your own private life. The examples of all those among us who are walking in confidence with God will hold us each up and help us all mature in our walk with God.

This is the God who invites us by the Spirit to know Him better and better and love Him more and more with all our hearts, all our souls, all our strength and all our minds. That's the God for me. Jesus Christ has proven the reliability of his character and his purposes for good, and His Word over the decades in my life and the centuries of those Christians down through the ages whose stories I will continue to tell as we journey together. This God continually empowers us to know Him better, and to help us flourish corporately in emotional, spiritual and mental maturity into all God makes possible for each of us individually and together. God is the One who enables us to trust Him for what we can't yet understand! Hallelujah!. Amen.

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