

## **“Doubt Your Faith, Have Faith in Your Doubt”**

A Sermon for Every Sunday

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*John 20:19-31*

Poor Thomas. He’s been called the doubter, the skeptic. Jesus seems to chastise him for having to see in order to believe. But I don’t think he’s all that bad. In fact, my heart goes out to the guy.

Imagine being poor Thomas, who walks into the upper room, and everyone says, “Oh my gosh, guess who was just here?! Jesus! He breathed in our faces, OK that was weird, but then he showed us his wounds! It was really him!” Notice that Jesus freely gives the disciples a glimpse of him... poor Thomas wasn’t there, so a week later Thomas has to *ask* for what Jesus gave the others *without* their asking. Thomas has been called the patron saint of doubters, but really I think he’s the patron saint of the chronically late. If you’ve ever been a day late and dollar short, Thomas is your man.

Thomas just seems to have bad timing, that’s all. Not just because of what happens in the story, but because of when this story gets told—the week after Easter. Think about who comes to church on Easter: the regulars, yes, but also some visitors; some people who are only there begrudgingly, because their spouses wanted them to come; people who long ago stopped believing in the whole Jesus thing but can’t quite break the Christmas and Easter habit. And it’s a shame, really, because this is the text they need to hear. A text about doubt, and how Jesus handles a skeptic in the ranks. Maybe we need to start preaching this text on Easter, instead of “low” Sunday, when we’re often preaching to the choir.

But if we’re honest, we know that even the “choir,” even the most steadfast churchgoers, have doubts. I don’t think it’s possible to have a mature faith without some doubt. It’s just hard for us to admit it. I have a friend who one year on Easter told her congregation, “OK, next week’s sermon is on doubt and the Christian faith,” and invited people to write down their doubts, anonymously, put them in the offering plate, and said they’d address them next

week. The pews were packed that day, but she received... four responses. Four people felt comfortable admitting their doubts.

I think we don't admit doubt because we're afraid of being judged: *everyone else's faith seems so solid. Maybe there's something wrong with me because I have doubts.* We're afraid that by admitting to doubts, we expose our weak places to the naysayers, who are only too happy to gleefully jump in, arms folded and smug expressions—*see, I always knew this Christianity thing was ridiculous.*

But here's the thing: Jesus is so matter-of-fact towards Thomas. In fact, Thomas doesn't even have to ask Jesus directly for proof. Jesus walks right in, bids them peace, and says, "Here Thomas. Put your hand here and touch there." It's as if Thomas's doubt is the most natural thing in the world. In fact, the word for faith and the word for doubt come from the same Greek root. It's as if they're two sides of the same coin. It's as if... you can't have one without the other. If your faith doesn't have any doubt mixed in with it, it's not faith, it's certainty. And it's hazardous to be certain of yourself when it comes to the God of the universe—you're just asking for trouble.

Frederick Buechner said, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Consider these words written in a letter years ago:

Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.

There is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake?

Hear the doubt?

But do you also hear the wrestling? Here is someone who's not giving up, but is continuing to struggle, listen, yearn for God, even in the midst of the doubt.

That's Mother Teresa.

The book *Come Be My Light* contains decades of her letters and journals, revealing a woman who inspired millions by her compassion and mercy but who was gripped with long periods of doubt and torment over God's absence. Now, if Mother Teresa can feel these things, who is immune from them?

I have a friend who preached on this text once and he said, "Doubt is normal, but we need to doubt our doubts. Don't let them rule our life."<sup>i</sup> As Jesus says later in the text, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." I'd like to add, it's healthy to *doubt your faith* too—if you know something for sure, you might want to loosen your grip, just a little, so you can still be surprised. God's not finished with you. But also *have faith in your doubt*: have faith that in asking the questions, you will find what you need. The questions may not lead you to greater certainty, but they might lead you to even better, more life-giving questions.

I currently work as a ministry coach, partnering with all kinds of people—pastors, church councils, vision teams—to help them be more effective and faithful in their ministry. And one of the most important and basic things I do in that work as a coach is to be very curious, to ask a lot of questions. *Why do you do that? What's the thinking behind that? And what would happen if you did something different?*

Thomas, too, is big on questions, daring to ask the questions no one else asks. (Maybe he's the patron saint of coaches too!)

Consider John 14, when Jesus says:

*'Do not let your hearts be troubled.... In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?\*' And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to .... And you know the way to the place where I am going.'*<sup>\*</sup>

That's beautiful, isn't it? I could just listen to that all day. But then...

*Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'*

Thomas kinda spoils the mood, doesn't he? But you know what? I needed Thomas to ask that question, because listen to what Jesus says next.

*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'*

Imagine if Thomas had never asked that question. We might never have received one of the most elegant statements about Jesus and our identity in Christ.

I am the way: If you want to know which way to go, look to me.

I am the truth: If you want to know what grounds your being, look to me.

I am the life: If you're tired of going the way of darkness and death, look to me.

It's an answer, but not a simple one. It probably led to more questions. And so be it.

One theologian tells his students that knowing God is not like knowing whether you're hungry. It's more like music, participation in it. "Like the knowledge of music, the knowledge of God is something that can never be fully attained. It is a knowledge which always leads to a kind of unknowing."<sup>ii</sup>

In her book *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about people who would come to her because they had trouble believing. Some believed "less than they thought they should about Jesus. They were not troubled by the idea that he may have had two human parents instead of one, or that his real presence with his disciples after his death might have been more metaphysical than physical... For others, the issue was that they believed more than Jesus. Having beheld his glory, they found themselves running into God's glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said it should not be."<sup>iii</sup>

In the midst of these conversations, and her own questions, she said, “I realized just how little interest I had in defending Christian beliefs. The parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the Church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts. ‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. Behold the Lamb of God. Behold, I stand at the door and knock...’ Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief.”<sup>iv</sup>

Thomas is a beholder, more than he is a believer, I think. He is moved to make a declaration of faith, but I’m not sure he’s ready to stand up and recite the Apostles’ Creed. He knows that something has happened, but “My Lord and My God” are about as specific as he can be in terms of a statement of faith.

But what is it that Thomas beholds?

What does he look at? Jesus’ eyes, piercing and deep? His face, open and available? The way he walks into the room, gently but with authority? These are what we’d normally look at to recognize a person. But no, Thomas looks at Jesus’ wounds. The nail holes, the pierced side. Those epicenters of pain.

If like Thomas you’re feeling doubt about whether the resurrection is true, whether life really wins out over death... or if like Mother Teresa you doubt whether God really loves you... then it’s time to look into the wounded places in the world. We need to be in touch with people who are wounded, people who are down and out, people who are poor, people the world has forgotten... Because that’s where Jesus said he’d be.

One of the questions I love asking people in ministry is, tell me about a time you felt your congregation was at its best? When did you feel the church fulfilling God’s call in a powerful way? I remember working with a small church in which countless people shared the same story of their church at its best—it was a story of a woman named Jackie, and how the church cared for her while she was dying of ALD, Lou Gehrig’s disease. Now I’m guessing that that was a difficult, wrenching experience. But I think so many people mentioned this experience because, just as Thomas put his hand in Jesus’ wounds and exclaimed, “My Lord and My God!” this church entered that woundedness and pain and somehow found Jesus there.

And unless we're willing to enter into the brokenness of others—unless we're willing to love the world that God loves, in all its difficulty and suffering—all of our affirmations of faith and our pretty words mean nothing.

Amen.

—*MaryAnn McKibben Dana* © 2020

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<sup>i</sup> The Rev. Deryl Fleming at Burke Presbyterian Church.

<sup>ii</sup> Theologian Michael DeLashmutt, quoted in the *Christian Century*.

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, p. 110.

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*, p. 109.