

**Dealing With Doubt**  
**John 20:19-29**  
**April 21, 2024**

I want to say this very carefully, but sometimes it is helpful to learn that other people struggle with the same problems we face. That does NOT mean we should rejoice over other people's struggles. Romans 12:15 says we should weep when others weep, not laugh at them. That said, there is some comfort in knowing we are not the only ones who don't always have it all together. We try do hard to put our best foot and our best face forward. We want to think – and we want others to think – that we always make the right decisions, that we always have perfect clarity, we always meet our goals, and that we love Jesus perfectly well. But the truth is, we don't. Our lives are never that clean, and learning that others deal with the same reality in their own lives – well, that frees us up to be honest with ourselves, with others, and even with God.

That is particularly true when it comes to the issue of doubt. Let's be honest: when it comes to our relationship with God, many of us, maybe most of us, have wrestled with doubt. At some point we have asked ourselves, "Is all of this really true? Did Abraham really hear God speak to him? Did Moses really get the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Does God even really exist? Or I have just been

pressured to believe something because my family or my church told me this is what I am supposed to believe?”

Such doubts can arise for at least two reasons, although there could be more. One is what we might call, simply, intellectual questions. These are the doubts that arise when our natural human reasoning causes us to question whether the claims of our faith are historically, objectively true. There is a lot about the Bible that doesn't make sense from the standpoint of purely human logic. Can a modern, rational, intelligent person – the kind of person who uses smart phones and flies on airplanes – can such a person really believe that a virgin could give birth or that a human being could walk on water or that a dead man could come back to life?

The other source of doubt is experience, especially hard experience. This is the kind of doubt that arises when suffering comes our way or when a crisis happens, or a tragedy strikes. A loved one dies, or a diagnosis is given, or a marriage fails, or we just look around the world and see all the evil that falls on people, and we begin to wonder how it all fits together. If God is good AND if God is all powerful, then why all this suffering?

Whatever the reason, doubt is going to come. Maybe not for everyone. The last thing I want you to hear me saying is that we are supposed to doubt or that something is wrong with you if

you don't. But I want to speak for a moment to those who do. When doubt does come, can we be honest about it? Are we allowed to say the quiet part out loud, or are we just supposed to swallow those doubts and pretend like everything is fine?

This morning, I want to give us permission to be honest, because when we doubt we are in good company. There are many places in Scripture where people are honest with God about their doubts and uncertainties. Just look how many times in the Psalms someone asks God why the evil seem to be prospering while the righteous suffer. Or read the book of Lamentations, which is a collection of prayers of anguish from people who don't understand why God has allowed the destruction they now see in front of them. Or listen to Jesus on the cross crying out with the words of Psalm 22, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*" These examples may not be the same as asking whether or not God even exists, but they certainly point to a kind of faith that doesn't try to hide from the deep questions of life.

At the end of the book of Matthew, the last words of the risen Jesus that Matthew records are what we call The Great Commission. This is where Jesus tells his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. We will look at that passage in more detail in a couple of weeks, but just before Jesus utters those words, Matthew's gospel makes an interesting statement that we

can easily overlook. Matthew 28:16-17 says, “*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*” Mixed in with the very first recorded worship of the resurrected Christ was the experience of doubt. Some people struggled to believe it was all true even as they worshipped Jesus.

All of which brings us to the story we have read this morning from John 20, the story of Thomas. On the evening of that first Easter Sunday, the risen Jesus makes an appearance to his disciples, but for reasons we are not given, Thomas was not present at the time. When the other disciples tell Thomas about their experience with the risen Lord, he doubts what they tell him. He goes so far as to say he will not believe their report unless he too can see the nail marks in Jesus’ hand and the wound in his side.

And for that, we have given him the nickname “Doubting Thomas,” which is usually offered up as a term of derision. But this is unfair, and for several reasons. For one thing, I don’t think Thomas was the only one who doubted. In the previous verses of John 20, when John’s gospel records the events of Easter morning, he tells us that John and Peter ran to the tomb and saw for themselves that it was empty. We are told that John believed, but that same report is not given about Peter. Apparently, Peter wasn’t quite so quick to come to a complete faith either.

But there is another aspect of Thomas' story that I want us to consider. Go back in your mind to the story in John 11, when we read about the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus got the news that Lazarus was sick, he was out in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan River, safely removed from the reach of his enemies. Going back to Lazarus' home in Bethany would put him within their grasp. The way John tells it, Jesus' choice to go to Bethany set up the final conflict that led to his death. Do you remember what Thomas said about that choice? The other disciples begged Jesus not to take the risk of going back to Bethany, but Thomas said, "*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*" That was a statement of courageous faith.

So here is an interesting tension. With Thomas, we see boldness and doubt residing in the same person. Those two things would appear to be contradictory or mutually exclusive. Either you have bold faith, or you have doubt. But the story of Thomas says otherwise. Doubt and faith coexist in partnership with each other, the same way courage and fear coexist, the same way joy and pain coexist, the same way forgiveness and hurt coexist. Doubt and faith are not natural enemies; they are flip sides of the same coin.

So, how do we deal with doubt when it arises? Where do we go with it? Using the story of Thomas as a guide, let's consider four steps that we can take in responding to doubt. The first we

have already mentioned. The first step in dealing with doubt is to be honest. Thomas' experience makes it clear that we do not have to hide from doubt or pretend like it does not exist. He just stated his doubt outright. And what was Jesus' response? He could have decided to reject Thomas at that point. He could have said, "After all I have been through you still have doubts and questions?! Away with you." But he didn't. He lovingly came to Thomas to give him what he needed. A week later he showed up again, this time with Thomas in the room, and he showed him his hands and his side.

I know it sounds like a cliché, but God is big enough to handle whatever questions we have. He is not going to immediately reject us because we dared to be honest with him. We should know that we are free to bring whatever is on our hearts and in our mind before him without fear of judgment or condemnation.

I have shared before how I went through a season of severe doubt earlier in my life. It happened the year after I graduated from college and moved off to attend graduate school in a new town where I knew no one. There were a lot of factors that contributed to that doubt, and I don't have time to get into all of them this morning, but there was a period of time when I deeply questioned everything I had believed. It was painful and frightening. It was my version of what some authors have called a dark night of the

soul – a season when a feeling of meaninglessness and dread creeps into your life.

There were a lot of things, and a lot of people who contributed to helping me through that season, but at the top of that list was a local church. Almost as soon as I moved to that town, I found a church to attend. Within a couple of weeks, I was singing in the choir and was attending their young singles Sunday School class. I cannot tell you that the people of that church had the perfect answers to all my questions; they didn't. But what they gave me was a safe space to be honest. They were willing to walk alongside me and share their own faith with me without judging me or condemning me because I dared to have questions. They allowed me to be honest. Successfully navigating doubt begins with honesty.

But it doesn't end there. The second step in dealing with doubt is to remain open to a God who wants to move us through that doubt and into a place of greater confidence in Him. To say it differently, when we dare to be honest with God about our doubts, we need to do it with an expectation that God, in His own time and His own way, will respond to those questions. When the other disciples told Thomas they had seen the risen Lord, he did not say, "Nope, I will NEVER believe that." He said, "*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.*” Admittedly, that was a big ask on Thomas’ part, but those words convey an openness to the possibility that he could be moved through his doubt and into greater faith. And then when Jesus showed up the next week and appeared that second time, this time with Thomas in the room, he showed Thomas his hands and side and said to him, “*Stop doubting and believe.*”

We live in a culture that celebrates doubt as the highest of all possible virtues. The person who refuses to hold any spiritual convictions is a person who can keep all his options open, who can keep an open mind, and who can be ready to shift in whatever direction the winds of culture are blowing at the moment. But that is not the place God wants us to be – at least not permanently. Psalm 23 famously celebrates that God leads us *through* the dark valley. He doesn’t take us into the valley so that we can build a house and live there for the rest of our lives. He wants us to keep going until he brings us out to the other side. We can be honest with God, but we should also stay open to the fact that God doesn’t want us to stay in that place.

In the meantime, we come to the third step we can take in the face of doubt. While we wait for God to respond to our doubts, we need to keep showing up. We need to keep making ourselves present to the means God has given us to experience his truth.



Verse 26 of today's reading tells us that a week after that first encounter, Jesus showed up to his disciples a second time, and this time Thomas was with them. That is no small thing. After that first encounter on that first Easter Sunday, when the other disciples gave their amazing report of having seen the risen Lord, Thomas could have said, "You guys are crazy. I am out of here." But he didn't. He hung around. He continued to share in the fellowship of those who were seeking to follow Jesus. And because he did, he got to see Jesus with his own eyes. If Thomas had removed himself from that fellowship, he would have denied himself that opportunity.

I mentioned my season of doubt. During that time, I stayed completely engaged with my church. I took advantage of every opportunity I had to worship, to study, and to fellowship. I was there every Sunday, every Wednesday, and every activity that was available to me. I don't say that to brag, so please don't hear it in that way. For me, I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. It was a season when I was hungry to know and to grow, and so I had to put myself in a place where that hunger could be fed. And in time, it was. I came through that season not only with my faith intact; it was stronger than it had been before.

Sometimes the best thing, maybe even the only thing, we can do is just show up. In the moment, we may be hurting or

confused or fearful or sad or struggling with a weak faith. We don't have to get all that figured out before we show up. Simply making ourselves available to the presence of God opens the door for him to reveal himself to us.

Which leads to the fourth step. God calls us to take whatever faith we have – however strong or weak it may be at the moment – and put it into action. You see, faith is not just a set of ideas that we are asked to accept in our heads. It includes that, but it is also more than that. Faith is a relationship of trust, and like any relationship, this one has to be fleshed out in action. History tells us that Thomas did this. There is a strong, reliable tradition which tells us that Thomas – the one we label the doubter – was responsible for taking the gospel to India, where he was martyred for his faith in 72 A.D. With his own blood, Thomas planted the seeds of the church that exists in India today. There is an indirect, but clear line, from this man who first doubted, to the work of the gospel in that faraway place, because Thomas put his faith into practice.

That is what we are called to do, even when our faith is imperfect and incomplete. Jesus tells us in Matthew 17:20 that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains for the kingdom of God. That doesn't mean we should celebrate or be content with an incomplete or imperfect faith. We should be

always seeking to grow in our knowledge and our understanding and our confidence. Like we said at step two: we need to stay open to the fact that God wants to move us through the valley. But we don't have to have all our questions answered before we can serve. We don't have to figure out all the mysteries. We don't have to resolve all the unknowns. We can take the faith we have right now, and put into practice – serving the church, serving our neighbor, and loving our God to the best of our ability.

For many of us, doubts will come. We don't have to hide from it or be embarrassed by it. If we bring our questions to God, in his time he will answer them, and he will make our faith even stronger than it has been. Because in the end what he wants for us is not confusion and fear and uncertainty. While these things are sometimes part of the journey, they are never meant to be the end of the journey. What God wants for us is confidence and clarity – confidence in His truth, and clarity for how that truth shapes our lives and changes our world.

*“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*