

FBC Service Sunday April 16 2023 John 20:19-30 The Reality of Doubt

Sometimes people get labels and nicknames they don't deserve. "Scaredy Cat," "Slow-learner," "Ugly," "Timid," "indifferent," I was labelled with a nickname? It wasn't too bad!

The thing about nicknames is they often stick. There were nicknames in the Bible. James and John were given the nickname by Jesus: the "Sons of Thunder," Simon Peter was "the Rock," and someone in our text who was called "The twin." At least, that is what he used to be called. **Now he's better known as "doubting" Thomas.** It's not a flattering nickname.

Since time began there has always been doubts, questions, unbelief, and disbelief. People have doubted scientific facts and discoveries, miracles, prayer, faith, salvation, and God. Here are some examples, starting off with doubt in the area of scientific discovery and achievement.

These statements are taken from official documents, newspapers and magazines widely read during their day. Listen to what the "authorities or so called "experts" " had to say:

500 BC - "It is commonly believed the earth is flat."

1840 - "Anyone travelling at the speed of thirty miles per hour would surely suffocate."

1878 - "Electric lights are unworthy of serious attention."

1901 - "No possible combination can be united into a practical machine by which men shall fly."

1926 - (From a scientist) "This foolish idea of landing on the moon is basically impossible."

1997 - "Having cameras on cell phones is an absurd idea and will not last."

Yes, even the experts can be wrong. But the real tragedy is the number of people who believed them.

Doubt is not unusual and not in itself sinful. As we read through the Bible we come across many people who doubted. **For us, there are many things that create doubt in our heads.**

Senseless tragedy

Natural Disasters

Birth abnormalities

Relentless pain in our body

The loss of a child or spouse

Financial losses

Seemingly unending frustration and the silence of God to our prayers.

Doubt and unbelief are not the same thing! McGrath explains. **Doubt is natural within faith.**

Unbelief is the decision to live your life as if there is no God. It's a deliberate decision to reject Jesus Christ and all that he stands for.

But doubt is something quite different. Doubt arises within the context of faith. It's a thoughtful longing to be sure of the things in which we trust

So does following Jesus faithfully mean we don't ever doubt Him, or that we rarely feel the sting of disappointment?

Doubt, questions, unbelief, and disbelief – I'm afraid – are always a part of the human experience.

When it comes to doubt there are two errors to avoid. First, **avoid the error of those who say that the true child of God never doubts.** They say that anyone who doubts cannot be a true believer.

What a cruel doctrine this is, to say the genuine believer never doubts. Consider what this teaching does to those who are new to the faith or weak in the faith.

Chuck Swindoll notes three times when doubt is most likely to strike:

1. When things we believe should never happen, occur. In this category we would put things like the awful abuse or suffering of a child; when a lie is passed off as the truth and sways the hearers; when terrorists strike innocent targets and kill thousands. Disasters like earthquakes with huge loss of life.

2. When things we believe should happen, never occur. These are the times when we expect God to say yes and He says No, and we wonder does God really answer prayer, and if He really hears us? Times when justice is perverted; when healing doesn't happen; and when hard work doesn't seem to pay off.

3. When things we believe should happen now, occur much, much later. Think about Abraham as he waited for the promised heir Isaac as he watched the gray hairs multiply on his head.

If you're a thinking person at all - the chances are that every once in a while you're going to come down with some questions, some issues, some uncertainties, some doubts.

We even have doubts sometimes about the message of Christianity that we can be forgiven through the death of Christ and live again after we die. The message of the gospel is so staggering, you need to pinch yourself to see if it's true or just a dream.

We have a word for people who never question or doubt. We call them gullible. They're the people the scammers of the world look for.

Doubt can be a springboard for growth. If doubt makes you dig deeper, if it leads you to examine the claims of Christ, you will come out of the time of doubt stronger in your faith.

Oswald Chambers says, "Doubt is not always a sign that a man is wrong; it may be a sign that he is thinking."

What about people in the Bible, surely they never had doubts?

Even in the sphere of religion and faith, there are those who doubt the existence of God.

They doubt life everlasting and the immortality of the soul. They doubt their own salvation and eternal security. They doubt the power of prayer and the might of God, and the promises of His Word.

In the Bible, we have folks like Peter, James, John, Matthew, Bartholomew, Simon the Zealot, and a man whose name is linked forever with doubt—Thomas. **Doubting Thomas.**

This morning I want to look at Thomas, his story, and his encounter with Jesus after his resurrection.

Thomas went from doubt to the boldest declaration of Jesus on record as soon as he saw the evidence. But has Thomas gotten a bit of a bum rap? I think a consideration of all the facts we know about him will help us see him in a different light.

The Bible doesn't tell us much about Thomas. We don't know anything about where he comes from or what he did before becoming a disciple. We do have a clue about his family. When you read about Thomas, he's usually introduced this way **"Thomas who was called Didymus in many translations."**

Now that doesn't mean anything to us, but it sure did to the original hearers as they recognized it immediately. The name "Thomas" comes from the **Aramaic word for "twin."** **And Didymus is the Greek word for "twin."**

Thomas had a twin brother or sister, and "Twin" was his nickname. In the early church there was quite a bit of speculation about who the other twin might be. Some have suggested Matthew, but no one knows for sure.

It's unfortunate that Thomas is remembered solely in a negative light. There's more to this man than doubt. He first steps onto the stage of biblical history in John 11 when they hear Lazarus has died.

When Jesus decides to go to Bethany to see Lazarus' sisters, his disciples remind him that the last time he went near Jerusalem, the leaders tried to stone him to death. It would be suicidal to go back. Jesus decides to go anyway.

And Thomas speaks up and says, *"Let us go also, that we may die with him"* (John 11:16).

It's a brief statement that reveals enormous courage. Thomas stated that the Jewish leaders would probably kill Jesus if he went back to Jerusalem.

Events would soon prove him correct. But what can you say about a man who says, "If they kill him, they'll have to kill me too?" It takes a real man to say that. There is love there, and loyalty.

It may just be that Thomas understood better than any other disciple what was about to happen. And that brave statement— may explain his later doubts.

John's gospel mentions Thomas one other time before the crucifixion.

It's late Thursday night in the Upper Room. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet and given them the great command to love one another. Judas leaves the room to do his dirty deed.

The rest of the disciples crowd around their Lord, as he speaks;

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going." (John 14:1-4).

Thomas, in a moment of great honesty blurts out, *"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"* (John 14:5).

This question prompted the famous words, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the Father except through me."*

Thomas has been listening quietly, intently, carefully. All this talk of coming and going is too much for him. It seems vague and mysterious. **Those are the words of a totally honest man.**

The rest of the disciples were just as perplexed, but only Thomas dared to speak out. We all know people like that—if they don't understand, they won't let it pass. They keep asking until it makes sense.

That's Thomas. And that's a second key to his personality. He was an independent thinker, a thoughtful man, not easily stampeded. He wouldn't make a confession of faith unless he deeply believed it to be true.

Let others have a glib, easy faith that comes without reflection and deep thought. Not Thomas. His was a faith won through the agony of personal struggle.

So the picture we have of Thomas is this: He's a brave man, intensely loyal and deeply committed to Jesus.

If need be, he's ready to lay down his own life. He's completely honest about his doubts, confusion and fears. And he won't be satisfied with second-hand answers.

Thomas was not present on that Sunday evening when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst after his resurrection. The Bible doesn't say why, but I think I know. **There are basically two different ways people respond to sorrow and tragedy.**

Some seek solace in the company of their friends. They want people around to help them talk it out. Others prefer to be alone with their thoughts. Such was Thomas.

He was not with the disciples because his heart had been crushed.

Mary had come back from the tomb as did Peter and John, the men on the road to Emmaus had returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples they had seen Jesus!

While they were all gathered together, Jesus appeared in their midst.

Deep inside he wants to believe. Don't put him down too hard. We've all been in the same place.

Thomas may have been a doubter, but he was not an unbeliever. Some have tried to place him in the company of skeptics. He doesn't belong there. Thomas is definitely not a skeptic. His doubts come from devotion to Christ.

There's no doubt like the doubt of a broken heart. It's one thing to doubt the Virgin Birth in a classroom setting. It's something else again to lose someone you love and wonder if there is still a God in heaven.

There are two kinds of doubters in the realm of spiritual truth. There are those hard-boiled people who say, "I don't believe it and there's nothing that will make me believe it." Such people enjoy their doubt, talk about it, laugh about it, and get angry when they are refuted.

They count the difficulties, seize objections, and look for loopholes.

But there's another kind of doubter, the person who says, "I don't believe, but I'm willing to believe if I can see for myself." **Thomas fits this category.** He's not an unbelieving skeptic; he's a wounded believer. Remember, Thomas didn't doubt the miraculous in general.

He'd seen many of Jesus' greatest miracles. But this one was too big to take someone else's word for it. He had to see it for himself to believe it. And who could blame him?

No one wanted to believe more than Thomas. Before Thomas would believe he had to personally see Jesus. And he had to be sure it was Jesus—not some dream or vision.

He had to be sure it was the same Jesus he saw die. That's why he couldn't just take the word of his friends. Not on something like this. He was not unwilling to believe, but unable.

Some people are satisfied with the testimony of others. Some are not. **Thomas was not.** Did he doubt the truthfulness of the others? No, he knew they believed they had seen Jesus. But that wasn't enough. Lots of people think they see things.

Thomas couldn't get rid of the suspicion that they had seen a ghost.

He couldn't live with a second-hand faith. He had to see for himself. When he says, "*Unless I touch his wounds, I will not believe,*" there is much more than doubt.

There is love, and sorrow, and pain, and a tiny grain of hope. Thomas stands for all time as the one man who most desperately wanted to believe if only he could be sure. Can you blame him? Would we have been any different? Jesus invited Thomas to see for himself.

After all these years, Thomas has gotten a bad reputation. Doubting Thomas, we call him. We tend to look down on him. **But not Jesus.** Eight days later Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time. This time Thomas was with them.

Jesus speaks to him as to one whose faith is weak, not to one who has an evil heart. He said, *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe”* (John 20:27). Jesus knew all about Thomas’ doubts.

And he came just so Thomas could be sure. Jesus didn’t put him down. He said, “Go ahead, all you who wonder if it’s true. See for yourself. Stop doubting and believe.”

There are lots of people like that today. Some would rather dismiss Christians as being narrow-minded or empty-headed than consider the message of the gospel.

They say the church is too boring or it’s too much like the world. The church sings too many hymns or not enough. Sermons are way over people’s heads or they are way too “light”. The people of the church aren’t friendly enough or they don’t think the people of the church are reverent enough.

So in summary: Doubt and unbelief are not the same things. Doubt is a matter of the mind. It means we cannot grasp something. God and His ways are bigger and more profound than we can grasp. Sometimes that leaves us confused.

Unbelief though is a matter of the will. It’s a refusal to believe what is clearly understood about God.

Jesus said to Thomas, *“You believe because you’ve seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.”* **The primary meaning of blessedness is: “to be looked on favourably by God.”**

Jesus told Thomas that God is especially pleased that there will be people **(like us)** who will believe in Christ even though we have not seen Him.

Do you know what happened to Thomas? Tradition says Thomas went to India to preach the gospel. He preached in a country of many gods that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

If the tradition is true, Thomas was executed in Madras, India. This doubter became a fearless follower and witness to what He had seen.

So this morning, let’s take the time to look at the hands and feet of Jesus. Recount the evidence for his Resurrection and build our lives on a foundation that is solid and sure.

In those times when Satan whispers doubts into your ear, remind yourself of the evidence for the resurrection. Remember that you have entrusted your life to the One who rose from the dead.

And every now and again, when you catch a glimpse of who Jesus is in all His grandeur, don’t be surprised if you gasp with awe and wonder and say with Thomas, **My Lord, and my God.**

The appearances lasted over several weeks! It appears Jesus was seen periodically over a period of 40 days. This was no mass delusion.

The radical change in the behaviour of the disciples indicates something life-altering happened. These guys went from hiding in the upper room to standing on the temple steps boldly declaring Jesus to be the One Israel had waited for all this time. Something amazing happened!

And then there are the changed lives over thousands of years. People like the Apostle Paul have been radically transformed. There are hundreds of thousands or more of such dramatic stories.