

“Overcoming Doubt”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**John 20: 19-31**

For Maundy Thursday this year, we brought back something we had done a few years ago. Thirteen men dressed in costume, sat at a long table here in the chancel, and acted out what it might have looked like that night in an Upper Room. Throughout the serving of communion to the congregation, until the conclusion of the service, we then froze in the positions of “The Last Supper” painting by Leonardo da Vinci. As someone who has witnessed it in the past, it is a creative, emotive way to remember that night, and the ongoing meaning of communion whenever we celebrate it as the community of faith.

The difference for me this year was to be one of the thirteen. I got to play Thomas, and I had to hold the following pose (show pose). As others said to me later, they were glad I remembered which finger to hold up. And I have to admit that it was a surreal experience. For as I was concentrating hard to remain in my set position, I could not see how my fellow actors were painting the picture around me. And while I could hear the rest of the service happening, I could only see the limited scene which was right in front of my eyes. I’m sure my fellow actors could relate to this experience.

Besides the visual image this service provides, I believe the other important meaning it offers is the biography each disciple offers. Before we all froze into our positions, each of the twelve offered a brief but insightful statement about themselves. As I read the statement for Thomas, I was reminded of how he was so much more than just the one who doubted. Here is a selection of what I read on Maundy Thursday:

“Thomas is my name. I am often called ‘Doubting Thomas.’ Even though I was a man of wavering faith, my devotion to the master was sincere. I remember when Jesus was called to heal Lazarus. How the other apostles objected because they were afraid of the council; but I said, ‘Let us all go along so we may die with him.’ When Jesus was saying farewell to us, I asked, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ I caused Jesus to reveal his purpose; and he said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.’”

On the Sunday after Easter, we most often will read the story of Thomas. It only appears in the Gospel of John, and immediately follows his account of the resurrection and Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Jesus. We are familiar with this story, and I have preached on doubting Thomas at least five times in my twelve years of ministry. It’s easy to identify with him: he hasn’t seen Jesus, so he won’t believe that he really lives. It takes Jesus coming a week after that first Easter to show his disciple that his friends’ testimony was true. “My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaims. Doubt is wiped away in the face of resurrection faith.

But Thomas's doubt has always been what the church has focused on, to the point that he has been portrayed as "the bad guy" in Church School classes. In fact, Thomas has been the persona of doubt, skepticism, and questioning throughout the church's history. Serene Jones writes:

*In the annals of Christian theology, there are numerous accounts of why Thomas doubts, each reflecting the skeptical impulses of the era in which they arose. In the early church, doubters questioned whether God, as eternal and divine, could die and still be God, and Thomas bore the weight of those Trinitarian debates. Later, medieval scholastics depicted his doubt as logical, putting in his mouth the question, "Is resurrection metaphysically and analytically intelligible?" For the mystically oriented, doubt is described as the "dark night of the soul" where, in the midst of unbelief, belief germinates in shadows. More recently, Enlightenment theologians used rational, empirical arguments to craft their brand of Thomastic doubt.*

*In the same way, most believers experience different kinds of doubt over time. In youth, often, it is the rationalist who reigns; in early adult life, the analytical metaphysician takes over. When middle age settles in, a maturing mystical doubt often arrives. And in the years that follow, the wisdom of those seemingly nonsensical Trinitarian questions can sometimes make more sense. One such question, "Can God die?" is a question that, if one is lucky, receives more than symbolic answers as the end of life draws near. At each stage, doubt follows faith's lead, stalking its edges with quizzical uncertainties, poking at belief's soft spots, and stirring up those still waters we are always seeking* (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 400-402).

At its core, doubt doesn't arise out of total unbelief, but rather out of questioning an event or belief which runs counter to our accepted realities. We don't doubt because we don't believe in anything. We doubt because it is difficult for us to accept some new reality which is opposite our long-perceived understanding.

For example, let's say that for three years, you are living somewhere other than the United States. You can imagine wherever that is, but there are a few stipulations. In that foreign location, you have no access to English-speaking news, and those you live with or among cannot tell you about anything happening here at home. For three years, you would be living in a different world, with no idea what has been happening during this time of separation.

Now, let's say that when you return from your three-year exile, your friends and family start filling you in on what's happened during that time. You may find out about people who have died, children who have been born, weddings which have occurred, and all other sorts of pertinent information.

But, let's say you are an avid sports fan, and you wanted to know who won the World Series during the three years you were away. And when your friend tells you, "The Yankees, the Phillies, and last year, the Cubs won the World Series," how would you respond? You'd probably believe without any hesitancy that the Yankees and the Phillies could have won the Series. But the Cubs? My guess is you would meet that declaration with a heavy dose of skepticism and doubt.

Why would you doubt that response? Because the Chicago Cubs have not won the World Series since 1908. That is the longest drought of any major North American sports franchise for winning a championship. To be told that the Cubs won the World Series would likely raise an incredible amount of doubt in your mind, because it goes against everything you thought you knew to be true before you left three years ago.

Thomas was not someone who didn't believe in Christ. As I shared in the beginning, he was the one who professed his devotion when going to the council, and he asked Jesus how they were to know where to go as his disciples. Thomas was one of Jesus' faithful friends and followers. He had come to believe God was present in his midst. But when he saw his Lord crucified on the cross, and then laid in the tomb, he just could not believe there was any different reality than what he himself witnessed.

There are so many situations in life which mirror Thomas's doubt, that perhaps he is the one disciple we can relate to the easiest. When our spouse is diagnosed with an incurable disease, we doubt how God could be present in our midst. When our employer tells us we will be losing our job after 20 years of faithful work, we doubt how God could be on our side. When a loved one suffering from addiction cannot break free from the demons which torment him or her, we doubt how God could change such a hopeless situation.

In the midst of that doubt and skepticism, God is nevertheless present. In the midst of Thomas's questions and grief, where he has locked himself in out of fear, Jesus `stands before him and says, "Peace be with you." In the midst of our anger and doubt, the risen Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." For the power of Easter morning is that the world in which we live has changed, has shifted, and will never accept the status quo. And God is immensely patient with us, giving us time to come to terms with this new reality, coming to us over and over to help us overcome our doubt with grace, love and faith.

If you are ever in a place where you are struggling and doubting God's presence in your life, I would invite you to try something. During Lent, Lisa Crismore led us in two different Spirituality Centers. For the second one, during Holy Week, one of the stations included a bowl of ice. In that simple exercise, I was reminded of the omnipresent nature of God.

Hold an ice cube in your hand. Watch it melt. As it melts, see how it slowly permeates every crevice of your palm. Watch as it spills over your palm, into your other hand. As it melts completely, feel how it is absorbed through your skin, nourishing it with life-giving water.

That is how God loves you through Jesus Christ. God loves you in a way which permeates every crevice of your being. God's hope overflows any boundaries which are present. And God's grace penetrates our souls through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If you ever struggle with doubt, it's okay. Just hold onto the ice cube, and you'll be reminded how deeply God cares for you each and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.