

SERMON TITLE: I Have Doubts

DATE: April 25, 2021

SCRIPTURE: John 20:24-31

PASTOR: Matt Densky

SERIES SUMMARY

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Easter and for many that holiday is the pinnacle of our faith. It is the day where we come together to worship Jesus, who we believe to be God in the flesh, brutally murdered on a Roman execution device, dead for three days, and then through the power of God was risen from the dead – definitively conquering sin and death, giving hope and victory to his followers.

For many others, it is a day to spend time with family, hide eggs, eat candy, bake a ham while a group of well-meaning but very naïve people come together to worship a God based on a claim that he died and after three days came back to life.

But I think there is a third camp, somewhere in the middle. This is a group of people who would definitely lean towards belief in Jesus, but wrestle with questions and doubts – about Jesus, his Word, his miracles, his resurrection, etc. If we're honest, many of us are in this middle camp or have been at one time. We have doubts. But we don't voice these, do we? Somewhere along the way, there has been this underlying idea put forth "If you believe in Jesus you cannot have doubts." And so we don't talk about them for fear of judgment, or shame, or sin, or whatever.

But they're there. We have questions. We have tension in our understanding. Doubt is what happens when an experience enters our story that our current worldview cannot reconcile.

CS Lewis a long time Atheist, converter to Christianity, and intellectual giant said it like this: "Believe in God and you will have to face hours when it seems obvious that this material world is the only reality; disbelieve in Him and you must face hours when this material world seems to shout at you that it is not all. "

So if we're honest enough to admit we have doubts, the next question becomes what do we do with them? Let's look at our passage to learn from the disciple Thomas on how to handle our doubts and how Jesus responds in the midst of them.

WHO IS THOMAS?

Thomas gets a bad rap and is often characterized by his doubts more than his faith, but he was actually an incredibly bold disciple who had a particular affinity for being inquisitive. There is one point in Jesus' ministry that he is being sought for arrest (or worse) and decides to go to Bethany. We see in John 11:16 it is Thomas who boldly proclaims, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." These don't sound like the words of a wavering, unsure man do they? No, Thomas believed. In John 14 Jesus is informing his disciples that he is leaving but they know the way to follow him. Thomas is the only one bold enough to ask the question the rest of the disciples were probably thinking. John 14:5 "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" It is because of that question that we have the beautiful and well-known response of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." It is Thomas who modeled faith and helps us gain a deeper understanding through his questioning. So what is going on in our passage?

Thomas, like many, could not reconcile the resurrection. He had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah - the liberator for Jewish people. There simply was no box in his mind for the category of Jesus dying at the hands of Rome and especially no box for the category of him coming back. He simply cannot connect the dots. It's impossible! I mean if

we're really fair to him, he's the only disciple who has yet to see the risen Jesus so we can give him some grace on the basis of how rare dead people come back (in his experience there's only been one - Lazarus). And so, he doubts. He wants evidence. He wants to see with his eyes and feel with his hands. Thomas does what many of us do in our times of struggle - "I want a personal experience with irrefutable evidence."

WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR DOUBT

So what do we do? Should we feel guilty? Should we blindly believe and never question? Is it a sin to have doubts? I think Thomas models three healthy movements of how to handle our doubts:

- **Honestly** - Truth is the foundation of any relationship including that between us and God. Thomas has serious questions, but instead of bottling them up or pretending like they don't exist he voices them. "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (vv. 25). He communicates what he's struggling with. Again, being the first generation to consider the resurrection of Jesus, it was a difficult idea to embrace as it is for so many today.

Our doubts should not silence our conversation with God, but amplify it. The Bible has many faithful followers who wrestled with the possibility of events at times. Abraham and Sarah struggled to believe God could give them a child, Gideon asked for a sign (or three), Jesus' own cousin John the Baptist began to have some serious wrestling matches in his own faith upon his impending death. All of these examples have one thing in common. They sought answers. They didn't withdraw. They didn't shut down. They honestly raised the questions because of their faith. They were trying to reconcile an experience within a worldview that hadn't made sense of it yet. When we silence our doubts (or others) they tend to resurface later in a much more toxic way, having never been voiced or resolved they now have become a poison in the mind.

- **Patiently** - Look in verse 26 at the timestamp between when Thomas vocalizes his doubts and when Jesus comes to him. It's eight days later! Thomas is waiting in his questions and I think this is intentional on Jesus' part. Jesus wants Thomas to linger in his seeking.

Isn't it frustrating at times to believe in a God who doesn't give us the immediate answer or result? But it is in the 'in-between' that our faith grows the strongest. It is silence that strengthens us. However, it should not be concluded here that Jesus was absent from Thomas. Physically yes, but not in love or concern. The presence of silence in our lives is not the absence of Jesus. Oftentimes it is when we draw the closest to him.

- **In Community** - Doubt had given way to isolation as it so often does with us. Thomas seemingly had pulled away from the other disciples. In the passage prior, Jesus appears to the disciples physically. But where was Thomas? We don't know, but it does seem odd that Mary and 10 disciples were together, but Thomas was not.

In our doubts or disappointments, we tend to withdraw as well, don't we? We conclude the questions will bring judgment or shame or the journey can't be shared so we pull away into loneliness. Eventually, we form new communities with people based on our shared frustrations. These only ever lead us further away from resolving our questions because people who share the same frustrations will never challenge our way of thinking. In doing so, it would be challenging their own.

It is when Thomas is with the 10 again that Jesus shows up, not when he's separated from them. We need our community around us too. We need people to challenge our thinking, but also allow us to vocalize our doubts. We need people who will be present with us in grace and love even if they have different conclusions.

HOW DOES JESUS RESPOND TO OUR DOUBTS?

Jesus meets us in the midst of our doubts and calls us into deeper faith.

Look at verses 26-29. Jesus meets Thomas in the reality of his questions and gives Thomas what he asked for; an opportunity to see and touch the wounds. He actually arrives with the greeting of peace, not judgment. However, he doesn't leave Thomas there. He invites Thomas to set aside disbelief and believe, which Thomas does. In fact, this is the only declaration from anyone in the Gospels calling Jesus God. The greatest doubter becomes the greatest worshiper.

So often we emphasize one of the two ends of the spectrum. We either sympathize with people's doubts to the point of never challenging them or we ask people to simply believe without giving merit to the questions they're wrestling with. Jesus meets Thomas in his doubts and calls him out of them.

Doubts can do one of two things. They can become the on-ramps to the interstate of deeper faith where we've been strengthened and fortified due to growth that comes through navigating the hard questions and seeking Jesus in the midst of them. Or they can become roads that lead to dead ends, stifling and strangling our faith leading to unbelief. The truth is we all have doubts. We all have experiences that our current worldview simply cannot reconcile and so we are all on a journey of asking questions and seeking truth. Let us make sure that our doubts lead us to truth and not to dead ends. How? Honestly, patiently, and in community.

Discussion Starters —

1. What were some things that stood out to you from Matt's message?
2. What kind of evidence did Thomas say he needed to believe? Why do you think this is what he desired? Can you relate?
3. Have you ever experienced a culture within the church where asking questions or having doubts was not allowed?
4. Why do you think doubts are difficult to vocalize and be honest about? What fears exist by doing so?
5. Have you ever experienced a culture within the church where asking questions or having doubts was permitted and welcomed? What values are present to create a culture like that?
6. Have you ever had an experience that your current worldview cannot resolve? Have you ever wrestled with doubts? Are you wrestling with any right now? Could we be honest and receive each other with grace in this moment about our doubts?
7. How would it change things if you began to see your doubts as opportunities to grow your faith?
8. What are some ways we can move towards deeper levels of belief in our relationship with Jesus?