

## “Grace for the Doubter”

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:24-31

April 16, 2023

Second Sunday of Easter

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As we gather to worship, our gospel lesson will be from John Chapter 20 versus 24 through 31. I encourage you to use your pew Bible or your phone or whatever you use to read Scripture to open up. We're going to walk through this passage together so it would be helpful to have it before you.

And as you're turning there, I just want to take a moment to reflect on this week, because this is kind of a weird Sunday, right? Last week was Easter Sunday. We celebrated the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the high point in the church year. It's the foundation of all of our hopes as believers. Easter is a day for champagne and celebration and brunch with friends and family. The church was packed. Everyone was dressed in beautiful pastels. It was a great day of celebration.

But now here we are again a week later and it's just kind of another Sunday, right? We're coming down from the high of Easter and we find ourselves back in these pews. And there is a lingering sense of, okay, we just celebrated this historic event that changes everything about the universe. What are we supposed to do now? Where do we go from here? I think these are the exact same questions that the disciples would have been asking each other after that first Easter, after Jesus had appeared to them. But then it wasn't immediately clear what they were supposed to do now.

Perhaps you felt this way before, after a spiritual mountaintop experience or a season when you felt very close to the Lord. And then eventually you end up settling back into the old rhythms and patterns and habits of the real world. And you kind of wonder, what was that all about? It raises all sorts of questions for us. And so, for the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at a few different passages about what happens after the resurrection. How did the disciples respond? What does Jesus do and what are we supposed to do in these days after the risen Lord has risen from the dead, but has yet to come again? And so today specifically, we're going to look at a story about doubt.

At this point in the narrative, it's one week after the first Easter, it's a Sunday morning much like today. Jesus has already appeared to his disciples. But one of them was not there when He first appeared. And that's where we're picking up today. Let's look at John 20:24-31. And for our younger disciples in the room, what I want you to listen for is, how does Jesus respond to doubters? Please stand for the reading of God's word.

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. And so the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails and His hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then He said that Thomas put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas answered Him, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in His name.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There are two opposite extremes that Christians tend to gravitate toward when it comes to doubt – two ends of the spectrum. The first extreme is to demonize doubt, to be afraid of doubt, to be afraid of any questions about the faith. These communities would see any sort of questioning as an inherent threat, a risk. Doubt is something that will lead you off the deep end and result in you walking away from the faith entirely.

The problem in this situation is that this can often lead to a shallow faith, one that has not been questioned. And therefore, when the storms of life come and as we all know, they will come, the faith is not firm enough to survive. Doubt is demonized, and doubt is treated as something to be avoided.

The other end of the spectrum is to celebrate doubt, to celebrate the uncertainty. Doubting what you've been told is viewed not only as a good thing, but a great thing. It's liberating. It's the true path to freedom. We're supposed to evolve past the simplistic faith of our youth. But what often happens in these scenarios is that the central, basic doctrines of the Christian faith become negotiable. And similarly, when the storms of life come, you have nothing solid to hold onto. There is no anchor to keep you in place.

Both of these extremes – demonizing doubt or celebrating doubt – are more harmful than they are helpful. What we're going to see in Scripture today is an entirely different approach to doubt. In the Bible, doubt is neither demonized nor is it celebrated. Instead, doubt is treated as this natural thing that is always going to arise in the life of faith, and it is to be dealt with patiently.

In the Book of Jude, Jesus brother says, "Have mercy on those who doubt." Have mercy on those who doubt. Even John the Baptist, who Jesus said was the greatest person to ever live, had his doubts. If anyone had reason for assurance, it was John the Baptist, right? He baptized Jesus. He was there when the voice from heaven said, "This is my son in whom I am well pleased, listen to Him." John saw all of it. And then a little bit later in John's story, he is unjustly imprisoned and he's suffering a great deal. And he sends a messenger to Jesus and he says, "Are you really the one? Are you actually the Messiah? Because this is not going how I expected it to. This is not playing out the way I thought it was supposed to play out when I was told that I would be the precursor of the Messiah. I am suffering. Where are you? Are you really the one? I need some assurance here."

Doubt is not demonized or celebrated, but it is dealt with in the Bible. Doubting is normal, but it doesn't stop there. We are called to believe in the midst of our doubts and to trust that God will actually use our doubts. God will transform our doubts to lead us into a deeper faith. The goal here is not to avoid doubt at all cost. We want to learn how to question our faith without losing our faith. We want to learn how to question our faith without losing our faith. We want to learn how to doubt well. And the surprising thing we see in today's passage is that our doubts can actually be the place where Jesus most wants to draw near to us.

Let's look at Thomas and see how this story plays out for him. Think about this situation from his perspective, and I want to do a little bit of image rehabilitation for Thomas here. What is the one name we all know Thomas as? Doubting Thomas. Right. But I want to cut the guy some slack. I think he has been unfairly treated throughout church history. Think about it from his perspective. Just over a week

ago, Thomas watched as a crowd brutally tortured and murdered his best friend. And not only his friend, but the person who he thought would be the savior of his people. Thomas went all in on Jesus for three years. He gave every waking moment of his life to Jesus. And as far as he can tell, it brought him nothing but disappointment and grief. Maybe some of you are feeling that way this morning. And then all of his friends come to him and they say, “No, we have seen the risen Lord. Jesus is alive!” But Thomas doesn’t buy it. He wasn’t there. He didn’t see it.

I don’t think he’s just a stubborn cynic, which is often how he’s betrayed. I think he’s hurt. I think he’s disillusioned. I think he’s just calling things like he sees it. Back then it was the same as it is now: dead people did not walk out of their graves. He wants to see some proof. “Unless I see the marks of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

What’s happened is that Thomas has encountered something that does not square with the story that he thought he was living. He’s bumped up against something that doesn’t compute with the way that he understood the world or God. One theologian refers to doubt as the wall. I love that image. The wall or the wall is what we hit when we bump up against something that challenges our core beliefs. And we do not have an easy, satisfying answer. And if you haven’t hit the wall yet, just hang tight, because I promise you that it’s coming. It’s a matter of time. But every single Christian will deal with doubt. And it’s going to look different for each and every one of you. It looks different for each person. So why and when do we hit the wall?

I think what I often observe is that it tends to be in seasons of transition or in seasons of suffering when the big questions start to get asked. This is true for Thomas, but I think it’s also true for us as well. What I’ve noticed is that doubt tends to present itself as an abstract theological or intellectual problem to be solved. We treat it like it’s an intellectual problem. How can a good, an all-powerful God allow suffering? How could a loving God allow something like hell? How do we know that we can even trust the Bible to begin with?

These are good questions. These are questions worth asking and exploring. But as a pastor, I found that more often than not, there’s usually a doubt beneath the doubt. There’s a more personal question beneath the abstract theological question. When we ask, “How can a good and all-powerful and loving God allow suffering,” what we’re usually saying is, “If God loves me, how is he allowing my suffering, my particular type of grief, my particular type of sorrow? If God really loves and cares about me, why did I lose my job? If God really loves and cares about me, why is my marriage so dang hard? If God really loves and cares about me, why are my kids going crazy and walking away from the faith when I tried so hard to raise them in a Christian home? If God really loves and cares about me, why does growing old feel so lonely? Why does it hurt so much? Why won’t God heal my loved ones, or heal me before I get more sick?”

And so, on the surface with Thomas, now it appears to be a fairly straightforward intellectual problem right there, saying a dead man came back to life. He’s saying dead people don’t come back to life. This is an intellectual problem to be solved. But again, I think there’s a doubt beneath the doubt, a more personal fear. I think it’s the fear of being disappointed all over again. There’s perhaps pain over the fact that Jesus apparently has appeared to all of his friends, but not yet to him. Maybe he’s grieving, maybe he’s feeling isolated and forgotten. And before he allows himself to hope again, he needs some assurance, much like John the Baptist.

So how does Jesus respond to Thomas’s doubt in this scenario? Look back at verse 26. As we said, it’s a week after the resurrection. It’s a week after the first Easter, and the disciples have all seen Jesus. He appeared to them on the first Sunday, and now they’re back. They’re back in the upper room. The

disciples are gathered, but this time Thomas is actually with them. And as they're sitting there praying, maybe trying to figure out what the heck is going on and what they're supposed to do next, Jesus is suddenly in the room with them. Not an apparition, not the Spirit of Christ. Jesus in His body has entered the room.

Now, if I'm Thomas at this point, I'm kind of freaking out inside. I'm joyful because there's Jesus. But I also just spent a week doubting that He was still alive. And so I'm expecting Jesus to roll up His sleeves to say, "Oh, I bet you wish you had believed. Here we go. You're in for it now," because that's how we would respond. If someone doubts us or wanted to push back against us, we would respond in kind.

But that's not what Jesus does at all in this scenario. Jesus shows grace and patience to the doubter. He literally comes and His first word is peace. "Peace be with you." And the extent of his grace, the sheer overabundance of the grace of Jesus is seen in the fact that He meets Thomas in the very place of his doubt. He says, "Here, look at the wounds, touch them. Put your hand in my side. Look at the wounds that I suffered. And by the way, I suffered them for you." But Jesus doesn't leave Thomas there. He also calls him to leave his doubt behind and to step into belief. Jesus doesn't demonize Thomas's doubt and certainly doesn't celebrate it. He comes to deal with it. He meets us in our doubts with grace, and he calls us to believe in Him.

Now, here's the frustrating thing. (I find it frustrating. I'm assuming you probably do, too. I'm assuming Thomas did.) Jesus rarely gives us the clear answers to all of the questions that we actually have. Unless you've had an experience significantly different than mine, I think that's true for almost everyone in the room. We have these questions and very rarely do we get the clear, cohesive answer that we are looking for. He doesn't give us an answer, but Jesus gives us Himself. He gives us Himself. He gives us His wounds which He suffered for us.

And for Thomas, in this moment, this is enough. I don't think Thomas suddenly had all of his questions answered. I think he had the benefit of actually seeing the risen Lord, which we should all be a little jealous of, but I don't think suddenly he had all of his deep questions answered. But he had Jesus before him, and this was enough. He immediately proclaims, "My Lord and my God."

Do you see how personal that is? It is not an abstract statement of faith written by someone else. Those are great, they have their place, but this is a declaration from the core of Thomas' being: "My Lord and my God." This is one of the most powerful and clear professions of faith found in all of Scripture.

And Jesus's response is kind of interesting, isn't it? Look at verse 29 with me. Here's what He says. After Thomas makes this profession, Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Well, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." As I was studying this this week, I kind of was like, "Really, Jesus? You're going to kick the guy while he's down? He knows that he was wrong. You don't need to overemphasize the fact that he was not believing to begin with." When I first read this, it felt like a condemnation of Thomas that he should have believed. But I don't think that's what Jesus is doing at all. I don't think this is a condemnation of Thomas in any way. It can't be, because all of the disciples, every single one, saw Jesus before they believed. When the women saw Jesus at the tomb and ran back to the disciples, they didn't say "Peter, Jesus is alive," and then he said, "Great, let's just hang here and worship." He said, "I need to go see this for myself." So, Thomas is not out of the ordinary here.

I do not think that Jesus is condemning Thomas. I think this is a word of blessing for you and for me and for all the Christians who would come after the apostles who do not have the benefit of seeing the risen Lord in the flesh. That's us. We have not seen Jesus in the flesh. We are basing our faith on the apostolic testimony that has come from these people, from these early followers of Jesus.

And Jesus is saying, "I get it, belief is very hard. This is not going to be easy. And that is why those who believe without seeing are even more blessed than the apostles." Jesus wants us to know that we are uniquely blessed, for we have believed without seeing. And he knows that that is hard and that there will be doubts.

And so, the question is, when we have doubts, what are we supposed to do with them? What do we do with the doubts or the questions that we might be feeling this morning? There's a lot that could be said on this. Doubt is a recurring theme throughout Scripture. I was going to do like a 45-minute sermon, and Abby said, "Absolutely not. You need to cut this down," so you can thank her for that later.

And so, because of that, I just want to focus on one practical point of application that I think we can draw directly from this text. And I think once we see it, it's just glaringly obvious. Here's the question I want to pose: Why didn't Thomas see Jesus on that first day with the disciples? It's not a trick question – he wasn't there. Thomas was not there with the disciples. We don't know exactly why Thomas wasn't there. We can speculate. Maybe he was angry at the events of the weekend. Maybe he realized he didn't want anything to do with the disciples anymore, if Jesus was not really who He said He was. We don't know why Thomas did not gather with the rest of the disciples, but we do know that he opted out. Thomas opted out. If he had been there, he would have met the risen Lord.

Now here's another question Where does Jesus reveal Himself to Thomas eventually? Does He appear to Thomas out in the countryside while he's working and kind of working through his doubts on his own, trying to figure out his own way?

No, not at all. Jesus meets Thomas on the Lord's Day, on a Sunday morning while he was gathering with the other followers of Jesus. And this is important to note: Thomas was gathering with this community of faith that he did not even know if he agreed with. He did not hold to their core tenet of faith yet that Jesus Christ is risen, and yet he showed up. Thomas was there.

Friends, Jesus has told us that where two or three are gathered in His name, that He is present, and of course God can and does reveal Himself to all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. But what we know for sure is that the normal way that God reveals Himself, the normal way that God draws people to Himself, is through the church. It's through the body of gathered believers, singing hymns, receiving the sacraments, hearing the Word of God preached. This is where Jesus has promised that He will always be present.

I have said it from this pulpit before, and I'm sure I will say it again. There is no such thing as D.I.Y. Christianity. There is no framework in the Bible for a Christian faith divorced from the community of faith, it simply does not exist. Our relationship with God is meant to be experienced, nurtured, cultivated within the very ordinary, very normal, very messy community of faith. I'm sure all of you are surprised that the main point of this sermon is that your pastor is telling you to go to church today. Surprise, surprise. When you choose to opt out of gathering with God's people for worship on the Lord's Day, you are opting out of the place where Jesus has promised to make Himself known.

I regularly talk with friends and especially college students (this is big with college students) who are experiencing doubts, who are experiencing a crisis of faith. And often their solution, which seems reasonable on paper, is to say, “Okay, I’m going to sort of step away for a little bit. I’m going to get some distance and then try to figure out what I believe. And if I end up believing it, then I’ll come back. But I need to get away and figure things out for a little bit.” And I can say with an extremely high level of accuracy that I know exactly where that will lead almost always. And it’s not to a deeper Christian faith. Maybe sometimes – I know stories of sometimes, but rarely. You are setting yourself up for doubt and for a crisis of faith if you separate yourself from the people of God.

I had a friend who was very active in my campus ministry in college. He’s an interesting guy, super bright, not a believer, didn’t buy any of this stuff, but he was really engaged in our community and he would gather with us to worship each week. He had all sorts of doubts and questions. We had great conversations. So finally, one day I just asked him, “Look, you don’t believe any of this, but you still gather with us each week. Just talk to me about that. What are you experiencing when you worship with us? How do you reconcile that? What are you feeling?” I’ll never forget what he said. He paused, and he kind of thought for a moment and he said, “You’re right, I actually don’t believe any of this, but I want it to be true. And if there’s any chance that it is true, I want to place myself in the place where Jesus is most likely to find me.”

“I want to put myself in the place where Jesus is most likely to find me.” That is a beautiful, honest answer of someone who is searching for something solid. All of us, but especially those of us who are doubting, who are suffering or in a crisis of faith, all of us need to be with God’s people, especially if you’re not sure you even buy this stuff anymore. You are in the right place.

My prayer is that we would be a church that does not demonize doubt, that does not celebrate doubt, but that patiently bears with one another in our doubts. I want this to be the place where we’re able to ask the hard questions that we’re all thinking, but too scared to say. I want us to shoulder that burden together to come alongside one another and, just as Jesus does, call each other to belief in the midst of our doubts. That is the model that Christ has laid out for us.

Thomas’ story ends happy. Well, depending on how you look at it. But here’s what we know: doubt does not get the final word for Thomas. This is where it is unbelievably unfair that we call him Doubting Thomas because he goes from this room and he becomes a missionary to India, the first missionary to India. He brings the gospel there. He introduces countless people to the person of Jesus Christ, and he ends up dying as a martyr for his faith. And we call him Doubting Thomas, a man who goes and dies for his faith. Doubt did not have the final word for Thomas.

So if you’re here this morning, you’re discouraged or you’re not sure what you believe or you’re just searching for something that you can’t even put your finger on, then I have two things I want to say to you.

The first is that you’re in the right place. We are all wrestling through this together. None of us has this figured out. We’re all asking the questions. You need to be here and we’re glad you’re here. And the second thing is this: just like Thomas, your doubt does not have to have the final word in your story, either. Philippians 1:6 says that he who began a good work and you will continue it to completion on the Lord’s Day. In other words, God who began the work in your heart is going to carry you through and complete that work when Christ comes again. So what that means for us is that your ultimate hope is not that you will one day have all of your questions answered, and then you can finally have the strength to hold on fast to Jesus. Having all of our questions answered is not our ultimate hope. Your ultimate hope is that regardless of how you feel right now, God is faithful to you.

No matter how you feel right now, God is faithful to you. It may not feel like it, but He loves you. He's kind, He's gracious, He's patient with doubters, and He is calling all of us to bring those doubts to Him, to be honest about them, to trust Him, and then to believe. That's the invitation for us today.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who is patient with doubters. Thank you that you are a God who knows and understands how hard it can be to believe, how hard it can be to trust in you. So, Lord, we pray that you would give us hearts that are prone to trust. Give us the gift of faith, Lord. Help us to lean not on our own understanding, but to lean on you and to bring our doubts to you. I ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.