

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee**

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Doubt

John 20:19, 24-29

Today we begin a new sermon series I've titled, "*Six Bad Words in the Bible.*" There are probably more than six, but today we want to start with the word "*doubt.*" Doubt is a bad word in the Bible.

This is the story of Thomas, who some call, "*Doubting Thomas.*" The setting is the evening of the day of the resurrection.

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¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

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It's easy to throw Thomas under the bus for doubting that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It's more difficult to deal with our own doubts.

What do you doubt, or disbelieve? Do you doubt the creation story as told in *Genesis*? Or maybe you doubt the evolution theory. Do you doubt global warming? Or maybe you doubt that acupuncture works.

People once doubted that the earth is round, or that the sun is the center of our solar system. There are even folks who doubt that men walked on the moon.

It would be easy to doubt that God is at work in the world if you lived through the Holocaust, or the atrocities that are occurring now in Syria. If you lose a child, or are diagnosed with a dreadful disease, it would seem natural to ask, "*Where is this God and what is this God doing?*" Who wouldn't doubt?

Abraham, Moses, Elijah, the disciples and the early Church all doubted, at times. Doubt is strung out, all over everywhere, throughout the Bible. It's a part of human life. Doubt is what happens when we come against something we don't know. We need proof. Doubt is a black hole that needs to be filled with facts and evidence.

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So that's where Thomas is. On the night of the resurrection, Jesus comes back to the upper room where the disciples are hiding behind locked doors. So they're not exactly huge believers! He reveals himself to them, showing them his hands and his side, but Thomas is not there. (*He skipped church! See what happens when you skip church!*) Later, the other disciples tell him, "*We have seen the Lord.*" (20:25a) That's all well and good, but Thomas says what I think any of us would have said;

*'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put **my** finger in the mark of the nails and **my** hand in his side, I will not believe.'*
(20:25b)

This is doubt-seeking-evidence. It's not that he won't believe, it's that he needs what they all had, an experience with Christ. A week ago they all saw him. Thomas is only asking for what they had, a real encounter with the resurrected Christ.

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I see a lot of myself in Thomas. It would be just like me to skip church on the night of the resurrection – to be in the wrong place at the wrong time! I understand his skepticism too. Here's the facts:

Jesus was crucified by the Roman Empire on Friday. That was real. He hung on a cross from 9:00 in the morning until 3:00 in the afternoon and suffocated to death. They took him down and buried him in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. All that's real.

Thomas wanted to see the evidence that Jesus was loose in the world. It's the people who *don't* want to see it who may be of some concern. It's the people who are

satisfied to live with the stone rolled across the door, with the guards stationed at the tomb, who may need an invitation to come back next week and experience something else.

It's one thing to doubt, it's another thing to live your entire life outside the room of experiencing Christ, never knowing there is something more than what you know.

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When I preach, I have two imaginary people sitting in the sanctuary. In the back left corner is a young woman who knows nothing about the Christian faith. Over in the back right is an older man who is a skeptic. He's not mean-spirited or arrogant; he just doesn't swallow the Kool-Aid and buy into all this so easily.

I craft a sermon trying to reach them both. In actuality, there is a part of all of us that knows very little about the faith, and there is a skeptic in each of us who needs convincing. After years of preaching to these two, I realized they are an extension of myself. (*Imagine the fun I have writing a sermon with all three of us in the room!*)

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How do you make someone see the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ for them? How do you lead someone to that experience? How do you serve as a conduit for the truth for people who live in *doubt*? What does it take to convince a person to move from that place of *disbelief to belief*, from *un-acceptance to acceptance*, from *closed to open*, from *unaware to aware*, from *asleep to awake*? We are not capable of making that happen. It is a work of the Holy Spirit. We need this to happen within ourselves. We can be messengers, or witnesses that it has happened, but we cannot make it happen.

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Jesus showed up in that room. No one went out and retrieved him. Nobody organized this. No one saw this coming. We are all dependent upon God's revelation to the world. We can't manufacture this, we receive this.

And that's what happened to Thomas. He put himself back in that room the next week. He wanted it to happen. He was open to it happening. He probably even hoped it would happen. There is doubt-seeking-evidence. There's somebody who wants their life transformed.

And Jesus said to him,

*'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not **doubt** but believe.'* But Thomas answered him, *'My Lord and my God!'* (20:27-28)

But have you noticed that Thomas never did put his hands in those wounds? Remember he said, *'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put **my** finger in the mark of the nails and **my** hand in his side, I will not believe.'* (20:25b) That's pretty specific. He needed a whole lot of evidence.

But Thomas didn't put his hands in those wounds because Jesus had put his hands into Thomas' heart. That's where the power and evidence of the Gospel lies. There's no substitute for that.

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I don't refer to Thomas as *doubting Thomas* anymore. For me, he is *believing Thomas*.

- He's somebody who stayed on the trip long enough to move into a deeper, richer experience with Christ.
- He's somebody who was honest about where he was and what he needed.
- He was someone who longed to have the experience that others had, and he came back a week later to get it.

Doubt-seeking-evidence can be a good thing. Frederick Buechner wrote, "*Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*" (*Wishful Thinking*). Doubt can be the gateway to faith, or it can be a bad word. The difference is in staying on the trip long enough to be in the right room, at the right time to have your doubt surrender to the evidence. Then, with Thomas we proclaim, "*My Lord, and my God!*"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: **Amen**