

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Doubting to Believe

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John 20:19-31

19 When 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.’²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So 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.’

26 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.’²⁷ Then 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.’²⁸ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’²⁹ 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.’

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ 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.

I heard a story a few years ago on National Public Radio about the Boeing 707. About a month after the jet was put into service in 1958, a traveler on a propeller driven DC-6 airliner struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger, who happened to be a Boeing engineer. The traveler asked about the brand new 707, whereupon the engineer began to describe all of the research and testing that had gone into the development of the jet engine. He recounted Boeing's successful experiences with engines. When his travelling companion asked him if he himself had flown on the new 707 jet, the engineer replied, "No, I think I wait until it's been in service awhile."

This week I heard another story about a young man who was being recommended for ordination by his local church. In the process, he had to appear before a council of vicinage, a group of local clergy who ask tough questions concerning the fitness of the candidate for ordination. In most cases the council is stressful, but it ends well. But in this case however, things got a bit dicey. The conflict arose because the candidate for ordination had attended a liberal seminary. Many of the questioners in the council were much more conservative. At one point, one of the members of the council inquired rather sternly whether or not the candidate believed in the virgin birth.

"Well," the candidate responded cautiously, "It's this way. Some days I believe in it and some days I don't. Today, I'm a firm believer!"

Both of these stories bring to mind the Scripture lesson for the second Sunday of Easter. In our consciousness some names are always linking to certain adjectives. There is "Curious George," "Wrong-Way Corrigan," and there is "Doubting Thomas." Thomas returned to the place where the disciples had gathered. In his absence the Risen Christ had appeared to the rest. We don't know where Thomas was. One commentator suggested that he thought the hiding would take a while so he went out for milk and bread. Regardless, Thomas wasn't going to be fooled by a silly rumor, even one spread by his friends. He had seen the large stone rolled over the entrance to Jesus' tomb. He knew the facts of crucifixion. It is no wonder he responded, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Now you must admit that a certain amount of skepticism is healthy. As I was writing this sermon, a phone call interrupted me. On the line was a rather pleasant sounding salesman who kindly offered me a free trial of a church growth DVD. He told me that if my church faithfully used the tools on this DVD, we would double our attendance. But I was skeptical. I doubted the offer. Even before he mentioned the price I would have to pay after the free trial, I politely told him that I was not interested. Indeed there is much in our world that might be better if we all were a little more skeptical. Lord Salisbury writes, "Never trust the experts. If you believe doctors, nothing is wholesome; if you believe theologians, nothing is innocent; if you believe soldiers, nothing is safe."

And so Thomas doubted. He was skeptical of the news. He didn't trust the expert witnesses even when he had traveled with them for three years. He knew they could be gullible. He reasoned that their grief might have made them delusional. And so he became "Doubting Thomas." And strangely enough through doubt he became a symbol for weakness. In a world that prizes positive attitudes, and within a religion where uncertainty and struggle frighten, Thomas has become almost a villain, an anti-role model. Faith and doubt often get linked as opposites, the presence of either of which cancels out the possibility of the presence of the other.

Author Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* writes of her experience in a Benedictine abbey where she was called to serve. She says, "I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned with my weighty doubts and intellectual frustrations over Christianity. What interested them more was my desire to come to their worship.... I was a bit disappointed. I had the idea that my doubts were spectacular obstacles to my faith and was confused but intrigued when an old monk blithely stated that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow."

The truth is that all of us have both faith and doubt within us. Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive. We may have a strong faith that there is an all-powerful and loving God whose presence is with us. Yet we may occasionally have doubts as we wrestle with the mystery of knowing the presence of God. We can have faith in God, faith that springs from our time of doubting. Doubts prove that we are in touch with what is real, in touch with the things that can threaten our faith as well as those that might nourish it. If we are not in touch with reality, our faith is blind and really not worth much. Yes, we all have doubts. Our doubts usually come in moments when something we trust gave out. Someone we thought was loyal betrays us. We are left to deal with a situation that has upset the harmony of our life.

When I was in seminary, my field supervisor was Rev. Kruse. He was a minister at a small Presbyterian Church on the southeast side of Minneapolis. In the mid-sixties, Rev. Kruse possessed what most would call a "conservative faith", preaching the fear of God and the Bible as the only source of answers for daily living. During that time his

only son was drafted into the military and sent to Vietnam. Rev. Kruse told me that throughout that time, the first thing he would do every morning was go into the church's sanctuary and pray, "Please God, bring my son home safely to me." One day he received notice that his son had been killed in combat. His world was shattered. He lost faith in God. He felt as if God had disappointed him. He left the ministry and wandered aimlessly through several other jobs for five years. But after a while Rev. Kruse began to come back to a God, which had never really left him. He came back with a doubting faith, with tough questions for God instead of easy answers for others. He can back trusting less in what he had been taught in Sunday School and seminary and trusting more in what he had learned about God in his actual experience and through God's revelation. He told me that we felt he had a stronger faith, forged through the fire of pain and strengthened through the necessity of doubt.

Yes, we have doubts! That is not the crucial element. What is important is what we do with those doubts. Can we make our doubt the new stage upon which God can act in previously unforeseen ways? Can we continue to act faithfully even in small ways, even when it doesn't seem to matter? Can we trust enough to look for God's surprise? Do we continue to live our lives in the realm of God, from beginning to the end, believing in the sure care of our Creator, even in those times when we wonder and question?

I read this week where the legend of Thomas continued, even if his Biblical fame ended. When missionaries made their way to India in the thirteenth century, to their amazement they discovered an already existent church, which called itself the "Thomas Christians." The leaders of this church told the missionaries the apostle Thomas had founded their church in the first century. They told of a legend in which Thomas, a skilled carpenter, was contracted by the King to build a palace. But the apostle decided not to build an earthly palace but a spiritual home in heave. He took the King's money and gave it to the poor. When the King demanded an explanation Thomas said, "You can not see it now, but when you depart from this life, you will see your palace." Of course, the King had Thomas jailed. But later he was released, the King was baptized, and the church was founded.

Whether or not the legend is true, it paints a new picture of Thomas the Doubter. He did not let his doubts incapacitate him. The one who would not believe and the one who was insecure about the Risen Lord, was the one who took his faith to far away places.

Dostoyevsky wrote, "It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My 'hosanna' is born of a furnace of doubt." Yes, the doubts are there. But in doubts God is evident and hosannas are born. Faith is strengthened. So it was for Thomas. May it be that way for each and every one of us as well.