

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of our past and of new beginnings, we know that Easter day is behind us. The Easter Eggs are opened, the meals and leftovers are completed, and the chocolate is eaten. But, as people of faith, Easter is not over. Easter is never over. We celebrate the season of the Risen Lord for fifty days, in which we rejoice and remember the glories of Jesus continuing to teach us in his glorious risen state. Thank you for this season, indeed, for every Sunday when we worship, for we recognize that wonderful Easter morning every time we enter these doors.

Today we remember the story of Thomas, the disciple often called “Doubting Thomas.” Beneath the surface, this scripture shows us something else, God. It shows that you walk with us in our unbelief and guide us to find what we need to authentically believe, to authentically have relationship. Thank you for legitimating us and helping us realize that you made us the way we are, and you guide us to wholeness at all times. Help us open our ears and our hearts to you, so that you may enter in and we may find new life together. Help us see how we can be your messengers throughout the world in how we act toward each other, ourselves, and how we worship you. We pray all these things in the Lord of Life, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

I doubt that will happen. I have self-doubt. I doubt it will rain today. Doubt mixed with faith. We use the word “doubt” often, and what’s the general feeling we associate with it? Negativity. Doubt has a negative connotation, one that always subtracts from something. To doubt something means that the possibility will not happen. To self-doubt means that you look down upon yourself, thinking that you are not capable of some task.

Doubt mixed with faith seems like it takes away from all the goodness that faith provides. Doubt seems like an overall bad word. Could that be our own cultural misperception? Could we be taking that connotation of doubt too far at some times? Could there actually be something redeeming about doubt, which can drive us to understand and grow deeper? Today, we heard the story of the disciple Thomas, whom we often call “Doubting Thomas.” This story often sends us into a righteous anger because we believe that Thomas is a disciple who dishonors the raised Jesus. We believe that Thomas is the poster boy of what people of faith to be against: doubt. And, we suppose, he is told off by the raised Jesus through his saying that “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.” I consider all of these thoughts misdirected. Thomas is not the worst disciple next to Judas. Thomas is, well, human, and simply lives that way. Thomas is the example of the disciple we can indeed follow, for Jesus not only hears what he has to say but also honors his request. Today, let us look deeply at the story of Thomas, how our thoughts about faith, belief, and doubt may be misdirected, and what Jesus does to legitimate Thomas in his searching for faith in the Risen Christ.

“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,” says Thomas. He seems stubborn. Thomas seems like he just doesn’t want to believe in the Risen Christ. Well, that is with good reason. Resurrection isn’t exactly something you hear about daily around town, not to mention anything we’d see on the news today, so Thomas seems well within his bounds to be skeptical. The statement by the disciples that “We have seen the Lord” isn’t exactly the convincing amount of evidence. He wasn’t there, so he can’t take the disciples exactly at their word. After a week, Jesus appears to them all in a closed and locked room. He pays

special heed to Thomas. Jesus asks him to do everything that Thomas wanted: touch the holes in his hands and his side. That is enough; notice that the text never says that he did! He returns to fellowship with Jesus wholeheartedly, knowing what he had experienced was true.

One of the shows that Catherine and I love to watch is *Pawn Stars*. Not only is it suspenseful, it also is quite educational. The show focuses on a Pawn Shop in Las Vegas that buys and sells historical and valuable items. It really gets interesting when the dealers and the sellers start to talk about the authenticity of items. I've seen many an instance when the seller will insist, yes, this is an authentic Steve McQueen autograph, for instance. Perhaps it is a gun or document from the civil war. Of course, each of the sellers is sure that the item is absolutely real. To the buyer, seeing is not believing. They need proof to confirm the seller's claims. They will bring in an expert to confirm whether it is real or it is a fake based on very meticulous evidence. From there, the shop buyers can start haggling or tell the seller they simply aren't interested.

The point is not that seeing is believing. As with the show *Pawn Stars*, seeing isn't believing. They see items all the time that look real, feel real, but, because of some level of deceit or reproduction, the items are not real. Seeing doesn't automatically show that truth is there. A seller can yell up and down the aisles that this is true, but that means nothing. Seeing isn't believing for us either. Thomas isn't a bad person just because he needs that proof. He is human, and his unbelief is natural. But belief and unbelief are more serious subjects than would first appear. The stakes are much higher.

We often interpret believing as a mental process in which we decide cognitively whether we accept the logic or we do not accept the logic. That, we hold, is belief and

unbelief. In John and, well, pretty much all of the Bible, that is not their understanding of belief and unbelief. It's not solely about what you think; it's mainly about what you do. Belief has hands and feet; you demonstrate what you think by what you do. If you think about atheism from a biblical context, it means that you may "believe" in God, but if you don't do anything to follow God, if you don't observe the commands and statutes, you don't truly believe.

In the same way, contrary to popular opinion, the opposite of faith is never doubt. The opposite of faith is apathy. The opposite of faith is just not caring. At times, we should doubt. Doubt is not necessarily a lack of faith, but can be a strengthening of faith. When we doubt, we take things apart, we play with them in our minds, so that we can better understand how they work and what they mean to us. We think about the time when Peter sunk when Jesus walked on water, and we think that's all because of doubt in Jesus. Really, that was a lack of relationship. Peter did not engage Jesus in the relationship he was called to, and that was his downfall. I think over time, what has made me grow the most in my faith life is understanding what it means to doubt and what it means to come from that doubt understanding who I am and what I believe in deeper and more committed ways. Doubt, in this way, serves as the fire that refines what we believe. It removes the impurities.

There is a good and faithful way to doubt. Doubt has its boundaries. Believing something too quickly does not do you any service, for you do not engage what is being presented. Not believing something in the face of overwhelming evidence is just foolishness. I ask you to doubt me. In all honesty, I want you not to take everything I tell you from the pulpit at face value. My task is to teach and guide you, but your task is to find

the truth, to wrestle with what I tell you. If you take it too easily, you probably haven't thought about it. On the other hand, it's not a good thing to say, "I don't believe you just because I don't want to believe you." That's not faithfulness either. We can do this process of doubting together faithfully; I want to talk about what I discuss in a sermon and where you struggle with it. Sometimes a message will resonate right away, and sometimes you might need to sit with it a while before you come to find what is in a message that gives you life abundant. That is the faithful place of doubt. If we accept a message too easily, we don't think too much about the implications of the message. If we balk at something in the midst of too great of evidence, then we can be stubbornly foolish. There is a faithful middle road, and Christ honors that. Thomas proves it.

When we really get down to it, this story is not about Thomas. This story is about Jesus' actions in response to Thomas' demands. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary suggests that this is about Jesus' grace, which moves so greatly. Jesus does not rebuff him; Jesus does not lecture him, he simply provides everything that Thomas might need. From there, relationship follows. Thomas delivers the greatest affirmation of faith found in John, when he says, "My Lord and My God!" Thomas sought Jesus, Jesus came to him, and faith was restored.

Because this story is not ultimately about Thomas, we recognize this is for our faith in Christ. This whole story serves as prologue for verses 30 and 31, which tell us that there are other stories, there are other adventures that Jesus has that aren't written in this book. They are written, it says, in order that we may believe. The point is that Jesus affirms us in our searching, and these stories are here in order that we may believe. These stories are here so that we may have relationship with Christ and, indeed, to walk and act for good and

love in Christ's name. An alternative way to translate the Greek it is that these stories are written in order that we might continue to believe. Sometimes it is not easy to be a person of faith. To be a person of faith, we learn, is not just about cognitively believing but continuing to act so that God's work in the world may continue to be fostered through our work as the Body of Christ. We are the ones who continue to do God's work in the world as God leads us. Stories like this refresh us. Stories like this show us that Christ calls us, but does not call us with a demanding voice. He calls us with the voice of love and grace, easily showing us the grace we need to pick up and follow.

"Doubting Thomas," as he is often called, is not the one we should scorn, but the one we should follow in example. His attitude does not show contempt or horrible stubbornness; he shows how deeply he cares. When he has the evidence at hand, he comes to relate once again to the Risen Christ. Jesus does not hold him in contempt, but recognizes that he needs something to come into relationship with him. Jesus gives Thomas what he needs, and harmony is restored. In the same way, we don't always believe something right off the bat, and that's normal. We are called to care deeply, not believing anything too quickly and not being obstinate in the face of real evidence. That is where the faithfulness resides, for we claim our humanity while God honors us in the midst of that. That is where holiness resides. Amen and Amen.