

## “Blessed by Believing”

Date: April 28, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: East 2, Year C

Text: John 20:19-31

Theme: Doubt, Faith, Believe, Thomas

If I were to mention the names of certain disciples, your mind might draw a blank. For example, if I say the name *Thaddeus*, what comes to mind? Probably not much, because we don't know much about that disciple. But what if I mention the name *Peter*, what comes to your mind? Fisherman? Loud and boisterous? Walks on water? The Rock? Quick-tempered? We've got a lot of images of Peter.

And what if I mention the name of the disciple known as *Thomas*, what word comes to your mind? Is it the word *doubt*? I'll bet it is. We have so closely associated Thomas with the word *doubt* that we have coined a phrase for him, “Doubting Thomas.”

What we don't remember about Thomas are the other occasions when he didn't doubt, in fact when he showed more courage than the other disciples. When Jesus made the decision to leave Galilee and head for Jerusalem, the disciples thought it would be certain death for all of them.

But it was Thomas who said, “Then let us go, so that we may die with him.” That was a very courageous statement. It took a lot of courage. And yet, we don't remember him for that incident. If we did, we would be calling him “Courageous Thomas.”

Unfortunately, history has remembered him for *this* scene, when the resurrected Christ made an appearance to the disciples in a home in Jerusalem. Thomas was not present at the time, and when he heard about the so-called resurrection appearance, he refused to believe it.

Maybe the news sounded too good to be true. Thomas said, “Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands, I will not believe.” He wanted evidence.

Now, I can’t help but notice that Thomas had separated himself from the disciples, and in his solitude he missed the risen Christ. I think John is suggesting to us that Christ appears most often within the community of believers – what we call the Church. When we separate ourselves from the church, we take a chance on missing his unique presence. For those of you who were here last Sunday, it was pretty special, was it not?

But the story does not end here. The second time Jesus made himself known to the disciples, Thomas was present with the other disciples. And this time, he too witnessed the risen Christ. This time he believed. So what can we learn from this event in the life of Thomas?

Let me suggest three things: First, we learn that Jesus did not blame Thomas for doubting. Second, we learn that we must move beyond doubt to faith. And third, we learn that we are blessed by believing. Let’s look at each one of those lessons in turn.

**Lesson number one:** Jesus did not blame or ridicule Thomas for having doubts and questions. Too often the church has tried to deal with doubt by trying to squash it. But Jesus never condemned or judged Thomas. I truly believe Jesus understood that once Thomas worked through his doubts, he would be a confident disciple and witness.

In fact, authentic faith begins with intellectual honesty and curiosity. In other words, it’s okay to have questions about God, the Bible and the Christian faith. God is big enough to handle our questions. God gave us brains and expects us to use them. God does not want us to simply believe everything somebody tells us. We’re supposed to think and to judge and to decide. Blind faith leads to cultic worship and heresy.

Doubts that lead to serious thinking, studying and reasoning can strengthen our faith. It was Alfred Lord Tennyson who said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds." So let me reassure you, many faithful Christians have had their times of doubt.

Most of us, dare I say all of us, have questioned even some of the basic beliefs we have been taught. Having questions is not a sin. But let me say this, although it is not wrong to have such thoughts, doubts or questions, it is not healthy to remain in such a state of mind for too long.

**And so we come to lesson number two:** We need to move beyond doubt to having faith. Doubting is not the goal. Faith is the goal, and so we should keep seeking, but not give up the faith. Simply because we have questions or doubts does not mean that we should throw the whole thing away. Rather, we should keep seeking answers.

That is what Thomas did. He came back. He came back to be with the other disciples. He didn't give up the fellowship of believers. He joined them. Oh, he still had his doubts and his questions, but he kept coming back. I encourage you to do the same.

Thomas may have doubted, but he didn't give up. And because he didn't give up, when he saw the risen Jesus, faith began to take root in his heart and he cried out loud, "My Lord and my God."

After that, Thomas began to preach the good news. He shared the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death. The good news of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ has transformed the world. But there were doubts, even in the beginning. The Christian faith was very fragile at the beginning. So let me tell you a story.

When they began to build a suspension bridge across the Niagara Gorge, it all began with engineers flying a kite across the great chasm and

river below. They simply played out the kite string until the kite reached the other shore. Then, twine was tied to the string and pulled across, and then rope was tied to the twine, and then wire to the rope, and then cable to the wire. In due time, mighty cables were suspended from great towers, anchored on either side in the depths of the earth. Thus the bridge was built.

Often times faith begins as a fragile thing, just like the tiny kite-string that began the mighty bridge. So, we build on what we do believe. Each experience of faith brings new strength, new hope, new confidence and new trust in the Lord. At first, we trust only a little, but with each new experience, our faith grows until it is strong.

Seen on one of those outdoor sign boards was this message: “Feed your faith and starve your doubts.” Instead of focusing on what we don’t understand, or what doesn’t make sense, or what seems peculiar or hard to believe, we need to focus on what we do know and understand. When you feed your faith and starve your doubts, your faith will grow.

**Which brings me to my third and final point:** When we believe, we are blessed. Doubting is like a beach ball tossed upon the waves of the ocean. It goes up and down but doesn’t really have any direction. If a storm comes up, the beach ball gets blown all over the place. But the ball doesn’t really go anywhere, does it? It’s just tossed around.

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we find the anchor that holds us steady in the midst of life’s storms. We can lose our jobs, discover we have cancer, have our home destroyed in a fire, or lose our life-long partner. Not all in one week, I hope.

And the Christian will stand firm, because the anchor holds. The anchor is Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Life can deal us some pretty rotten deals. But the Christian has an inner strength that comes from believing. We don't have to like what is happening to us, but we need not despair. For we have faith in the One who conquered death.

We are blessed by believing in God. My friends, we are not simply an accident of the universe. We were created by a loving God who has a purpose for our lives. What a blessing it is to know that we are here for a reason.

As Christians, we are blessed by believing that God loves us and cares for us. This God that we believe in didn't just throw us down here on earth and forget about us. God cares about what happens to us.

Even when we rebel and make a mess of our lives, God doesn't walk away from us. God makes a way for us to be with Him always. There is forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. Do you have that reassurance in your soul? We are blessed by believing.

My faith has been such a blessing to me; I pray that your faith has been a blessing to you. Because life can be crazy, hectic, frustrating, annoying and all of that. But I have the assurance of eternal life, believing by faith. Everything around me can change. Everything can be taken from me. But nothing can separate me from God's love in Jesus Christ. Amen?

We are blessed; we are so blessed by believing. I don't know where you are in your walk with the Lord. Maybe you're stuck in your doubts and you find it hard to believe. I'm here this morning to tell you three things:

1. Jesus doesn't judge us for having doubts;
2. It is best if we move from having doubt to having faith; and
3. We are blessed when we believe.

May these promises come true in your life. Amen. And Amen.