

## “The Dynamic of Doubt”

Date: April 11, 2021  
Text: John 20:18-31  
Occasion: Easter 2

Place: Lakewood UMC  
Theme: Doubt, questions, faith

The words *doubting* and *Thomas* have become almost inseparable, haven't they? The phrase, "Doubting Thomas," is used in some churches to rebuke those who ask questions or who cast doubt on other people's absolute certainties. In some places, to be called a Doubting Thomas is almost as scandalous as being called a Judas. I suggest we take another look at the story.

First of all, Thomas is not the only one who had doubts about the resurrection of Jesus. Cleopas and his companion tell a fellow traveler on the road to Emmaus that they had hoped Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel. They didn't recognize it was Jesus himself, and they certainly did not believe in the resurrection, at least not yet.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples and their companions. Even after he had showed them his hands and feet, they were still disbelieving. Perhaps *all* of the disciples were infected with a little doubt. I wonder: if you were there, would you have believed right away?

Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. They were so excited about seeing the resurrected Lord. And it appears they were upset with Thomas for not believing them. But Thomas needed more than just their word. He had to see for himself, to believe.

Now, to his credit, Thomas *does* want to believe. Nowhere does it say that he didn't want to believe. He didn't have so much doubt that his mind couldn't be changed. In fact, all he wanted was some evidence so that he could believe.

You might say Thomas was the “Palestinian from Missouri.” Missouri, you know, is the “Show-Me” state. Aren’t most of us spiritual Missourians? We want proof and lots of it before we are willing to commit to anything.

The entire concept of empirical evidence is the foundation of the scientific method. Our legal system is also based on the concept that the accused is considered innocent until proven guilty. Without the evidence, the prosecution has no case.

Well, Thomas is confronted by the other disciples with nothing but words, “hearsay” we might call it. Thomas had to decide, “Do I believe them, or do I wait for the evidence?” He knew how much they wanted to believe Jesus was still alive. He also understood their emotional condition – they were distraught. Should they be trusted? Could he believe them?

Thomas holds out for the evidence. You see, it’s not that Thomas didn’t want to believe; but his was a seeking faith. It was a doubt that wanted to be proven wrong. He wasn’t unwilling to believe; he simply wanted something he could hold on to.

And so, Thomas decided to wait with the disciples, in fact in the very place where the risen Christ had appeared to them the week before. Thomas shows us he wanted to believe, by choosing to be with them at that place and time.

When Jesus appears before them, Thomas doesn’t even try to touch the wounds, as Jesus invites him to do. Instead he cries out, “My Lord and my God!” *Now* he believes.

Do you ever have doubts about your faith? Are there things about God, or Jesus or the Bible that you’re just not certain? Most people do. Sadly, many believe they are the only one who is dealing with doubt. Some

times they withdraw from the church and other believers, feeling they are somehow inferior. Other people come across with a façade of spiritual confidence, acting spiritually confident but feeling like a hypocrite inside.

So what do you do when you have doubts and questions? Do you go back to your Bible and read it again? Do you seek out other resources to help you better understand? Or do you toss the Bible aside and say “That’s a lot of baloney?” Do you ever share your questions with Christians to learn what they have to say? Or do you keep your doubt to yourself and hope it will get better?

I ask those questions, because what we do with our doubts will either cause our faith to grow stronger or become weaker. What do *you* do with your doubts? How you handle them will either cause your faith to grow or to shrivel.

But having doubts is a very common experience. Personally, I am very grateful to the Bible for including this event in Thomas’ faith journey, because it gives me the reassurance that having doubts is not a terrible thing. I say that because of the way Jesus responds to Thomas.

Notice what Jesus does when he appears before Thomas. You might imagine Jesus would have gotten angry with Thomas. But he doesn’t. Instead, Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter and offers Thomas the evidence he’s looking for.

Thomas may have been skeptical, but he was searching for the truth. Doubt was not a fixed state of mind for him, but a technique he used to discover the truth. His was a faith in search of answers. Jesus understood and responded to him with patience, compassion and understanding. He will do the same for each one of us.

We can either feed out doubts, or we can use them to build our faith and make it stronger. I went searching for a certain quote that I once heard about doubt and I discovered several really interesting quotes I wanted to share with you. Listen to what some other people say about doubt and faith:

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Paul Tillich said, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of it.” Author Herman Hesse said, “Faith and doubt go hand in hand; they are complementaries. One who never doubts will never truly believe.”

Peter Abelard is quoted, “The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to question, and by seeking we come to the truth.”

Philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, “The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.” Alfred Lord Tennyson is quoted as saying, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, than in half the creeds.”

I love these quotes; they remind me that I am not alone in my questions. Jesus didn't condemn Thomas for having doubts and he won't condemn you either. In my own experience, I have found that honest searching and probing has actually made my faith stronger. When I didn't like the answers I'd been given, I kept asking and searching.

The encounter between Jesus and Thomas welcomes every skeptic to bring his or her doubts to God. So I encourage you, if you're having doubts, feed your faith by keep asking questions. The great Russian author Dostoevsky was once asked about his faith. He answered, “My hosanna comes forth from the crucible of doubt.” May it be so with you. Amen.