

## In Our Unbelief

Sermon 15 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 28, 2019

John 20: 19 – 31

Doubting Thomas: (n) a person who is skeptical and refuses to believe something without proof.

We've all heard the term, maybe we have used it to describe someone we know. Maybe we've used it to describe ourselves from time to time. This limited caricature of Jesus' disciple named Thomas appears in literature, art, and music more than any other. Despite the other disciples' lack of understanding, lack of faith, and undeniable missteps, Thomas is the one who gets the bad reputation. And I don't quite understand why. Consider the other disciples. Take Peter for example. The one who tried to walk on water, the one who denied Jesus before the cock crowed, the one who is called the rock upon whom Christ's church is built... how about these nicknames: "Sinking Peter," "Denying Peter," or "Peter the Rock." I've never heard anyone called any of those? (I've heard people called "the Rock" but they aren't talking about St. Peter.)

But Doubting Thomas, is everywhere. Google it. You'll see.

Despite our affinity for the nickname, the truth is, there was no "Doubting Thomas." Thomas was not particularly skeptical. He did not require more evidence than the others to believe that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. He simply requested the same experience that the others had while was out of the room. They got to see Jesus' wounds; he wanted to also!

Thomas was just like the others who gathered in the room, feared for their lives, and refused to believe Mary's testimony from the garden.

To further redeem Thomas from this unfortunate nickname, we need to be clear that in the Greek, the word "doubt" never appears in this text, or in the Gospel of John... or connected directly to Thomas. In fact, the only two times the word appears in the Gospels at all, it's in Matthew. The only time the word "doubt" is associated with any particular person, it's Peter! Matthew chapter 14 tells the story of Peter stepping out of the boat and onto the water, where he will try to walk, just like Jesus did. When he starts to sink he cries out for Jesus to save him. "Ye, of little faith," Jesus responds, "why did you doubt?" So, despite all the biblical evidence mounting up against Peter, we still call Thomas the doubter. Maybe today we can launch a campaign to clear Thomas's name. I wonder how far "Doubting Peter" will go?

To be even more fair, though, I wonder if this exercise of naming any one of us a "doubter" is the best idea. At least according to John's Gospel which (again) never includes the word doubt at all. Perhaps this is because John understood doubt not to be a problem, but rather as a natural part of the faith journey. Doubt is an intellectual

problem; it is what happens when our minds cease to understand what is professed to be true. Spiritually speaking, doubt (although it can be unpopular in religious circles) can help us grow deeper in faith. The condition which plagues Thomas, and the other disciples who had gathered behind locked doors is one not of doubt (though they certainly experienced doubt from time to time), but this is something far more relational and embodied.

Today's reading describes Jesus' second resurrection appearance in John's Gospel. Remember, the first appearance was to Mary Magdalene at the tomb early in the day. Now it is evening, on that same day. The disciples are gathered in a room behind closed doors, for fear of the Jews, John says. Somehow, Jesus enters the room and says to them, "Peace be with you." He shows them his hand and his side as proof that he is indeed the crucified one, and *then* they rejoice. Their joy is a sign of their belief that God has indeed raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus speaks again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent me, I also send you." The same way that Jesus told Mary, "Do not hold onto me, but go and tell..." Jesus speaks to the disciples who were afraid in the room. "...so I send you." There isn't a moment to waste or revel in the miracle that Jesus is alive before the disciples are sent back out, to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and raise the dead.

The disciples probably wanted to stay in their locked room, just like Mary probably wanted to stay in the garden with Jesus. They had witnessed so much during that last week in Jerusalem. They must have been angry with those who betrayed their Lord, even more so with those responsible for the violence. Surely, they feared for their own lives, after all, they had been seen with Jesus traveling throughout the region for the last three years. What might become of them? Would they suffer the same fate? Surely, they had doubts about this mission now that they had seen what the religious and political leaders were capable of.

But Jesus says, "Go. Just as I was sent, so I send you." Some scholars consider these words John's version of the Great Commission, but rather than commanding the disciples to go into the world baptizing (like we find in Matthew's Gospel), John characterizes the mission as a relational offering of peace and forgiveness. "Peace be with you." – Now go and do the same.

Throughout his Gospel, John uses the word "believe" to describe the relationship that the disciples have with Jesus. Those who believe in Jesus, according to John, love Jesus and live their lives for and with him, participating in his mission of feeding, healing, and resurrection. Here, the disciples are angry and afraid. They are literally shut off from relationship with anyone as they are camped out behind closed doors with walls built up around them – keeping themselves and their mission safe, locked, and hidden away.

The disciples probably would have preferred to stay put in their room than to return to the violence of the city with a message of forgiveness. Certainly, it would be easier for them

to consider retribution than peace. Jesus had just shown them his hands and his side, and now they're supposed to forgive? They're supposed to just let all of that go?

Go. Go in peace. Offer forgiveness. "Just as I was sent, so I send you." Jesus says, even as his wounds gaped open.

John's Gospel offers us a beautiful synopsis of Jesus' life, ministry, and mission. It describes for us with artful use of language, the Good News of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The beautiful language is one of the reasons that John is the source of so many of the words we use to talk about our faith; and there is no word more central to John's theology than "believe."

It is tempting for us to accept this term at face value. To remove it from its narrative context within the Gospel itself and to let "belief" simply be an intellectual exercise, sort of like a synonym for "understand." But within the larger narrative of the Gospel, belief is demonstrated through action and relationship. To believe in Jesus is to live in relationship with him. To believe in the resurrection is to participate in restoring life where life is lost. To believe in God is to receive the Holy Spirit and go out into the world offering that which the Spirit offers: peace where there is fear of violence and forgiveness where there is harbored anger. So, when the disciples are closed up in their room on that first night of the week, they are not practicing resurrection, they are not "believing" according to John, they are living their un-belief because they are overcome by fear.

Fear is a powerful force that has been used throughout history to elicit behavior and to motivate allegiance to groups who hold a certain power in society. It has been used in countless political campaigns – the most obvious historical example being that of the Nazi party in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But that wasn't the first time this tactic was employed to garner power.

All of the Gospels remind us that Jesus' movement of feeding, healing, raising the dead was a threat to all kinds of powers. It challenged political, social, and economic norms which made religious and political leaders uneasy. Whether Jesus was killed because he threatened the religious institution by turning over the tables in the temple and raising Lazarus from the grave, or because he threatened the political leaders by standing up for the poor and giving authority to the powerless, Jesus was not afraid and could not be persuaded to go along with the status quo which oppressed the poor, marginalized the sick, and relied upon strict boundaries designating who was in and who was out.

Jesus refused to let fear put an end to his mission. And to believe in Jesus was to follow him. To believe in Jesus was to be in relationship with him. To believe in Jesus was to live as he lived: boldly, courageously, and faithfully. To believe in Jesus was to say, "no," to fear and, "yes," to peace... even if it meant death on a cross.

Fear is a powerful, powerful tool. And it continues to be used to elicit behaviors and to motivate allegiance to all kinds of groups. Fear of being bullied prompts us to remain silent while others are belittled and called names. Fear of isolation and loneliness leads us to go along with the harmful ideologies of our social and political affiliates. Fear of exclusion from our churches and Bible Study groups prevents us from asking our deepest questions or expressing our true feelings during moments of doubt.

Of course we are going to have doubt. We have lived long enough to understand that we cannot make it through life alone. We have learned through painful experiences that we can and will be broken, that those we trust will let us down, and that those we love will sometimes hurt us. But just as we cannot let our pain deny our ability to love, we cannot let our doubt hold us captive to fear.

Fear is everywhere, it is alive, it is active, and it is confining us to all kinds of closed rooms with locked doors where we cannot and will not bring the good news of God's radical love, peace, and forgiveness.

The opposite of belief is not doubt. It is un-belief, embodied and imprisoned by fear.

One of the most famous believers in the twentieth century describes her life experience with belief and doubt:

*Where is my faith? Mother Theresa writes. –even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness. –My God – how painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing. –I have no faith. – I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart and make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me. – I am afraid to uncover them – because of the blasphemy – if there be God, -- please forgive me.<sup>1</sup>*

Teresa is remembered for her tremendous faith, lived out for more than 60 years serving the poorest of the poor. Many hailed her for her faith but in 2007, nearly a decade after her death, her private writings revealed a lifelong struggle with doubt.<sup>2</sup> In these writings she expresses feeling abandoned by God and she questioned God's own existence. Surely, she understood the way the disciples felt when Jesus was gone, dead, and in the grave. Surely it would have been easier for her to throw up her hands, walk away, and do something more productive with her life... But even through her doubt, she continued expressing belief in her actions, putting one foot in front of the other and stretching out her hands in service to her neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> Mother Teresa. <https://www.smmsisters.org/who-we-are/sister-stories/86/the-doubts-of-a-saint>. Retrieved April 24, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Come and Be My Light*. Crown Publishing Group. 2007.

Mother Teresa, Thomas, the other disciples, and all of us (if we are honest) will experience moments of doubt. We will all struggle to understand why things happen and what to do next. Many of us may even join Teresa in questioning if God even exists at all. Doubt is part of the journey of faith.

When Jesus speaks to Thomas saying, "See my hands, touch my side... Thomas, do not be un-believing but believing," he's asking Thomas not to understand what is happening but to embody the mission, to overcome all of the fear that keeps him surrounded by walls, tucked in behind closed doors and to go out into the world doing as Jesus did: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

Jesus asked Thomas to believe.

In the same way, God continues to call us to believe.

If we could overcome our fears and begin to believe, how might God use us to bring peace into our world? If we could get open our doors, rather than close them for fear of the other - how might God liberate us through relationship with our neighbors? If we could become a believing people, how might we live differently, embracing doubt and difference, not as an impediment to growth, but as a critical step on the journey of faith?

To often in our unbelief, we migrate toward safe spaces of similarity and like mindedness. We venture out from time to time with acts of generosity and charity, but sometimes it is easier for us to talk about the good news than it is for us to believe it.

But seeing as we are Easter people, and seeing as God saw fit to raise Jesus from the dead and send him back to the first disciples with a calling to Go and tell. To see and believe... may we make it our mission – in this season of resurrection – to overcome our fears, to open every closed door... and in our unbelief, may we believe!

**Benediction:**

May the words of the psalmist give us comfort and courage: The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?

So as we leave this sanctuary... this refuge from all that causes us to fear. May God give us the courage to believe with our whole lives now and forevermore, Amen.