

“DOUBTING THOMAS FINDS FAITH” **(John 20:24-31)**

If you were with us at our Good Friday service you know that it was a very somber reflection of Christ’s death – but today is a day of joy and celebration because on Easter morning Jesus triumphed over death and rose again from the grave. This morning I want to talk to you about faith and doubt, and I want to start with a story that was in the news some time back – a story that started when the Webb family of South Bend, Indiana got a phone call one morning. It was the Animal Control Center saying that they had their dog. Holly Webb said, “What dog? We don’t have a dog.” The caller from the Control Center told her that they had a little white Lhasa Apso dog wearing tags with the Webb’s phone number and address. “Gidget? You have Gidget?”

Five years earlier Gidget had mysteriously disappeared and the Webbs searched and searched for her – they took out ads in the newspaper, they hung up signs and checked all the shelters – but no one called and they gave up hope that they would ever find her alive again. Then one day, five years later, the dog was found tied up in front of the Animal Control Center. When Holly Webb told her husband Troy that Gidget had been found he said, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” When he finally did see Gidget, he said it was like seeing a ghost – it was if their dog had come back to life.

Most of us would have the same reaction of disbelief that Troy Webb had if we had heard the same thing. There is something about our human makeup that has to see something before we believe it. There are a few gullible people, but most of us have to experience something with one or more of our five senses to believe something is true – we have to see it, hear it, feel it, taste it, or smell it – then we’ll believe.

Jesus’ disciples reacted with full doubt when they were told that Jesus had risen from the dead. On more than one occasion Jesus told them that He must die, but that He would rise again. Somehow the “rising again” part flew right over their heads. The disciples were normal, everyday people who had good common sense. They knew that people just don’t come back to life – once they die, they stay dead. It’s biologically and scientifically impossible for someone to come back to life.

Of all the doubtful disciples, Thomas will always have the tag as the biggest doubter. He is “Doubting Thomas.” He wouldn’t believe that Jesus was alive unless He could actually see Jesus. If we’re honest, there’s probably a bit of Thomas in all of us. We’ve all, to one degree or another, wondered if God is real or if our Christian faith is true. We’ve all had bouts with doubt. As we look this morning at Thomas’ story, I want to share with you six practical things you can do to turn doubt into faith.

John chapter 20 records that Mary Magdalene was the first person to see Jesus raised from the dead. She goes to the tomb at the break of day and finds the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. She looks in. A stranger outside the tomb asks who she's looking for. She thinks it's a gardener. But then He speaks her name... "Mary." It's Jesus! She falls at His feet and clings to Him. She doesn't want to let go.

But Jesus says, "Don't hold on to me, but go to the disciples and tell them that you've seen me." Mary runs to where they are staying and breathlessly tells them the astonishing news... "I have seen the Lord! He's alive! I saw Him outside the tomb and I talked to Him." But the disciples just looked at her – they didn't believe her.

The gospel of John picks up the story in 20:19... "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'" In His resurrected body Jesus can just pass through walls and suddenly appear. Imagine being in the room, probably talking about what Mary had reported and then all of a sudden there is Jesus!

Verse 20 goes on to say, "After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." Jesus gives them empirical evidence that He is alive. He wasn't a ghost. The disciples see His nailed scarred hands – they see the wound in His side where He was pierced. All their doubt melted away and they believed.

But one disciple is notably absent. Verses 24-25 says, "Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'"

I won't ask for a raise of hands, but I'll bet that most of us can identify with Thomas. "Show me! I'll believe it when I see it!" The first principle we learn in this story is that **realize that doubting is normal**, even if you're a believer. Christians aren't supposed to have any doubts, so we are led to believe, but doubting is a normal human reaction to that which we can't see. You get a call that your dog is found after five years. You say, "What are you talking about?" The weatherman says, "It's not going to rain next week," and you say, "I'll believe that when I see it." Mary Magdalene says, "Jesus is alive." The disciples don't believe it.

After seeing Jesus for themselves the disciples tell Thomas, "We've seen the Lord!" The present active tense of the verb means that they didn't just say it once, they kept on telling Thomas that He's alive. "We saw Him Thomas – we saw Him with our own eyes and touched Him with our hands." Thomas says, "I have to see it to believe it."

It's only natural to doubt something that you've not seen or experienced with one or more of your five senses. The very fact that there is faith means that there must be some measure of doubt. Phillip Yancey said, "God's invisibility means that I will experience times of doubt." Oswald Chambers said, "Doubt is not always a sign that a man is wrong. It may be a sign that He is thinking." The only way you will never doubt is if you don't have any brain waves anymore. We all have bouts of doubt.

Sometimes we confuse doubt with unbelief. We say, "I doubt so I must not believe." Doubt means I'm kind of hanging in the air between something. Unbelief means I've made up my mind that it's not true. Just because you doubt doesn't mean you don't believe. But doubt can lead to unbelief if you don't do the right thing with your doubt.

I can honestly say that I never had any serious doubts about my faith from the time I accepted Christ as a young child all the way into my adult years. I maintained a childlike faith even through losing our first two babies, I did not question God. But when I first started experiencing physical pain, I was surprised to find myself asking questions I had never asked before. I was like Job asking all the philosophical questions of life and I started wondering about things I had never wondered about. It wasn't unbelief, but it was a heavy-duty case of doubt, and Sharla got the pleasure of listening to me ramble on and on about why life doesn't make sense.

During this period of time I was reminded of how many of the great saints of the Bible had times of doubt and uncertainty. A great example is John the Baptist. John was the forerunner who pronounced the coming of Jesus – he spent time with Jesus, he baptized Jesus and saw the Holy Spirit descend on Him like a dove. Sometime later he's arrested and thrown into prison. As the days go by doubts begin to creep in. He's tired and lonely and discouraged. He needs some reassurance. He sends a messenger to ask Jesus, "Are you the Coming One, or do we look for someone else?" Even the mighty John the Baptist experienced a dark night of the soul and wrestled with doubt. Doubting is normal.

The second thing we learn from Thomas' story is that when you're going through a time of doubt, **do not withdraw from fellowship with God's people.** Like the other disciples, Thomas is devastated by the death of Jesus. He feels tremendous discouragement and defeat. He not only withdraws from God, but from the other disciples. When Jesus appears to the disciples, he's not there. When you're down, when you're hurting, when you're doubting, the tendency is to run away and hide – but that's when you need to be around people the most. Being alone only feeds discouragement and before long it grows into self-pity. Thomas isn't around when Jesus appears and he misses out.

Jesus said when two or more are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst. Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." There is something very powerful that happens when two or more are gathered together in the name of Jesus. The lesson we learn from Thomas is: when you're down and doubting, don't do it in isolation.

The third thing you need to do when doubt creeps in and that is to **pinpoint the source of your doubt**. The first source of doubt is intellectual. Thomas is a thinker. He can't comprehend how Jesus, being dead, could rise from the dead. How is this possible? Thomas had to know it and experience it in order for it to be true. I've seen the following scenario play out several times: someone grows up in a Christian family and goes to church and learns the simple truths of the Bible – then he or she heads off to a secular university and everything they've been taught is challenged by a very intellectual professor. They dogmatically say that the Bible is not true and just a book like any other book. They scoff at the idea of creationism when everything in science, they say, points to evolution. They cause you to question a God who would allow such pain and suffering and turmoil to go on in the world.

That happened to my nephew – after being raised in a Christian home he went off to college and started asking all these questions. He read book after book after book trying to figure faith out. But in the end, he became a doubting Thomas, and his doubt led him into unbelief. He said if he couldn't comprehend it, he wouldn't believe it. He declared himself an agnostic and no longer a believer.

Some doubts come because of an intellectually challenge to our faith, but the source of most doubts is deeper in nature – they are emotional and are born out of deep hurt and woundedness. Thomas was a wounded soul. When we read about him earlier in the gospels, we see that he was one of the more dedicated, loyal disciples of Jesus. He was ready to die for Jesus. He had given everything to follow Him and when Jesus died it knocked the wind out of him. It emotionally devastated him. Most of us know what it's like to feel let down by God. Something happens in your life and you say, "Where is God?" or "What is God doing?" You need an answer from God and wonder why He's absent. He could speak one word and solve your problem – yet He seems to hold back and be oblivious to your needs. These wounds can cause a crisis of faith.

Some years ago a professor of psychology in New York, named Paul Fritz, studied the childhoods of several well-known atheists and saw strong evidence that their rejection of God was directly related to emotional wounding from childhood – most often it was the death of a father or abuse or abandonment by a father. Ted Turner, the media mogul who founded CNN and all the Turner channels, is one example. As a teen he made a decision to follow Christ at a Billy Graham crusade. Sometime later his sister, his only sibling, died. It crushed him and it crushed his faith. He turned his back on God and became an outspoken critic of Christianity. It's important to determine the source of your doubt, and usually it is related to some kind of personal pain or loss.

This leads to a fourth point when doubting, and that is **learn to live by faith, not by sight**. Verse 26 says... "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'" Just as He did a week earlier, Jesus suddenly appears through the locked doors and says, "Peace be with you!" The only difference this time is that Thomas is there with them.

Verse 27, “Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’” Here we see how Jesus responds to doubters. He doesn’t condemn Thomas, but graciously invites him to carry out the same test He suggested a week earlier.

Verse 28, once Thomas sees that it really is Jesus... “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” Everything Thomas had believed about Jesus is validated. He understands that Jesus both Lord and God and that Jesus is his personal Lord and God.

“Well, that’s nice,” you say, “I wish I could see God as well. If He would take the time to drop down from heaven and reveal Himself to me, then sure, I’ll believe.” Notice what Jesus says next in verse 29... “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

That’s you and me. Thomas believed because He saw Jesus. He and the other disciples were able to experience the unique period of 40 days between the time Jesus rose from the dead and ascended back to heaven. During that time He appeared to more than 500 people, and commissioned the disciples to go tell the world that He had risen and to put their faith in Him.

Unlike Thomas and the disciples, we live today not by sight but by faith. God longs for us to seek after Him in faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” I don’t know all the reasons why He has set it up this way, but whether we like it or not, faith is not faith if it can be seen. Doubt and faith go hand in hand because if you don’t have doubt – you have certainty – and if you have certainty, you don’t have faith. This helped me tremendously during my period of doubt because I realized that I didn’t have to know everything in order to believe.

This side of heaven we’ll never have absolute proof. Although the Bible gives us lots of proof, it is not designed to be a book of proofs. The Bible never seeks to prove God. Christianity begins with two assumptions – God exists and that He has revealed Himself to us – His character, His guidelines, His expectations – through the Bible. If you believe that, everything else takes care of itself. But if you’re looking for every question to be answered, every “i” dotted and every “t” crossed, you’ll never, ever get there. You say, “Well I have to have proof. If you can prove to me scientifically that He died and rose again – if you can prove to me that the Bible is the Word of God, then I will believe.” If I could prove it to you there would be no need for faith and you can’t get around faith.

Every belief system, every way of thinking, requires faith. To be an atheist you have to by faith believe that there is no God. You can’t prove that there’s no God – you believe it by faith. There’s no way you can get around faith. Remember that faith and doubt go together. If you don’t have doubt, you have certainty – and if you have certainty, you don’t have faith.

Since we live by faith and not by sight, belief ultimately comes down to trust – and trust is something we practice every day. This morning I flipped the light switch on and the light just came on. I don't know how it happened, but it did. I put some coffee grounds in the coffee maker along with water and hit a button and it made coffee. When I went out my van and turned the key in the ignition, it started up. I don't stop and analyze all these things, I just do them because of their track record. I trust that when I turn the light switch on the light will come on because it's come on hundreds of times. The coffee machine has come on hundreds of times. I trusted my car would start. I trusted the sun would come up. I don't understand how all these things happen, but I don't have to understand them to know they happened. The evidence is there to point to the fact that they did.

The fifth thing we must do on our journey from doubt to faith is **honestly examine the abundant evidence of the Christian faith**. Although God has designed it so that we live by faith, our faith is not a leap into the dark. Although we don't have absolute proof, Christianity has the most compelling, convincing evidence around. If you take the time to check it out, the evidence is there. Christianity rises or falls on the resurrection of Jesus, and some of the world's greatest skeptics have turned to Christ in faith after analyzing the evidence for the resurrection.

Among the critical points of evidence is... (1) The empty tomb. The empty tomb is an historical fact. In Jesus' day the tombs of religious leaders who died were venerated as shrines. If Jesus' body was still there, you can bet that it would have become a shrine. Today you can visit the tombs of other religious leaders, but there is no such shrine for the greatest figure in all of history.

(2) Jesus made at least ten separate appearances, including one before 500 people. If over 500 witnesses were brought into a courtroom today and all said they saw the same thing, the case would be a slam dunk.

(3) The day we worship. Why do we worship on Sunday? For centuries Jews worshipped on Saturday – the Sabbath – and all of Jesus' early followers were Jewish. Something cataclysmic must have happened to change the day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday. The fact that millions of people are gathered for worship this Sunday morning is a testament to the reality of the resurrection.

(4) The transformed lives of Jesus' followers. In a court of law you might call this circumstantial evidence, but the effect the resurrection had on His disciples points to no other conclusion but that something profound happened on Easter morning. Before the resurrection the disciples were a group of rag-tag disciples who alternated between faith and doubt – between a heavenly mind-set and an earthly mind-set, and between commitment and flakiness. In fact, the last thing we read about the disciples before the resurrection is that they fled in fear when Jesus was arrested in the Garden. In the hour of Jesus' greatest need, they were nowhere to be found. But something happened to these men when saw the risen Christ. It changed them and propelled them to go turn the world upside down. Perhaps the best proof of the resurrection is the transformed lives of we who sit here this morning. If you take the time to examine the evidence of the resurrection, you'll find convincing evidence that clears the path for faith.

The sixth thing we learn from Thomas' story is **don't linger in doubt – put whatever faith you have into action**. If you have doubts, don't remain stuck in doubt. Don't say, "I must be the only one who has doubts." You're not the only one. You say, "I can't figure it all out." Join the club – we all live by faith. Don't just stand there and have baby faith the rest of your life. Put whatever faith you have into action.

Picture in your mind three guys getting on an airplane. The first man who gets on is a first-time flyer and you can tell – he's nervous as all get out. The second man who gets on has flown a few times and is a little nervous. The third man is a frequent flyer who's not nervous at all. When the airplane takes off, the first man breaks out in a sweat and prays the Lord's Prayer. The second man takes a deep breath, while the third man kicks back and takes a nap. The point is: **THEY ALL GET OFF THE AIRPLANE**. It's not the *amount* of faith you have, it is the *object* of your faith. All three men had faith. The reason the seasoned traveler more confident is because he had put his faith in an object week in and week out that reinforced his trust.

Every believer has a certain amount of faith – some a lot of faith and others but a mustard seed. But the important thing is that you act on your faith, whatever amount you have. You have to get out of the boat if you want to walk on water. You have to step out on the limb if you want to see the fruit. Faith is a choice. Faith does not mean complete blind faith. We have plenty of evidence of God's work. But if we could see all of it, it wouldn't be faith. We walk by faith, not by sight.

Thomas was never the same after his bout with doubt. Once he saw the risen Christ he became a fervent preacher of the gospel. According to church tradition Thomas first went and preached in ancient Babylon, where Iraq is today. He then went to Persia, which is modern-day Iran. From there he traveled to India where he spread the good news of Jesus and established many churches. At one point he was told to stop preaching the gospel. When he refused, he was thrown into a pit and speared to death in the back. Thomas never looked back once his faith in Jesus was restored.

Going through a period of doubt can actually serve to make your faith deeper and stronger. I know it did for me. I can honestly say that after knowing and practicing the six principles we learned this morning that I will never doubt again. That doesn't mean that I have everything figured out, but it means that I have driven a stake of belief and today I'm much more like the third man on the airplane who is content and secure in what God has chosen to reveal.

Thomas declared, "My Lord and My God." I want to give you the opportunity this morning to make that your personal declaration. I want to invite you to move from doubt to faith. No one can force you to do that. I certainly am not going to twist your arm. You may need some more time to check things out. But don't stand still. You will never have all the answers, but you will find plenty of evidence to put your faith in Christ.