

**New St. James Presbyterian Church**  
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**Sunday, April 28, 2019**  
**“Doubting Thomas”**

Easter is the church season beginning on Easter Sunday and continuing for 50 days and ending with Pentecost. During this time, we commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the most important Christian festival, and the one celebrated with the greatest joy. Without Easter there would be no Christianity. Without Jesus' suffering, his death on the cross, and subsequent resurrection there would be no Easter. For however terrible the suffering was, it was part of God's plan for our salvation.

Last Sunday we had an uplifting Easter service celebrating faith in Christ and in the resurrection. We read together the story of how Christ rose again, and appeared to those he loved.

Today's gospel lesson from John tells us about the first appearances of Jesus to his disciples after his death and resurrection. On the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, we see the disciples huddled together in a room with the doors locked. Jesus suddenly appears in the room and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Then we encounter Thomas, who missed Jesus' revealing himself to the rest of the disciples. And because he wanted some proof to go along with the joy they were all experiencing, he is forever referred to as “Doubting Thomas”. To this day, many of us often refer to someone who continuously has doubts as a “Doubting Thomas. Even Wikipedia describes a “doubting Thomas” as a skeptic, who refuses to believe without direct personal experience.

Thomas V. Moore, a minister in Richmond, Virginia, who became the moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church. In 1867, wrote a book, *The Last Days of Jesus*, commenting on Thomas's character. He describes Thomas as “a man of gloomy spirit, prone to look on the dark side of everything, and live in the shade. There was little in him of the bright, sunny and hopeful, and hence he was ready to believe good news as bad. This frigidity of his temperament made him skeptical, hasty in coming to unfavorable conclusions.”

More recently, John MacArthur, an American pastor and author known for his international Christian radio program, *Grace to You*, and has been the pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, since February 1969, just published a book, *Twelve Ordinary Men*. It's a book on the twelve disciples. This is what he has to say about Thomas: “Thomas

was somewhat a negative person; he was a worry wart, a brooder, tended to be anxious and angst ridden. He was like Eyore in Winnie the Pooh. He anticipated the worst all the time, pessimism, rather than doubt, seems to have been his besetting sin." Not so much a doubter then as a pessimist.

Wow, this doesn't paint a pretty picture about poor Thomas. I say poor, because it's all based on the most slender of evidence. The truth be told, the Bible gives us very little information about Thomas. In the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all we know about Thomas is that his name is listed among the twelve disciples. That's it! Everything else we know about Thomas is found in the Gospel of John. And even in John's gospel, he's only mentioned three times.

The first time we meet Thomas is in John chapter 11. Hoping he would come and heal their brother, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that his friend Lazarus was very sick. Instead of dropping everything and going to him, Jesus continued his ministry.

Then a few days later, Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus was dead and that he was returning to Judea to see him. When the disciples heard this, they became visibly upset. They are troubled, and not because Lazarus was dead. Instead, they remind Jesus in no uncertain terms, "Lord, don't you remember the last time you were in Judea? The Jews tried to kill you! They wanted to stone you! If you go back, they may very well succeed." The disciples tried to stop him, fearing for his life and we might add; their own.

It was precisely at that moment that we meet Thomas. Fully realizing the danger of returning to Judea, Thomas spoke up and said to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." In essence, he was saying, "If the people take up stones and kill Jesus, let us die with him. If he is cast into prison, let us go to prison also."

We see that Thomas loved Jesus so much that he was willing to die right along beside him. This statement took great courage of the part of Thomas. Instead of calling Thomas the Doubter, we should call him Thomas the Risk Taker.

Thomas took great physical risk to follow Jesus. For us, there is emotional and spiritual risk when accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. There is risk involved to get up and say before God and everyone else, "I am a sinner. I am sorry for the things I have done wrong.

There is risk involved in committing yourself to be a member of a local church. It requires a risk to turn a significant portion of your income over to God.

There is risk involved in telling a colleague or friend about Jesus. We never know how they might react.

There is risk involved to love a stranger and turn the other cheek.

There is risk involved to commit yourself as a church to grow. It may require doing things differently and going outside our comfort zone; going further than our past experiences and doing things the way we used to. No church or individual will grow unless we are willing to take a risk. Like Thomas, if we truly love Jesus and he is number one in our lives, we will be willing to take those risks

The second time we see Thomas is on the night of the Last Supper. It was the night when Jesus said to the disciples, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know."

Again, it was Thomas who spoke up. He asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas was not only a risk taker he was Thomas, the Inquirer. He was not a man who considered himself to have all the answers. Instead, he was an individual who wanted to know more. He wanted to understand what Jesus was talking about. Thomas loved Jesus and he wanted to know more about him. And, if Jesus was going somewhere, he wanted to be with him.

Thomas wants to be in Jesus' presence, and the thought that most concerns him, is that there may come a time when he won't be able to find Jesus anymore. The thought of Jesus' absence and him not being able to find Him again, was something that troubled him immensely. Whatever else you may think about Thomas, here's a man who loved Jesus.

We need more Christians who are longing to know more about Jesus and his word. Far too many of us are satisfied with knowing Jesus on a superficial level. This wasn't good enough for Thomas. He wanted to know more.

When we don't understand we should ask questions. We don't have any issue with asking our leaders questions when unsure of their direction, yet somehow we cringe at questioning our faith and our spiritual leaders. If Jesus welcomed questions from his Disciples, then God certainly welcomes our questions. The only wrong question is the one that is not asked.

The third time we meet Thomas is in this morning's story when Thomas says, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

Thomas' reaction wasn't really that unexpected? In fact, he is no different from the other disciples. He wasn't any different than Mary who would not believe even though Jesus stood right in front of her, and no different from Peter and John who would not believe even though they saw the empty tomb and had heard the words of Jesus about what would happen on the third day. They now believed, but only after they had seen Jesus and His wounds with their own eyes. Why should it be different for Thomas?

He was a man who had tremendous sorrow and pain in his life. His friend had been hung from a cross and left to die. The one whom he believed in, the one whom he hoped in, the one whom he trusted, the one who healed people and brought wholeness to those in despair, the one who was crucified like a common criminal; he was mocked and beaten, brutalized, and finally he was buried. And that, for Thomas, was the end.

What hope is there when your friend dies, and you are left alone? What is there to believe in when you sit by yourself in your home and think of all that could have been and all that will never be? There is very little, if anything.

Some of us, know these kinds of feelings. They are the kind of feelings that come with grief, the kind of feelings that come with loss or abandonment. They are the feelings of stress, the feelings of being overwhelmed, the feelings of being out of control, the feelings that come when we are betrayed by our bodies or minds. It is hard when you have these kinds of feelings, hard to know which way is up, hard to know what to do, hard to hope, hard, in fact, to believe. It's at these times that we need to remember what happens next in our story this morning.

The days did pass and once again the disciples were gathered together but this time Thomas was with them. Once again Jesus came and stood among them. Jesus did not waste a moment. He walked straight over to Thomas and said, "Thomas, here is my hand, put your finger in it. Here is my side, thrust your arm into it. Stop doubting and believe." We should note that, Jesus was not rebuking Thomas, Jesus was reassuring him. Jesus knew exactly what Thomas needed, just as He knows exactly what we need, and he always responds to those needs. All we have to do is wait, especially in the times of sorrow. It's hard but at the end, it's worth it.

Thomas found himself standing in the presence of the resurrected, living Jesus! He had been dead, but now he's alive. What was he to do? Should he fall down and kiss Jesus' feet? Should he cry? What should he do? Thomas responded to Jesus, as only Thomas could, with what many have considered to be the climax of the Gospel of John. Thomas said, "My Lord and My God!" For the first time in the Bible, Jesus is called God. He had been called, Lord, Teacher, Son of David, and even the Son of God but now, one who had doubted gave the greatest witness of all. He proclaimed, "My Lord and My God!" Thomas the doubter is now, Thomas the witness.

Like Thomas it's ok to doubt. Doubt isn't the absence of faith; it's a critical and necessary step on the path towards faith, however crooked that path may be. I've found that the times I experience the most growth in my belief came after a time of doubt, a time of sitting in the unknown not sure how to proceed, doubting that God had the answer. I've often told people of my hesitation about going to the Princeton Youth Forum. To say I had real doubt is an understatement. But, just like Thomas who went from doubting to proclaiming, "My Lord and my God", I found a new faith. I gained a new relationship with God. For the first time in my life, I felt God right there with me in the form of Jesus.

But this isn't the end of the story for Thomas and indeed for us. As an extra encouragement to future followers, Jesus goes on to say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. He meant that once He ascended to heaven, He would send the helper, the Holy Spirit, who would live within believers from then on, enabling us to believe that which we do not see with our eyes. That is the heart of what the Gospel is all about: Faith! Hope! Ours is a faith that comes not from seeing, but from experiencing it in our hearts.

Faith, the "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" is the reality of God's promises. Faith is the noun form and believe is the verb form of the same Greek word, *pisti*, so believing is faith in action. Believing, then, is the process by which we receive God's reality into our lives. Believing is our receiving the substance and reality of our hopes, and then providing the corresponding actions. Believing is accepting and choosing to act solely based on faith.

Faith is how we receive 'His Kingdom come and His will be done' into our lives. Faith is the process that brings God's world into ours. Faith is believing that God is real, and He is active in our lives. Faith is putting our belief into action. Faith becomes real when God lives within us. When that happens, the Word on the page becomes the Word in the heart.

Although we have the Spirit within us, we can still experience doubt. This, however, does not affect our eternal standing with God. True saving faith always perseveres to the end just as Thomas's did. Faith is the gift of God to His children.

So, when we experience doubt, that's the time we need to go to God in prayer. That may be the very reason God is allowing us to doubt; so that we will depend on Him. We go to God because we believe in Him and ask Him for more and greater faith to overcome our doubts, saying, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.

In the movie "An Interview with God" journalist Paul Asher is assigned to interview this particular man. Through the series of interviews, the man announced that he is, in fact, God. God tells Asher that, "Faith isn't the goal; faith is the process. It's a lot like marriage. The vows you take aren't the end, but the beginning."

Christians fight a spiritual battle daily. We have to gear up for the battle. We need to be armed with the Word of God to help fight these spiritual battles, which include fighting doubt. As Christians, we must take advantage of the lulls in spiritual warfare to polish our spiritual armor in order to be ready for the next battle. Times of doubt will become less frequent if we take advantage of the good times to feed our faith with the Word of God. Then when we raise the shield of faith and do battle with the enemy of our souls, the flaming arrows of doubt will not hit their target.

An unknown writer wrote this poem:

Doubt sees the obstacles. Faith sees the way!  
Doubt sees the darkest night; Faith sees the day!  
Doubt dreads to take a step. Faith soars on high!  
Doubt questions, "Who believes?" Faith answers, "I!"

Thomas the doubter was also Thomas the risk taker, Thomas the inquirer, and Thomas the witness. Perhaps it should just be Thomas the Apostle, and we should make him an example in our lives. We need to have a love like Thomas that is so deep and sincere that we will be risk takers. We need the courage that would allow us to follow Christ where ever it may lead. Let us pray that we would have an inquiring mind to know more about Jesus. And most of all, regardless of our moments of doubt let us put our faith into action and be witnesses to the fact that Jesus is our Lord and God. Amen