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April 11, 2010
Sermon Title: ~~Doubting~~ Believing Thomas
John 20:19-31

Thomas is one of those characters in the Bible who has managed to catch enough attention for his story to earn himself some recognition beyond the church:

His initial unbelief upon hearing that Jesus was alive prompted people to dub him “Doubting Thomas-” which has become a well-known term applied to those who habitually question or insist on proving things for themselves.

Except, when you look at this story more closely, you'll come to realize that Thomas *doesn't ask* for any proof beyond what the other disciples saw- *none* of them initially believed and *all* of them got to see Jesus alive. When you consider the proof the other disciples got -along with the fact that resurrections are pretty unlikely- Thomas' reaction of disbelief doesn't seem quite so unreasonable.

So how did Thomas come to lend his name to doubters of so many generations? What is it about Thomas that makes him any more skeptical than the other disciples?

Looking at today's scripture, we actually can't tell whether or not *the other disciples* believed Mary when she shared the news that she had spoken to Jesus outside his tomb. The account in Luke ch. 24 [:11] says that the disciples dismissed it at first as “an idle tale,” -as nonsense.

The John passage we just read says that after hearing Mary's news, the disciples gathered in hiding from the Jewish authorities. Their fearful conduct as they meet behind locked doors indicate they may not have put much faith in Mary's news. You would think that they would have a little more confidence in their role as followers of Jesus if they'd believed he had returned.

When Jesus first appears to them inside that locked room, it is not until *after* he has spoken his gift of peace to them, and showed his wounded hands and side to them, that they rejoice.

Thomas missed that first meeting, so when the other disciples explain that Jesus is somehow alive again after being buried for three days, I don't know if Thomas is feeling much *doubt*, per se- He's pretty *certain* that Jesus is dead.

He tells the others that before he could even begin to wrap his head around such an impossible reality, he'd have to see and touch the wounds of the resurrected Jesus- evidence the others had already seen.

We're almost trained to think that way, aren't we? – That if something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Take any of those letters and emails promising a fortune to you- if you just help transfer funds for a company (or a Nigerian billionaire) who *only* need access to your bank account to give you your monetary reward.

It sounds enticing- the whole "something for nothing" pitch- but they're just scams. Any poor investors usually end up with a drained bank account and a cold trail from the thief that set them up.

Healthy skepticism is a good thing here- if we didn't question it, we'd all own imaginary property on tropical islands and be invested in some stranger who we thought was a broker. So for Thomas to believe that somebody he thought was dead is now alive isn't that far-fetched. Maybe doubt isn't such a bad thing after all.

It's a logical approach that many of us can identify with- especially in our scientific world today.

I'm in the habit of double-checking or cross-referencing any surprising news I hear or read about- whether that's at home on the computer, or delegating a friend to use wireless internet on their cell phone.

Even at summer camp, where technology is *kind of* forbidden: Our camp directors had a strict rule that there would be no cell phones or laptops allowed around campers- during staff training we told the counselors that they were only allowed to use them while on break and away from any kids - and that electronics were in bold on the "what NOT to bring" packing list for the campers- grounds for confiscation if they had them.

So one week last summer, our chaplain leaned in right before worship to ask me if our staff had heard the unfortunate news about Michael Jackson's death. And of course as that rumor spread, we had to investigate it for ourselves. As I looked around the campfire circle, I noticed most of the counselors spending a little too long digging in their backpacks for their "flashlights" or "water bottle" while they looked up the news on google or texted friends who were a little more connected to the world outside The Woods. Busted.

We have this natural tendency to want to verify things for ourselves before we can say we know it's true. Life experience has taught me to not to believe everything I hear- to not take it too quickly at face value.

Even I have mistakenly misinformed others- when I've gotten a story wrong or misinterpreted some turn of events. We know that facts can get mixed up through re-telling or become a little dimmer over time- whether it's intentional or not.

I can't really fault Thomas for his reaction of unbelief. He was in mourning as he tried to cope with the death of his friend and teacher. If it had been me in that situation, I may have been hesitant to believe them too, even if the news was this wonderful.

Doubt in and of itself is not such a bad thing most of the time- It's a defensive move we use to preserve the truth. When it comes to looking at the way doubt applies to our faith, though, it makes us pause. We often assume that having doubts about what we believe is a sign our faith is weak.

This is especially problematic when you also believe that your salvation is dependent on how concretely you believe and how free from doubt you are.

I keep coming back to a line in a song when I think of the emotions and fears that arise as many of us wrestle with doubt and faith. Performed by the bluegrass band Nickel Creek, it is appropriately titled *Doubting Thomas*.

The author and singer, Chris Thile, articulates the journey of his struggle with his fear of the uncertainties of faith. Although he acknowledges receiving the promise of God's love and

all that goes with it- he still doesn't feel safe, and he's afraid that as he fumbles in his hesitations, they will ultimately prevent him from fruitfully ministering to others, or following God's calling for his life. The final lines of the song bring him not to a resolution of his fears, but to acceptance of his own faith, and the doubts which inevitably will come with it. He sings:

“Can I be used to help others find truth,
When I'm scared I'll find proof that it's a lie.
Can I be led down a trail dropping breadcrumbs,
That prove I'm not ready to die.

I'm a doubting Thomas,
I'll take your promise,
though I know nothin's safe.
Oh me of little faith”

I don't think “Oh me of little faith” is such a fair self-accusation. He's not necessarily *lacking* faith- usually there is some degree of doubt that comes along with having faith, and that's okay. If anything, he's pointing out the nature of faith- as most people experience it.

Some sense of doubt is to be *expected* for a healthy faith- It's not detrimental to faith-, and it probably won't go away-, even if you read your Bible over and over again. If we didn't have some room for doubt in our faith, we'd have to call it something different, like certainty.. or a given. There wouldn't be much left for us to explore about how God works in our lives, and there wouldn't be much ability to grow and mature in faith.

The truth is we believe in a God whom we cannot fully know or understand.... and that's grounds for doubt. Dr. Kristin Lergen, (talking about Christian existentialist and philosopher Paul Tillich) says it like this:

The very act of faith requires that we believe in someone we cannot fully know, someone who calls us to follow down paths whose ends we cannot see, and someone who demands of us an obedience and trust beyond anything we can conceive of in our daily lives.

Faith and doubt are intertwined in our relationship with God in such a way that you really can't pull doubt out of the picture entirely. We have faith in a living God who loves us and cares for us... in spite of bad things that happen and the evil that we are capable of doing to each other. Considering what we believe to be true about God, with all the "hard stuff" in the world, it's sometimes difficult to wholeheartedly believe God's love and care for all of creation to be true without having some questions, some hesitation, some confusion about why certain things happen that seem to go against a God who would be so loving. As hard as it is to believe things we can see and hear and touch, of course it would be hard to believe in things we can't see and hear.

As evidenced in the common but unofficial title for today's passage: "Jesus and Doubting Thomas," we sometimes are so distracted by Thomas' doubt that we miss the part of the story that we should really pay the most attention to- Jesus' response to that doubt. It's what really characterizes this story.

Thomas never directly asks Jesus if he can check out the wounds for himself- yet without a hint of disappointment in Thomas or a wag of the finger for his unbelief, Jesus invites Thomas- to reach out and touch his hands and side, giving the proof he needed, and matching almost verbatim what Thomas had told the other disciples he required to believe.

"Do not doubt," Jesus says, "but believe."

And through this amazing act of grace, Jesus was able to move Thomas from fear and doubt to what could be the strongest and most powerful confession found anywhere in the gospel: "My Lord and My God!" he cries. Thomas is declaring God fully revealed in Jesus. Any skepticism or unbelief he held before is eliminated.

Although such a profession of faith is an important part of our Christian lives, it is pointless if it is not followed by action in service to God.

After Thomas delivers his confession, Jesus commissions him and the others to receive the Holy Spirit and go and continue the work he

was sent to do. Confession of faith without commitment of life is empty, and even counter to Christ.

Whether your faith is characterized by certainty or doubt or something in between, the only true response to a confession of faith is a life of discipleship.

According to John, when the disciples saw Jesus on the day of his resurrection, Jesus blessed them with his peace, and told them to receive the Holy Spirit and go out to continue his work. This is a commission to the faith community to go and forgive sins of others.

Now, the editors (of the NRSV New Interpreter's Study Bible) write in the scripture commentaries that, "since sin, and not recognizing and embracing the revelation of God in Jesus, is a theological category of John, forgiveness of sins is not about the act of penance regarding individual deeds. Rather, forgiveness of sins is the community's Spirit-empowered mission to continue Jesus' work of making God known to the world and through that work to bring the world to judgment and decision through its response to Jesus."

So go and do. The way you live your life is a proclamation of what you believe. If you confess something to be true but live as though it is not, you lose that belief.

No matter what you may doubt about your faith, and no matter what you believe in your faith, your answer to the love, peace, and grace God has shown you is to go out and live your life to serve God. Go out and serve *with love*. Allow *peace* to fill your heart. And *show grace* to those around you, the same as God has shown grace to you.