

“Is It OK To Doubt?”  
John 20:19-30  
April 16, 2023

“I can’t believe it!” “I can’t believe it is raining again.” “I can’t believe the Hurricanes won their division on the last day of the regular season!” “I can’t believe I passed the test!” When something extraordinary, unusual, or unexpected happens we will often say, “I can’t believe it!” “I can’t believe I got the job!” “I can’t believe she said ‘yes!’” “I can’t believe he recovered from that stroke!” Many times those words follow the evidence that something we thought would not or even could not happen has in fact occurred.

That was the common reaction by the people closest to Jesus following His resurrection from the dead. “I can’t believe it!” The women who went to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning saw that the stone at the entrance to Jesus’ tomb had been rolled away; they heard the news from the angel that Jesus was not there, He had risen; they saw that the tomb was empty, but they still found it hard to believe. They reported the news to Jesus’ disciples and they found it hard to believe. Peter and John even went to the tomb to verify the information told to them by the women, and they still had a hard time believing it.

Then on the evening of that first Easter the disciples still couldn’t believe the news as they were huddled together in a locked room filled with fear. Why? They saw Jesus brutally tortured and killed a few days earlier, but now His body was missing and the people who killed Jesus might think they are the ones responsible for His body being gone from the tomb. But suddenly, Jesus appears to them in that room and to convince them that He really was alive He shows them his nail-pierced hands and side to convince them that it was true. This appearance gives them an incredible sense of joy. However, Jesus is not done. There is a reason He came to them. He tells them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I am sending you.” He then

breathes on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” With these words Jesus commissions them for the work He has planned for them to do.

However, there is one small problem. Thomas, one of the disciples, is not there. We don’t know why, but Thomas misses out on the opportunity to see Jesus alive. So when the other disciples tell Thomas that they saw Jesus alive, Thomas replies, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Thomas just couldn’t believe it. After all, people do not just rise from the dead. I can just imagine the disciples talking to Thomas all week long, trying to convince Thomas that they really had seen Jesus alive, and Thomas just repeating his demand, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” What’s interesting is that Thomas doesn’t just want visible proof, he wants physical proof. As you can see in this verse, it will not be enough for him to simply see Jesus, he also wants to touch Jesus’ wounds to confirm that his eyes are not being deceived.

We can be very similar. It can be hard to believe something that appears to be impossible or highly unlikely. If I told all of you that I can take a basketball and make a shot from halfcourt blindfolded, would all of you believe me? You would probably want to see me do it in order to believe it. I think it is still challenging for us to believe amazing or incredible things, even from friends and family.

But is there anything wrong with doubting? Is there anything wrong with Thomas insisting that he sees and touches Jesus before He believes the news that Jesus is alive? What I mean is, if we were buying a car and the seller said that his 20 year-old car had only 10,000 on it, we would probably want to see it to make sure the seller was being honest. If we were buying a house and if the seller said his house was the best looking house on the block, we would probably want to see it before we believed it and paid for it. For Thomas, he saw Jesus arrested, even though Jesus

was all-powerful. He saw Jesus tortured and crucified, even though Jesus could raise people from the dead. None of this made any sense to Thomas. Everything he saw contradicted what he believed about Jesus. So in Thomas' mind, the idea that Jesus is alive was just too good to be true.

We should note that Thomas was not the only disciple to doubt the resurrection. Remember where the disciples were on that first Easter evening and where they are in our Gospel lesson for today, one week after Easter? They are huddled together in fear, in a locked room, hoping that no one would find them. They weren't out in the cities telling people, "Christ is risen! Alleluia!" Even after the women told them the tomb was empty, even after Peter and John verified for themselves that Jesus' tomb was empty, they still doubted.

And yet, who is the one who is labeled as the doubter? Thomas. Sadly, he is the one who is branded forever as doubting. Even non-religious people today know the name or the term, "Doubting Thomas." But again, is there not some value in doubt? Could a certain amount of doubt be a healthy thing? In our judicial system, we place a great deal of value on doubt. A person is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. The benefit of the doubt can sway an entire jury's decision, even in life and death situations.

I know many of us have faced questions of doubt when it comes to health issues concerning family members or even ourselves. Should surgery be done, knowing this is the best way to get the cancer, while at the same time knowing there is great risk and a person may not survive? Should we keep the breathing tubes in that are keeping a family member alive in the hospital or should we remove them and let "nature take its course?" Are the machines or the medical treatments truly protecting and preserving life or are they interfering with the dying process and delaying death? There are certainly doubts at times as to what should be the proper course of

action as different factors present themselves in cases of life and death, and Christians may not always agree about how to apply the principles of caring for life in every situation.

So with this in mind, what if the Church changed its view and teaching about Thomas and began to picture him as one who had the courage to admit his lack of understanding? What if the church began to celebrate the willingness of Thomas to express his honest doubts? What effect would that have on the public perception of the church? As we continue in our sermon series: “RSVP – Responding To God’s Invitation,” God invites us to share this wonderful news of Jesus’ resurrection with others, and this may also include our questions and our doubts. We certainly do not understand all of God’s ways and sometimes His Word is confusing. But if we did this, maybe the church would be seen by unbelievers or unchurched people, not as a group of people who think they have all the answers, but as people just like themselves – people who cling to their faith in spite of the uncertainties of life. In other words, people who are just as human and sinful as anyone else.

One week after Easter, Thomas’ request is answered. The disciples are together again in that locked room and this time Thomas is with them. Jesus appears to them again and looking at Thomas, Jesus invites him to do what he had insisted. Jesus says, “Put your finger here, Thomas, see my hands, and put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas immediately goes from doubting to believing as he says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” Thomas instantly sees Jesus as his God and Lord, and that changes everything for him. He now knows that Jesus has defeated death. Jesus came in the midst of Thomas’ doubt, not to criticize or punish him for a lack of faith, but to comfort and forgive him, and Jesus comes in the midst of our doubts to comfort us and to bring us His gifts of love and forgiveness. In addition, Jesus also invites us to pass along those same gifts of love and forgiveness to all people who also have

doubts. So how will we respond? Christ is risen, that I will never doubt, and it gives me hope in all circumstances.