

## **“Holy Doubt”**

Date: May 1, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 20:19-31

Theme: Doubt, questions, faith

Occasion: Easter 2, Year A

It may seem kind of odd, but every year on the Sunday after Easter, we look at the story of “doubting Thomas.” One week after the biggest celebration of the Christian year, and we deal with the subject of doubt and uncertainty.

Many of us grew up in churches that tried to deny the fact that people have questions about their faith. If we had questions about the Bible, about God, about miracles, we were told “Stop asking questions. Just have faith.”

Many people end up feeling guilty about the questions they have. “What’s wrong with *my* faith. I want to believe, I just don’t get this one thing. And no one is willing to talk to me about my question.” Or maybe they get angry at the church for telling them to stop thinking. And they quit coming around, altogether.

Has that ever happened to you? Who did it? A parent, a Sunday School teacher, a pastor? Maybe you feel guilty for having questions, or maybe you got angry at these authority figures for not answering you. When we are simply told, “Have more faith,” it makes it seem like faith is something that you can turn on and off like a spigot.

It kind of reminds me of the white queen from Alice in Wonderland, who told Alice that she was 101 years, 5 months and one day old. Alice replied, “I can’t believe that!” And the queen answered, “Can’t you? Try again. Draw a long breath and close your eyes.” Really?! Is that how we come to faith, by holding our breath and closing our eyes and trying harder?

The Bible, on the other hand, is quite realistic about people’s doubts and questions. It doesn’t pretend as though everyone has found it easy to believe in

Jesus. The Bible, in fact, is quite honest in admitting that people have doubts. In the Gospel of Matthew, which we read last Sunday, it says that when the disciples saw the risen Christ they worshiped Him. But then it says, almost immediately, “But some doubted.” They were looking right at him, and yet they doubted.

The Gospel writers understood that doubt and uncertainty are part of the Christian experience. We’ve known that since the earliest beginnings of our faith. Even when Jesus was physically present, here on earth. Rather than deny it, the Bible deals with it, head-on. And so, here we have the story of Doubting Thomas.

We don’t know a lot about the disciple known as Thomas. He’s mentioned only a couple of other times. But he seems to be a realist, one of those practical, down-to-earth type of guys. For some reason, he hadn’t been with the other disciples the week before, when Jesus appeared to his followers. Thomas had missed Easter.

When Thomas meets up with his friends, they tell him the most outrageous thing he had ever heard, that Jesus was alive again. He had seen the crucifixion, saw them take the body down and put it in the grave. Now they were talking about Jesus coming back to life.

Now, Thomas had not read the most recent book on dealing with grief by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the pioneer in grief study. She was the one who told us about the four stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. But Thomas knew denial when he saw it. He needed to help his friends snap out of their denial and face reality.

“Come on guys,” he might have said. “We all miss Jesus. But he’s gone! Unless I can put my finger in the nail marks, and unless I put my hand into his side, I can’t believe what you’re telling me.”

Well, a week later the disciples are together again, including Thomas this time. Imagine his surprise when Jesus showed up. Oh, my gosh! But I want you to notice how Jesus dealt with this man who had doubts and questions about the reality of the resurrection. Jesus wasn't angry with Thomas. Jesus wasn't resentful that God had done this wonderful thing, and his own disciples didn't believe it. Jesus didn't lecture Thomas, or attack him, or demean him. Jesus simply says, "Tom, put your finger here. Have faith."

Thomas had made a mistake. He wasn't with the disciples on that first Easter morning. He was separated from them, which is to say, he was separated from the church. And because of that, Thomas missed out on Easter. His doubts were directly related to being separated from the others.

But then, Thomas turned around and did the right thing. He got back together with the other disciples and shared his doubts with them. Which is to say, he brought his doubts to church, which is where our doubts belong. "Say what, pastor? You mean its okay to express our doubts and questions at church?" Yes, that is what I mean.

In the church, we can explore our doubts, and we can ask our questions. We ought to take people's questions seriously instead of trying to make them feel stupid for asking them. I think that's why so many people like Larry Thompson's Bible study on Tuesday evenings. He always begins by asking, "Are there any questions?"

You see, if we don't ask our questions out loud, and get a serious answer, our doubts turn into cynicism, which turns into rebellion against the faith. That's what's happened to a lot of people. Instead of taking their questions to church, they try to deal with them on their own. Or maybe somebody told them not to ask questions,

and they feel like they don't belong in church. So they leave, often forever.

Their doubt, which began as a legitimate question, turns into a sickness, an attitude of contempt towards religion in general, and towards the church more specifically. Tragically, it can kill a person's relationship with God. Doubt, if its not dealt with in the community faith, can ruin a person's faith altogether.

One of the most reassuring things about being a Christian, is that we don't have to do everything on our own. The community of faith is here for us, to help us and to support us, even in our doubt, even with our questions.

I've seen it happen over and over again in Bible studies or sharing groups, or prayer meetings. Someone asks a question, "I know this may sound silly, but I've always wondered....." and they ask their question. The group talks; people share their experience and knowledge; we go back and read the Bible again.

And when we're finished talking about that person's question, someone else will say, "I'm so glad you asked that question. I've always wondered about that, too."

Was Doubting Thomas so different from the rest of us? I don't think so. He simply had the misfortune of being absent on the day when the Lord Jesus appeared to the other disciples. Thomas was the first to face the challenge of believing without seeing. Thomas led the way, where one day we would follow.

Do you have doubts or questions about your faith? Bring them to church. Let's talk about them. Bring them to Bible study, or the adult Sunday School class, or Larry's class, or set up an appointment to talk with the pastor. I'd love to have the opportunity to talk to you about spiritual matters.

Thomas returned to be with the other disciples. He came back to church. In the context of being with the others, Jesus answered his questions. It's here, in the

church, that we can help each other to grow in our faith. Amen? Amen! Thanks be to God.