

“Joy and Doubt”

Reading: Acts 2:22-32; John 20:19-31

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Poor Thomas. As someone who has had my doubts at various times in my life, I've always felt bad for him. Lots of those early followers let Jesus down at one point or another, but only Thomas gets saddled with a nickname like “doubting Thomas” for all future generations. Peter denied Jesus three times the night of the crucifixion, and Paul was a persecutor of Christians: we certainly tell their stories, but we don't rub their noses in their failures by giving them unflattering nicknames. But there's something unique about our relationship to doubt, I think. Many Christians would insist that all sin is sin, that any sin no matter how great or small is enough to earn you an eternity in hell and requires the sacrifice of Jesus to pay off your debt, but then in practice we treat certain sins as being particularly bad. Doubt is one of the bad ones. It's like we've made faith this magic spell that you have to keep repeating in your head, and if you stop to ask a question or raise a doubt, you're breaking the spell. We've taken that verse about faith being belief in things unseen and then insisted that you have to close your eyes, and things like science and scholarship and doubt are taken as inherent threats to faith. If you had better faith you wouldn't need such things.

But that's not fair to faith or doubt or poor old Thomas. As evidence I hold up Doubting Thomas himself: according to many traditions he was martyred while preaching the gospel in India, having traveled farther than any of the other of those first Apostles of Jesus. Yes, he insisted on seeing and meeting and touching Jesus after the resurrection before he would believe, but once he had his questions answered he was unstoppable. And even if you discount the traditions about Thomas reaching India as being unreliable, you have the witness of Scripture itself: immediately after having his questions answered, Thomas responds with, “My Lord and my God!” In John's telling of the gospel, this is the only explicit declaration of the divinity of Jesus. In the other gospels it's Peter who stands as an example of the faith of Jesus' followers; here, it's Doubting Thomas.

So let's not doubt the quality of Thomas's faith, and let's not make doubt a cardinal sin. It's true that we live in an age of doubt, where being a skeptic is considered a virtue or a sign of intelligence. In our culture educated people are explicitly atheistic or at least agnostic. If you believe in anything greater than yourself you're deluded. It's true that for many people in our world, what matters is what works for me: if I'm not convinced then it's not real, and if I don't want to do it then I shouldn't have to. And so doubt can become a game or a badge of honor to some people, where you can't convince me if I don't want to be convinced. And what's worse, since we doubt that there can be anything truly good or lasting or meaningful in life, and what matters is what works for me, faithlessness is the result: I don't have any expectation of being faithful to you or anyone else if it's not in my own interests, and in fact you're being unreasonable to expect me to be faithful.

That sort of cold-hearted, selfish philosophy is what many people of faith react against. We've seen how doubt and skepticism can seek to tear down and even mock everything we hold dear, so in response let's make faith the opposite of that. Coupled with that reaction against the world we have a reaction against certain excesses in Christian practice, in which we act as though we're saved by what we do. Some Christians have thought they needed to earn a place in God's favor by being good enough, and we've reacted against that by saying that no, *just believe*; you can't do anything worthy of God so you just need to believe hard enough. But faith is not wishing on a star, where it might not

happen if you don't wish hard enough. And while simplicity may be a virtue and even a spiritual practice, ignorance is not. There are good reasons for our faith. God is real, and since He is real our faith is the stuff of reality, and this episode with Thomas is one place where God shows us He does not seem to have a problem with honoring our honest questions. What God does have a problem with is apathy and self-righteousness, whether it's the self-righteousness of a holy person or an atheist. So Jesus meets Thomas's doubt not by saying, "Don't doubt, just believe," but by saying, "Your doubts have now been answered, so it's time to trust that I am who I've said I am."

Last Sunday was, of course, Easter Sunday, and we told the story of the women who were the first to the empty tomb of Jesus and were the first to proclaim the message of Jesus' resurrection. We focused on the fact that they were afraid yet joyful, that their joy was not just a feeling of being happy but it was and is a response to fear and darkness. It's the same for us today: joy because of what God has done is our answer to the darkness of the world. But joy also shows up in our reading for today, in these events taking place in the days following the resurrection. Jesus meets with a group of His followers that evening, and John tells us they're "overjoyed when they saw the Lord." But poor old Thomas is not there that evening, so he gets stuck with the nickname. As joy was the answer to fear last week, joy is the answer to our doubts today. Joy is a response, an action motivated by what God has done, not just a feeling. Joy is that declaration Thomas makes – "My Lord and my God!" – followed by a movement outward, not just the solution to an equation or a logical argument for the existence of God.

It's worth noticing not only what Jesus *does* do in these days after His resurrection, but also what He *does not* do. He does give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, giving them His own presence to be with them and among them and within them. He does give them a reason for their joy; He proves that He's alive, that it's really Him, that He's not a ghost or a hallucination. And, judging by the other gospel accounts, He apparently spends a great deal of time explaining to them how His resurrection fulfills the promises of God made in their ancient Scriptures. In Luke's gospel in particular, Jesus appears to a couple of His followers on the road to Emmaus, and as they try to make sense of the events of His crucifixion and resurrection He explains to them how it all fits with the Scriptures. And again, when He meets with the rest of the disciples, Luke tells us that He "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." So in the book of Acts, when Peter stands up to preach the first sermon after the birth of the church, how does he explain things? He tells the story of the past, and how Jesus fits right in. He reminds them of the promises God has been making all along. They can have joy and be motivated because God has shown Himself faithful through Jesus.

But here's what Jesus does *not* do. While He answers their fears and doubts and gives them proof of God's faithfulness, He does not give them a lecture. He does not give them a treatise or a dissertation that explains all of the trivia of what has just happened and how. There's good reason to think John's gospel was the last of the four gospels written, and as a pastor and leader in the church under the inspiration of God's Spirit John surely would have wanted to write this gospel account with the needs of the church of his day in mind. In the latter part of the first century when this was probably written, it's likely that some Christians were facing certain heretical views of Jesus that denied that He had been physically resurrected, and instead claimed a "spiritual" resurrection or something similar. In other words, they claimed that He didn't have a physical body when He was raised from the dead. So perhaps John included this story about Thomas that the other gospels left out in part to emphasize that no, you could touch Him. He wasn't a ghost or spirit or something

immaterial. He had and has a body. But as important as it was for John to answer that question, Jesus does not give the disciples a lesson on Christology and Trinitarian theology and metaphysics. No, He gives them His presence, He assures them that it's really Him and He will continue to be with them through His Spirit, and therefore He sends them out to spread the news. He does not give them a systematic theology book explaining everything, He just gives them Himself.

And that's really the thrust of how Jesus answers Thomas's doubts, as well as our doubts today. He's present and He sends us. John's account of the resurrection is full of sending. When Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus on Easter morning, He sends her to tell the other disciples. When He appears to the other disciples in that locked room, His message to them is, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." They – and we – are the continuation of the mission of Jesus. And He gives them the authority to forgive sins; that's a mission to go out into the world and proclaim freedom for those bound in sin. Later, when Thomas touches Jesus' wounds and makes his declaration, Jesus' response is, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." In other words, the focus is on the lost sheep, on the generations yet to come to faith. And at the end of the chapter John our narrator steps in and gives us an explanation: these words are written "that *you* may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in His name." This isn't a historical record just to give you information, it's an introduction to a person who can form your life. There is a mission all throughout this passage: there are people who do not yet believe; they're still caught in their doubts, and they need someone to go to them.

Maybe there are three ways we can look at the life of a Christian. We're Wesleyans, and we talk a lot about holiness and freedom from sin and being made new in Christ's image, and rightly so. Maybe we could say that part of our faith has to do with what God wants us to be. We could also look at it from the perspective of what we need from God, and we could talk about things like prayer and the sacraments and salvation and the many ways God blesses us. There's what God wants from us, but there's also what we want and need from God. But there's a third perspective to our faith as well. What sort of people does the world need us to be? Because it's far too easy to live a life of faith and only have God and myself in the equation, and to neglect the fact that we are a called people on a mission out to the world. In those days after He was raised from the dead, Jesus does not create a community that withdraws from the world. He doesn't form a group of hermits who hide away somewhere being holy all by themselves. He doesn't form a university of experts and professors who can explain everything and give all the answers to people's questions and argue with people about their wrong beliefs. He doesn't form an army to go out and conquer the world or force people to behave like saints.

No, what Jesus made – and what the world needs us to be – is a nation of ambassadors for the king. The world doesn't need more know-it-alls. The world doesn't need more mystics. It doesn't need more salespeople or entrepreneurs or combatants or politicians. It needs converts, ambassadors, missionaries. It needs people who have met and been changed by the risen King, people whose doubts and fears have been answered by nothing less than His presence. The world doesn't need us to inform it about Jesus, it needs us to introduce it to Jesus. And so we go as friends and neighbors, not as experts but as those who have met the risen Christ and know that He lives today. We go filled not with trivia about the Bible but filled with the presence of the Spirit of Christ.

And by saying that I don't mean in any way to put down the value of learning about the Bible or studying about church history; I spent far too much time and money in school to suggest that there's no value in asking good questions about Jesus. On the contrary, God invites us and expects us to use our reason for His glory. But there are always temptations: on the one hand, the temptation is to give in to doubt and refuse to follow Christ until my ever-growing list of questions is satisfied. On the other is the temptation to reduce my relationship with Jesus to what I know about Jesus. What Thomas shows us, far more than that he was a doubter, is that he, too, was sent by Christ, and that the same is true of each of us. Jesus walked out of that tomb and hasn't stopped moving since then, and the same power that moves Him is willing to fill each of us and move each of us today. Doubt is okay, but keep moving. Fear is not sinful, but don't give up. It's not a sin to ask questions of God, but it is a sin to make your questions your god.

We are gathered so that we can be a sent people. We go as ambassadors of the risen King. If you are in need of a new filling today, there's no need to fear or live in doubt. Come and meet the living King, and be sent on His mission.



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