

Dealing with Doubt
John 20:19-31

What a roller coaster week it had been for the disciples, Everything had happened so fast! One moment Jesus was receiving a hero's welcome with shouts of *Hosanna!* and the waving of palm branches. Then suddenly, a couple of days later, he was arrested, taken to the cross, and crucified. Think about what they had been through. They had been taken to the heights of joy, only to have their hopes and dreams crushed with Jesus' death. It's no wonder they hid out. They were afraid, dominated by the fear of knowing that if Jesus could be killed in such a cruel and unfair manner, those who followed him could meet the same fate.

So, it's no wonder they gathered behind locked doors. We certainly can't fault them for that. Nor can we fault them for their disbelief concerning the resurrection. What if we had run to the tomb with Peter and John that morning to find Jesus' tomb empty. Would our first thoughts have been that Jesus had risen? What if we had been with the disciples when Mary came with the report that she had seen Jesus alive? Would we have accepted it without question? Or would we, like the disciples, view it as nonsense – just the overactive imagination of a distraught and hysterical woman? That first Easter evening, the disciples were gathered behind locked doors, not knowing for sure what to think about what they had heard and seen.

On the surface, it must have seemed that things couldn't get any worse. They had given up everything to follow Jesus, including their vocations. What would they do now to earn a living? Following Jesus was to have been their future. Now, all that was gone. Was there any future for any of them after what had happened? Their faith was shaken. They had trusted Jesus. They had believed in him. And now, everything they believed and lived for was gone.

But John tells us that when the disciples were at their lowest, they got the biggest surprise of their lives. Into that dark and somber room, closed off to the rest of the world by deadbolts, Jesus came. In the midst of their confusion, fear and distress, Jesus stood among them. *Peace be with you*, he said. That's how it is with Jesus. Just when things seem terrible, Jesus is there. Just when things seem hopeless, Jesus is present. Just when things seem impossible, Jesus can help.

For the disciples, just when their world was completely torn apart, Jesus was there for them, standing in their midst. He was alive! The living, breathing Jesus was there to grant them strength and hope and peace. And that would make all the difference for those disciples – just knowing that Christ was present with them and would always be there for them. Yes, Jesus came that night behind locked doors and changed their lives. And they emerged as different people, confident and assured of God's love for them.

But Thomas wasn't there. He had missed Jesus' appearance. For him, the darkness surrounding the crucifixion still filled his heart. For him, life was still hopeless. His hope had died with Jesus. And, for him, the future was still unsure. He had yet to meet the risen Lord and, because of that, doubt filled his heart. When the other disciples told him that Jesus was alive, Thomas said, *Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*

Hearing these words from Thomas, those of us living 2,000 years after the resurrection are tempted to wag an accusatory finger at him. *Shame on you, Thomas, for not believing the testimony of your peers!* Should Thomas be ashamed? Is that why John included this story in his gospel, to help us avoid being like Thomas? I don't think so. This is the story of a man who had the honesty to confront his doubts and who was willing to believe only when he had the evidence to believe. I personally think this story is to help us walk the line between believing too quickly, on the one hand, and too slowly, on the other. Some people are too gullible and will believe everything. Others are too skeptical and will believe nothing. The story of Thomas challenges us to walk between these two extremes.

Let's, for a moment, consider the two ends of this spectrum. Some of us have learned and grown through the years, but have remained very immature in our religious faith. Our beliefs about Jesus, the Bible, and what is right and wrong are a collection of things we heard and read while we were growing up. But we have never really examined these things with any seriousness. We have never asked ourselves whether there is solid evidence to support what we believe. We have simply accepted the faith of our parents or our church as our own. I guess it could be described as a *simple faith*. But what it may actually be is an unexamined faith – a faith in which we have invested very little mentally and emotionally; a faith that has no real depth.

Thomas was not like this. He would not allow himself to believe so easily. He had trusted and been hurt. He had loved and lost. As a result, he was feeling separation and loneliness. He would be slow to believe and reluctant to trust again. What's more, how could he trust in something so bizarre? He had watched Jesus' lifeless body be placed in the tomb. If he were to believe that Jesus was now alive, he would have to see in order to believe. His faith would have to be his own. It would not be somebody else's faith that he had reconfigured for himself. His faith would have to be real and authentic; otherwise, it would give his life no meaning. Without true faith, Thomas knew that he would have no real convictions and that he would be hiding behind someone else's faith and value system. No, he wanted a faith he could live out.

On the other side of the spectrum, are others of us who are too slow to believe. We may make decisions and take risks in the secular world based on limited information or evidence, but when it comes to religious faith, no amount of evidence will make us believe.

What if Thomas had been too slow to believe? What if he were convinced that no human could possibly rise from the dead? What if he refused to believe, even when Jesus was standing in front of him, passing it off as some sort of apparition? Thomas would have missed the peace that Jesus brought. He would have continued to live his life in hopelessness and despair without ever knowing the life-changing power of the risen Christ. So, the more we look at Thomas, the more we can see him as a man who managed to avoid both of these pitfalls. He was able to use his doubt to deepen his faith.

Many are the times when we allow doubt to dominate our lives. We doubt that God truly loves us because we're too broken. We doubt that God hears our prayers. We doubt that God can work through us. And when we doubt, we close ourselves off to the possibilities of God and walk through life down a dead-end road. But, as Thomas shows us, doubt does not need to lead to death. Doubt does not have to destroy faith.

Consider what Jesus said to Thomas a week later: *Do not doubt but believe*. There is a remedy to doubt. There are ways of dealing with doubt. The first is keeping the proper perspective. We must understand that some doubt can be good. Doubt will lead us to look deeper into God's character and how he works in the world. It will send us searching for God's wisdom and goodness. It will draw us more deeply into worship, into the reading of scripture, and into more time in prayer – all of which serve to strengthen our faith.

Secondly, we should bring our doubts to the Christian community where they can be answered in the presence of other Christians. Thomas made the mistake we often make. He thought he could go it alone. Devastated over Jesus' death, he sought time to himself, time away from the community of believers. And it was being absent from the other disciples, being separate and alone, that his doubt came. But in the presence of the other disciples, his doubts were answered when Jesus came and said, *Reach out your hand and touch me*. We can trust that Jesus works within the community of faith to help us deal with our doubt.

Lastly, we must realize that, in the midst of doubt, Jesus is there. Even when things seem darkest, a light shines. That's what Thomas and the other disciples discovered.

Mature faith – faith that serves us for a lifetime – is not a faith that has never experienced doubts. Let me give you an example from my own life. My very first Easter as an ordained pastor was a wonderful, uplifting celebration of Christ's resurrection. There was the swell of organ music, the blowing of trumpets, the congregation joyfully singing the Easter hymns, and the Easter proclamation: *Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed*. Following the worship celebration, when Susan and I were alone, I turned to her and asked, *What if it was all a hoax? What if Jesus didn't really rise from the dead? What if our Easter celebration was all for nothing?*

Your faith and mine will experience doubts along the way. For our faith to mature, it must go through a time of seeking and searching. It must always be on the lookout for Jesus. It must be a faith which trusts that even when the worst has happened, there in the middle of it, stands Jesus. Jesus knew that is the kind of faith we need. That's why he said, *Peace be with you. Do not doubt but believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*. That is his promise for us. Blessed are you and I, for in believing, we have life in his name. Amen.