

Refining Doubt
John 20:19–31
Sunday, April 24, 2022 (Easter 2)

Risen and ever-living Christ, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. Speak but a word to us, so that we may have life in your name. Amen.

Today is my absolute favorite day of the year to preach! Some people like Christmas Eve. Some people like Easter Sunday. I *love* the Sunday *after* Easter. Because we are still in the *season* of Easter, with the *celebration* of Easter, but we don't have all the busyness of Holy Week. Everyone's not rushing to get home and prepare meals. We can just kind of take our time and *dwell* in the resurrection. Last week we celebrated the good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death *by* death and giving life to those in the tomb – whether those tombs are physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual – and now the question that *this* day poses to us is, “So what now?” What happens *next*? What are we going to *do* with that good news? How are we going to *respond* to it? What *difference* is it going to make in our lives? Like Roger Lovette says in the poem on the cover of our bulletin, “What now, now that the *Alleluias* are over?”

And so first, we get the story of what happened next for Jesus' disciples, when it was *evening* on Easter Sunday. The disciples were all gathered together in a locked house because they were afraid that the Jewish religious leaders were going to come after *them* next. They saw what happened to Jesus, and they are guilty by association, so they are locked away, hiding out. But all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Jesus is in the room with them! He says, “Peace be with you.” He shows them his hands and his side, still bearing the wounds of crucifixion. Then he says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” and he *breathes* on them and says, “Receive the Holy

Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.”

That is the first time in John’s gospel that the disciples have seen the resurrected Christ. Up to that point, Mary Magdalene had seen him, but all the *disciples* had seen was an empty tomb. So they finally see Jesus for themselves, *but*, it says, one of the disciples – Thomas – was not with them when Jesus came. We don’t know *where* he was, but he wasn’t *there*. They tell him all about it, but he says, “Unless *I* see the mark of the nails in his hands; unless I put my finger in them and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.” And who can blame him? What would *you* do if you had missed church last Sunday, and when you came today, everyone was telling you that *Jesus* was here in the flesh last week? You’d think we were putting you on. I mean that’s absolutely *unbelievable*. You would need proof. “Did you take a picture? No? Well, unless I see it for myself, I won’t believe you.”

On Good Friday, we took the kids on a quick overnight trip out to Gettysburg. We walked the battlefield during the day, but at night, we went on a ghost tour. Any of you been to Gettysburg and seen these? The streets are just *lined* with business after business offering ghost tours. They say it’s “the most haunted town in America.” So, after the sun went down, we went out with a tour guide, and she told us all these stories about what happened at *this* place and how people have seen ghosts here; what happened at *that* place and what people have experienced there.

And I loved the *history* of it; I learned things that happened *after* the battle that I had never known. But for the most part, I was standing there listening, thinking, “Yeah, sure.” It was something fun for the kids, but I wasn’t buying it. Oh, kids used to randomly fall down on the soccer field where they ended up finding 400 soldiers buried? Have you ever seen kids play

soccer before? *They fall*. I seriously doubt it was the ghost of General Strong Vincent pushing them over 150 years later just for kicks.

And yet...I have absolutely no problem standing up here telling you that Jesus Christ physically, bodily rose from the dead 2,000 years ago and is still alive today and at work in this world through the power of the Holy Spirit. I can't *prove* that to you. I don't *care* to try. It is not about empirical evidence or indisputable proof. We can't *reason* our way through this. The disciples had to take Mary Magdalene's word for it, and then Thomas had to take *their* word for it, and then someone else had to take Thomas's word for it, and now we have to take *theirs*. But it is only natural when you hear something that *supernatural* to have *doubts*.

And there is nothing *wrong* with that. If you have doubts about the resurrection, you're in good company. In Matthew's gospel, it says that when the disciples first encountered the risen Christ, "they worshipped him, but some doubted." In Mark's gospel, when Mary Magdalene tells the disciples that she has seen the Lord, it says, "They would not believe it." In Luke's gospel, it was at least four or five women who told the disciples that they had seen the risen Christ, but it says, "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." And in John's gospel, we get Thomas.

Thomas gets a bad rap. History has remembered him as "Doubting Thomas," but was his reaction really any different than anyone else's? I mean, Jesus had shown *them* the marks in his hands and his side. That's all he was asking for. The same proof that *they* got. He wasn't being unreasonable. They all doubted at some point, but we don't hear about Doubting *James*. Peter denied even *knowing* Jesus three times, but we don't talk about "Denying Peter." And yet

Thomas has been remembered for 2,000 years as an unbelieving doubter; an example of what *not* to do.

We flash forward to a week later – *today* – and they are all together in the house. Thomas was with them this time. Again, the doors were locked, and again Jesus appears in the room with them. Again, he says, “Peace be with you,” and then he looks right at Thomas and says, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe!” It doesn’t say if Thomas actually *does* any of that or not. Thomas just says, “My Lord and my God!” To which Jesus says, “Have you believed only because you have *seen* me? Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe.” Well, the *other* disciples didn’t believe until *they* saw! They *all* doubted.

There is nothing *wrong* with doubt, but what this story shows us – what this *day* shows us – is that you just can’t *stay* there. The question is whether, even *with* our doubts, we can still have faith. It’s not about *dispelling* our doubts. It’s about whether we can carry our doubts with us to the place where, like Thomas, we can cry out, “My Lord and my God!”

The title of this sermon is “Refining Doubt,” and I mean that in two senses. The first sense is that we need to refine our understanding of doubt. And the second sense is the way in which doubt can refine *us*. So first, refining our understanding of doubt. One of the meanings of the word *refine* is “to improve” something. So how can we *improve* our understanding of doubt?

The word that John uses here for *doubt* is the Greek word *apisto*, and it actually doesn’t mean doubt. When Jesus says to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe,” John uses the word *pisto* for, “believe” and *apisto* for, “not believe.” This is the same word that gets translated throughout the

New Testament as *faith*. And we have talked before about how this understanding of faith is not just intellectual understanding or assent. It means something closer to *trust*. So what Jesus is literally saying to Thomas here is, “Do not *not trust*, but *trust*. Do not be *untrusting*, but *trust*.”

In Mark’s gospel, when it says that Mary Magdalene told the disciples she had seen Jesus, but they refused to believe her, it uses that same word *apisto*. They *did not trust* her. In Luke’s gospel, when the women tell the disciples that they have seen Jesus, it says, “These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them,” and it uses that same word, *apisto*. They did not *trust* them. *Belief* and *trust* are two very different things. It’s the difference in someone saying, “I *believe* you,” and, “I *trust* you.”

Faith is not about believing or understanding in our *minds*. It is about *living in ways that trust*. We can have doubts in our mind, but still live in ways that trust. I mean, that’s what trust *is*; when you’re not sure about something, but I’m going to take a chance on this anyway. I’m going to *act* as if this is *true*. We will never know on this side of eternity whether Jesus actually, physically, bodily rose from the dead. There is just no way we can ever know that. Nothing will ever be able to *prove* that or *disprove* it. The question is, can we *trust* it? Can we live in ways that *trust* that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? Even though we might not know for sure, or we might have doubts from time to time, can we live in ways that trust that Jesus Christ has overcome the powers of sin and death? Because that kind of trust leads *us* to live new lives.

It’s not just *intellectual*, it’s *incarnational*, something we *embody* and *live out*. Because you can *believe* and still not live in ways that *trust*. But you can live in ways that trust, even when you have doubts. That’s how we refine our understanding of doubt, by moving the locus of belief from our *minds* to our *lives*. Now, how does *doubt* refine *us*?

There is another way in which the word *refine* is used. It means to *purify* something, to free it from impurities and imperfections. Precious metals like gold and silver are *refined* by putting them into fire and burning away all the impurities and other stuff that doesn't need to be there. In order to make those things *better* and *stronger*, you almost have to *destroy* them. And it can work the same way with us. Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky once said, "I believe in Christ and confess him, not like some child; my hosanna has passed through an enormous furnace of doubt." By that, he means that his doubts have not *destroyed* his faith, but rather they have *refined* his faith in Christ, making it *stronger*, by burning away all that which does not need to be there.

I was reminded of that this past week as I went to Nebraska for the funeral of a friend, a 46-year-old mother who was in a car accident and died on Easter Sunday, leaving behind a teenage son. She is a part of this much larger extended family that has endured *so many* tragic losses over the years, and to have *one more* is almost *unbearable*. When we gathered in that sanctuary, we did not check our doubts at the door. Our hearts cried out to God, "How *could* you let this happen? *And yet...* from the rising of the sun to its setting, blessed be the name of the Lord." It is not an easy journey to get from that first statement to the next. But this family, their faith has been so refined by the fire of loss and doubt over the years that it leads them to hold on more strongly than ever to the hope of the resurrected Christ; to live in ways that trust in the promise of God, because how could you go on otherwise?

The weight of our doubts can cause our faith in Christ to break, or it can cause us to lean more heavily upon Christ because we *need* the promise of God to be true that resurrection and new life

are possible, not just one day after we die (although certainly that), but also *here* and *now*, that God makes it possible for us to keep living in the midst of death.

And because of all the losses that this family has experienced over the years, they became *our* family when Jen and I experienced the loss of our *own* children 15 years ago. They walked alongside us and helped us to trust in the promise of God. They loved us and cared for us. They helped us *hope*. And this is something so important that the story of Thomas shows us. Thomas couldn't *believe* because he wasn't *there*. He wasn't *with* the other disciples when Jesus first showed up. The other disciples were all together, saw Jesus together, believed together. But Thomas was on his own. He couldn't see the risen Christ because he wasn't there *with* them. It was only when he was with the others that he saw the risen Christ and could trust.

Just like we said that faith is not an *intellectual* exercise, it is also not an *individual* exercise. A life of faith is something that is meant to be lived out in community with others. It is too hard on your own. We help one another *believe* when it is hard. We help one another *trust* when it is hard. We help one another *hope* when it is hard. I mean, just look at the last lines of today's reading. John says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to *trust* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through trusting you may have life in his name." John is writing to help us trust. And that's what we do for one another. That is the purpose of the church.

German theologian Gerhard Lohfink writes, "No one has ever seen God. What can be seen is only the Church." We are called together by God to be the body of Christ in the world today, that the world might look at us, see our way of life, see the way we *love* one another (even with

our differences), the way we help one another when it is hard, and in seeing *us*, they might say, “I have seen the Lord.” We are not here to *prove* anything. We are here to trust God *together*, to love one another *together*, to bear one another’s burdens *together*, to help one another trust in those times when it is unbearably hard. You have doubts? Bring them with you. Faith is not the absence of doubt. It is *trusting*, even in the *midst* of our doubts, that Christ is risen, so that we might be, too, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.