

Faith & Doubt  
*Series: Everything in Between*  
John 20:19–31  
Sunday, April 27, 2025 (Easter 2)

Let us pray: Lord, John said that the words of his book were written so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we may have life in his name. May that be true for us. May your word lead us to life, in Christ. Amen.

I have told you before that 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. 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?

Throughout Lent we have been looking at the dichotomies of faith; these things that seem like *opposites* that we have to choose between. Stranger and neighbor, faith and works, rest and growth, lost and found. And we’ve seen how God is often found, not at one extreme or the other, but somewhere in between. The series was *supposed* to end last week on Easter Sunday with grief and hope and how, because of the resurrection of Jesus, we can have hope *in the midst of* our grief. But I want to extend the series by one week, because there is a really important dichotomy that we *haven’t* talked about – faith and doubt.

When I was in seminary, I had a theology professor who asked the class this question: “If someone discovered *absolute proof* that the resurrection never happened, like it was 100% totally obvious and undeniable, would you still be a Christian?” A lot of us really struggled with that. We didn’t know what

to say. But there was one person in the class who said right away, “I *know* that Jesus is alive.” The professor said, “Well, but what if there was *indisputable evidence* that Jesus never rose from the dead?” “No. I *know* that Jesus rose from the dead.” The professor said, “Yeah, but we’re doing an exercise here. We’re using our imaginations. What if...” “I don’t *have* to use my imagination. I *know* that Jesus is alive.”

For her there was no questioning it, no entertaining the possibility. Even if presented with rock solid, undeniable, indisputable evidence, she was absolutely *certain*. There was no room in her faith for questions or *doubt*. Because, for her, *doubt* meant that you *don’t believe*, that you are being *unfaithful*. You let one shred of doubt in the door, and the whole thing unravels.

That’s the way that a lot of us have been taught about faith. You either 100% believe, or you don’t believe at all. There is no room for questions or doubt, because doubt is the beginning of a slippery slope that ends with you not believing *anything*. But as we’ve been saying all throughout this series, we often find God somewhere in the middle, between our faith and our doubt.

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Last week we talked about how, on that first Easter morning, the disciples didn’t even *see* Jesus. In all four gospels, the disciples do not see the resurrected Christ on Easter morning. In two of the gospels, Mary Magdalene sees him, but all the *disciples* see is an empty tomb and his burial cloths. Well, now it is evening on that first Easter Sunday, and the disciples are all gathered together in a locked house because they are afraid that the Jewish religious leaders are 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,” and then – hang on to this detail – he shows them his hands and his side, still bearing the wounds of crucifixion.

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*. The disciples tell Thomas all about it, but he says, "Unless *I* see the mark of the nails in his hands (like *you* did); unless I put my finger in them and put my hand in his side, I will not believe." And honestly, 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."

And Thomas is not *alone* in his doubts. 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 two men in dazzling clothes at the empty tomb who told them that Jesus was alive, but it says, "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

So Thomas is not the only one who doubted. History has remembered him as "Doubting Thomas," but was his reaction really any different than anyone else's? I mean, Jesus had shown the *other* disciples the marks in his hands and his side. That's all Thomas was asking for. The same proof that *everyone else* 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 call him "Denying Peter." And yet Thomas has been remembered for 2,000 years as an unbelieving doubter; an example of what *not* to do.

After Thomas expresses his doubts, the story jumps forward one week to *today*. The disciples are all together in the house, and this time Thomas is there with them. Again, the doors are locked, and again

Jesus appears in the room with them. Again, Jesus 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!”

We often hear that as Jesus rebuking Thomas for doubting and telling *us* that we should not doubt either. But the Greek word that gets translated as *doubt* is the word *apisto*. It is the negative form of the word *pisto*, which means not just *believe* but something closer to *trust*. So we can understand Jesus as saying here, “Do not be untrusting but trust.” Jesus tells Thomas to touch his wounds so that he might trust.

It doesn’t tell us if Thomas actually *does* that or not. Thomas simply says, “My Lord and my God!” He professes his belief. 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.

And if we’re being honest, so many of us, at some point, have had doubts just like them. “Risen from the dead? Really? I don’t know.” “God in human flesh, born to a virgin? I don’t know.” “Feeding 5,000 people with just a few loaves of bread and some fish? I don’t know.” “God is *with* me and is going to *provide* for me and make what seems so *impossible possible*?” That’s hard to trust sometimes. Or we look at the world around us with so much violence and hatred and suffering, and we say, “How could a loving God let this happen? *Is* there even a God in charge of all this? I don’t know.”

If we are going to have honest conversations about our faith and speak authentically about it, that’s where we have to start. We *believe* it, but there is no way we can actually *prove* it. We can argue until we’re blue in the face, we can quote scripture and theologians, but we cannot actually *prove* it, because we were not there. We are taking someone’s word for it. And that person took someone *else’s* word for it. And

they took someone *else's* word for it. The resurrection or even the existence of God is not something you can *prove* through *reason* or *logic*. It's something that we take on *faith*.

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There's a story about a group of people hiding in a bunker in France during the German occupation in WWI. They had been there for months, some of them *years*, hiding in this dark, cramped space. One day an Allied soldier opened the door to the bunker and announced that Germany had been defeated and that they were *free*. Some of the people scrambled up the ladder immediately. They couldn't wait to get out and embrace their freedom and start living their lives again. But there were some who *doubted* what the soldier said. They thought it was a trap, and that there were going to be a bunch of German soldiers waiting outside the bunker to shoot them as soon as they come out. So they stayed there until the others came back and said, "It's true!"

We hear that and say there were two kinds of people in that story: those who *believed* (or had *faith*) in what the soldier told them, and those who *doubted* and did *not* believe. But I would be willing to bet that, after years of fear and hiding out in that bunker, cut off from the outside world, *every single person in there* had doubts about whether this news was true. For some of them, their doubts were just too overwhelming and *kept* them there. But the others had to be thinking, "You know what? *I have no idea* if this is true. But I'm going to take a chance and go see." And they went forward, even *with* their doubts. *That* is faith.

Theologian Paul Tillich says that "doubt is not the *opposite* of faith, it is an *element* of faith." It is an *inherent part* of faith. Think about what faith is. Faith is believing, *trusting* that something is true, when you have no proof that it is. It is holding on to something despite a complete lack of evidence. The book of Hebrews defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Doubt and faith are not opposites. They go hand in hand, because faith is saying, "I don't know if this thing is

true, I don't know if it's real, I can't prove it to you, but I'm holding on to it and trusting that it is." That *I don't know*, that *doubt* is a part of faith. It is built into it. You cannot have faith without *some* shred of doubt.

Faith is not about having everything figured out and never having doubts. Faith is about taking your doubts with you and going to see – is this possible, is this true? The point of faith is not to avoid doubts. The point of faith is to keep seeking, keep following, keep trusting, keep holding on in the midst of our doubts. Faith is about letting go of our need for certainty, embracing the unknown, and finding a way to be okay with it. It's about opening ourselves up to the mysteries of life and standing in awe and wonder before God. It's not about being right or being certain or having proof. It's following where we cannot see and trusting where we have no proof that God is with us.

And faith is not just about believing or understanding in our *minds*. It is about *living in ways that trust*. We can have doubts in our mind and *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.

There is nothing *wrong* with doubt. You have questions and doubts? You're welcome here. Let's talk about them. God is big enough to handle them. The seeds of faith are sown in doubt. But what this story of Thomas shows us is that we can't *stay there*. The question of faith is whether, even *with* our doubts,

we can still move forward, trusting the promise of God. It's not about *dispelling* our doubts. It's about saying, "You know what? *I have no idea* if this is true. But I'm going to take a chance and go see." It's about whether we can carry our doubts with us to the place where, like the people in that dark bunker, we can run out to freedom, and like Thomas, we can cry out, "My Lord and my God!" Amen.