

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 20:19-31

April 23, 2006
Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

19On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the religious authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

24Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

26A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

30Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Do you ever doubt your decision to move up here—away from your old friends, your kids, and life in the big city? After all, our winters are long, it can be challenging to make new friends, and the drives back and forth to see doctors and old buddies can get to be a drag. Or you, do you ever doubt your decision to go back to work after the kids were born? After all, fundamentalist media sources site study after study about how children whose mothers work are doomed to a life of neglect and abandonment issues. Or you, do you ever have any doubts about your spouse? Do you sometimes wonder if you could have done better? Maybe you could have found someone who doesn't leave dirty tissues all over the house or who washes the dishes without being asked or who doesn't have to be reminded time and time again to hang his bath towel on the towel rack—not the shower curtain rod—after all who does he think has to take that stupid towel off of the shower rod and hang it onto the towel rack every time she wants to take a shower—does he think there's some kind of towel fairy living in the house? Because there's not, there's no towel fairy. It's your spouse who has to move your damp lousy towel from the shower rod to the towel rack. Anyway, during those kinds of "Martial Moments" do you ever doubt your decision to get married or your choice of whom to marry?

Doubt—it's part of life. We doubt our decisions and choices. We wonder if we did the right things. "What if" questions plague us. The reality of reality is that, we have to make choices. Sometimes the choices are easy—white or wheat, regular or decaf, low-fat or low-carb. Sometimes the choices are much harder. Should you make the move? Should you keep working or stay at home with the baby. Should Mom go to a nursing home or move in with us. Should you take the job that's more fulfilling or the one that pays better. Should you stay here in town or move closer to the grand kids. These are the choices that, once we've made them, cause us to wonder "what if" and occasionally doubt ourselves. We doubt not because we're bad or even

because we think we've made the wrong choice but rather we doubt because God has given us incredible minds with the capacity to dream, imagine, and reflect. God created us with the ability to choose in a world with endless choices. We doubt because we think.

Why then does Thomas get such a bad rap for doubting Jesus? If doubt is part of life, why has one person who doubted something seemingly impossible—bodily resurrection, carried the burden of hundreds of years of accusation and condemnation. I have a vivid recollection of learning the story of “doubting Thomas” in church school. The message was crystal clear—don't be a doubting Thomas. Thomas was bad because he doubted that Jesus wasn't dead after he had watched him die. Who can blame him?

I certainly can't. I've done my fair share of doubting Jesus, I've doubted the resurrection, I've doubted the virgin birth, I've doubted scripture, I've doubted doctrine, I've doubted my own faith experiences, I've doubted my call to ministry, I've even, as the famous preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick put it, doubted my doubts. And I say, thank you Thomas! Thank you Thomas for doubting. Thank you for giving me permission to doubt too.

Thomas' reputation is undeserved. He wasn't the only doubter among the original disciples. Matthew, Peter, Mark, Luke, Mary, Bartholomew, Andrew—they all doubted the resurrection too. When the disciples were gathered together on Easter night—locked away in a room because they were afraid the religious authorities might find them, the risen Christ entered the room. Scripture tells us that they rejoiced in Christ's presence only after seeing the wounds on the hands and side. The empty tomb wasn't enough for the disciples, the reports from Mary and John weren't enough for the disciples—they had to look right at Jesus' wounds in order to believe. They all doubted too. Somehow though, through misinterpretation and labeling, Thomas has become the scapegoat, the sacrificial lamb for all those who doubted. It's a classic case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or, maybe it's just what he and we needed.

Had Thomas not doubted, had Thomas not examined the holes in Christ's hands and put his hand into the open wound in Christ's side, he would not have been so overwhelmed with the presence of the risen savior that he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”—one of the strongest, surest, and most confident declarations of faith in the whole Bible. Sure, Thomas needed visual and even tactile proof, but that's what he needed to believe and so that's what Christ offered him. Christ did not say, “Sorry Tom, if you don't believe what the other guys told you, then I'm not going to let you see my hands or touch my side.” Christ isn't testing Thomas. Christ's burning desire is for Thomas to believe and so Christ says, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Christ wants Thomas to believe. Christ would probably prefer that we all be like John, the supposed beloved disciple, and believe in the resurrection after just looking at grave clothes left in the tomb. But, most of us just aren't that exceptional. Most of us are like Thomas. We need proof, we want data, we've been taught to make educated decisions, we have to see, feel, smell, and taste. Thomas expressed his need and Jesus met it. Thomas “reached out and touched faith.” And because he did, I feel like I can too. Thomas's hand is my hand, plunging into the hole in the side of the body of our risen savior Jesus Christ. Christ gives us the gift of Thomas'

doubt so that we too can exclaim “My Lord and my God”, even as we are still harboring some of our doubt.

Religious belief, Christianity in particular, is often presented to us as a checklist. In order for us to be a Christian we must first believe a list of doctrines, principles, and scriptural accounts. This often includes the virgin birth, the full divinity of Christ, bodily resurrection, and the necessity of being “born again.” And only if we can whole-heartedly stand behind all of these checkpoints 100%—only then can we call ourselves a Christian. And yet, there are many folks who struggle with some of these doctrines and canons and what are deemed as commonly held beliefs. These folks have doubts. And I would say not because they’re faithless or wicked or somehow don’t measure up—but because they’re using their God-given gift of thinking and reasoning to try to sort out their world. And in their world—some of these concepts don’t make sense or are simply unbelievable. And does that make them bad or unworthy or unChristian if they can’t buy into all of this stuff 100%? I don’t think so.

In fact, it seems that doubt is an essential part of faith—after all, if we’re sure and think we’ve got the facts to back it up—then that’s not having faith, that’s having facts. Faith is believing—or at least trying to believe—in spite of our doubts. And our doubts can even enhance our faith. Consider the new research about the Gospel of Judas. If all people who consider themselves Christian were free of doubt and ever-convicted of the Christian status quo, then there wouldn’t be these new developments that lend us new insight into the relationship between Judas and Jesus and cause us to seriously question 2000 years of tradition. Or consider the scriptures in the Bible that seem questionable and even contradictory to our overall sense of God’s nature and plan—verses about war, oppression, and overt sexism and homophobia—verses that promote hate and judgment instead of the love and acceptance Jesus himself practices. There’s good reason to doubt the authenticity of some of those scriptures or at least good reason to doubt some of the ways in which they’ve traditionally been interpreted.

And yet there are still many groups within the Christian Church who denounce doubt, judge doubters, and claim to have a corner on The Truth which they believe they know 100%. But it seems to me that church isn’t really for the folks who believe 100%. Why do they need a place to learn, grow, question, and explore if they’ve already got it all figured out? That would be like a Rhodes Scholar going to kindergarten. Church is for the folks who believe 75% or 52% or 34% or even just 1% of this stuff called Christianity. Church is for the Thomas’ of the world, the doubters, the questioners, and the folks who just kind of have a hunch. Church is where the Risen Christ hangs out—waiting to show us the holes in his hands and side—revealing himself to us in the music and in the scripture and in the words and in the fellowship and in the silence. And he comes here because he so desperately wants us to believe in him—and there’s obviously some part of us—no matter how big or small—that does believe. It’s that bit of belief that got us out of bed, dressed, in the car, and through those doors this morning. We haven’t arrived here at church because we have, in some way, “arrived” in our religious lives. Rather, we’ve arrived here at church because we want to believe, we are like the sick child’s father in Mark’s gospel pleading with Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” And we are like Thomas, desperately wanting to experience the Risen Christ so that we too, might one day join our voice with his in the bold declaration—“My Lord and My God” a declaration that, because of—not in spite of—our doubts, is all the sweeter to make.