

Sermon for April 3, 2016
"Doubt"

John 20:19-31

Doubt. It's part of life. It is taught to us from an early age. At some point an older child tells us a lie, perhaps for good reason. But once we discovered that we had been told an untruth the seeds of doubt were planted. And the seeds of doubt grow fast and choke all in their path. The next time they told us something we questioned whether it was true: we doubted.

Doubt is necessary for survival in this world. If we believed everything we were told, we would soon be in trouble. So if someone tells us their product is better than another we question their word. If a government tells us to do something, we question their motives. We have all been lied to, so out of self-defense we distrust; we doubt.

Doubt may be necessary in this world, but it is also dangerous. Doubt may save us from believing a lie, but it can also keep us from believing the truth. How many times has a person in a bad situation been told, "Take my hand; I can lead you out. Trust me." And because they doubted, they perished. But worst of all, doubt about ultimate things creates spiritual turmoil and pain. A person who doesn't know what to believe about God and the meaning of life is like one who is alone and lost. Doubt can be like a whirlpool that threatens to pull a person under.

The prime example of doubt in the Bible is Thomas. We often call him "Doubting Thomas," but he is no different from us. We all doubt as he did. Under the same circumstances, we would doubt too. He had been gone when Jesus appeared, and he did not see him the first time. So when he came back everyone was excited and were saying that Jesus was alive.

Consider this from Thomas' point of view. He had seen Jesus crucified. The Romans had nailed him to a cross. And when the Romans set out to kill someone they finish the job. First the women and then the rest were saying that Jesus was alive. The physical evidence was clear. Jesus had died. He was pronounced dead and the certificate had been signed. It was obvious that the disciples were the victims of some kind of group hysteria. Their grief had driven first the women and then the men into the delusion that Jesus was still alive.

We can't blame Thomas for doubting the resurrection. The other disciples had doubted before they saw Jesus. Under the same circumstances we would doubt. It would be natural. When someone tells us something unbelievable, not matter how much we normally trust that person, we doubt. We should not blame Thomas for doubting. Instead we should acknowledge that we are more like him than we like to admit. Then we should try to learn from him.

I have a special kinship with "Doubting Thomas." Just call me "Doubting Alex." When I was in college I went through a period of serious doubt. I left for college knowing of my call to the ministry. I was going to study Religion and Psychology and then go to seminary. Then I met people and read books that made me doubt.

It was my first semester at U.S.C. I was taking the introduction to Religion course in the Bible. At the same time I had gotten involved with a Bible study group in the dorm next to mine. Soon my faith was under attack from both sides. In my religious studies course we read books that made me question whether I understood the Bible at all. Then in the Bible Study they told me I was not saved. I had not been baptized in the right way at the right time they said. They said my church, which had loved me, was not obedient to God's Word because it ordained women and baptized children. And I began to doubt my salvation.

The seeds of doubt were sown. And they grew fast and furious. Someone was wrong and I didn't know whom. Either my Sunday School teachers in the United Methodist church I grew up in

were wrong, or the United Methodist minister who was teaching my class was. Either I was saved by grace through faith, or I was damned because I had not been immersed. I even began to wonder if maybe they were all wrong and there was no God or Jesus or anything. That Semester I experienced the spiritual turmoil that comes with not being sure of anything. I doubted just as Thomas did.

We call him "Doubting Thomas," but doubt is only half of his story. The other half of the story is that Thomas came to believe. A week after Jesus appeared to the other Apostles he appeared to Thomas. Jesus obviously came just for Thomas' benefit. He came to give Thomas the proof he thought he needed to believe. And in the end Thomas said, "My Lord and My God." Doubting Thomas had doubted that Jesus was even alive. But Jesus came and changed Thomas. In the end "Believing Thomas" confessed that Jesus was God. God took the prime example of doubt and turned him into an example of belief.

So what happened to "Doubting Alex" in College? One Day when I was doubting the most, I was sitting reading my Bible. I was frantically searching for some evidence that someone was telling the truth. I was looking for something that I could believe without doubting. And as I was reading I was doubting my understanding of what I read.

Finally out of desperation I turned to God and prayed and asked God to show me the truth. At that moment the turmoil in my heart was taken away. It was as if Jesus appeared in that dorm room and said, "Peace be with you" just as he had to Thomas. Oh, I still doubted some things. I questioned the things I had assumed about the Bible. I questioned my understanding of God's Word. But I no longer doubted the important things. I knew that God was loving and just. And I trusted God to lead me. To show me what I should believe, and to forgive me when I failed to follow. I no longer had to rely on ministers and professors to tell me what God's will was. I still listened to them, because they could help me find God's will. God was the one I trusted to reveal his will to me.

We are all doubting Thomases. We all doubt, especially concerning religious matters. Perhaps we doubt that we are saved. "Do I trust enough? Am I living in a way that reflects God's love? Is my faith enough or is there something I need to do?" Perhaps we doubt the Bible or the way people interpret it. And we think, "Maybe God really isn't loving. Maybe someone made it all up. Maybe there is no God." Or maybe like Thomas we doubt the resurrection. "Maybe Jesus didn't raise from the dead. Maybe the accounts of the resurrection were just a religious expression of the disciples' belief that the spirit of Jesus or his teachings still lived among them? Maybe he was just a good man who is dead." And sometimes the things preachers say make our doubts worse.

We learn two very important things about doubt from "Doubting Thomas" and "Believing Thomas." First of all, doubt is part of the human condition. Don't blame Thomas or yourself for doubting. We all doubt and at times that doubt is even necessary. Even Jesus didn't condemn Thomas for doubting. Second, God can turn doubt into belief. God took Thomas, the prime example of doubt, and turned him into a prime example of belief.

Doubt is necessary: without it we would believe every lie people tell us. But we don't have to let doubt rob us of the joy God is offering us. Jesus appeared to Thomas to take his doubt away. And he ministered to me to give me faith and peace when I needed it. When you doubt, acknowledge that doubt, and give it to God. God can take the turmoil of doubt and transform it into the peace of faith. God took "Doubting Thomas" and transformed him into "Believing Thomas," and God can do the same for all of us.