

BELIEVE

TEXT: John 20:19-31

Last Sunday we heard the most unbelievable story ever. Jesus was dead, yet he was alive, talking to Mary Magdalene. She saw the wounds on his hands and his side. A week later he surprised ten of his disciples by appearing in a closed room, as if by magic, and they too were able to see – and they believed.

But today we have the story of the one who was absent from the closed room, the one who was not able to see for himself. And he found belief impossible. I think perhaps this was our first example of someone thinking what he heard was “fake news”. And he was not about to fall for that.

The story of Thomas has always been one of my favorites. Poor Thomas. He made *one* mistake and he became a morality lesson. Of course, it isn't just a story about Thomas. It's a story about frightened disciples. So scared, in fact, that they hid behind locked doors. And who can blame them? They had just witnessed the one they confessed to be the Messiah betrayed by one of their own, tried and convicted by both religious and civil authorities, and then brutally executed. It's little wonder that they were afraid, assuming that the next step would be to round up Jesus' followers. But when Jesus arrived on the scene, walking, speaking and touching, their fears fell away, to be replaced with joy.

But Thomas wasn't there. We are never told why, or where he was, just that he did not see the risen Jesus suddenly arrive out of thin air.

I think we assume that's the way faith should work. Thomas doubts. Thomas questions. Thomas believes. He is not satisfied with second-hand reports, and he wants to see for himself. Can you blame him? He was one who had seen his Lord and friend mistreated, beaten, and then crucified. He had probably spent the past week pulling the broken pieces of his life back together and trying to figure out what to do next. Why else

would he have been out and about when the rest of the disciples were hiding behind locked doors.

But Thomas harbored doubts. Is Thomas so different from the rest of us? How is it that we profess to believe when doubt won't go away? So, let's talk about doubt. Many of us think that doubt is the opposite of faith, but that's not really the case. The opposite of faith is unbelief. Unbelief refers to a willful refusal to believe, while doubt refers to inner uncertainty. Lord I believe. Help my unbelief! And God does not condemn us when we question. Job and David, and many others in the Bible repeatedly questioned God, but they were not condemned. God is big enough to handle our doubts and all our questions.

Many of us think that struggling with God means we lack faith, but that's not true either. Instead, it's a sure sign that we truly have faith. If we never struggle, our faith will never grow.

Believing is hard work. Jesus said that it is work to believe. Finding it hard to keep believing does not mean that we don't believe. It means that believing is hardly ever easy. I would guess that every church is filled with doubters. Above every door should be a sign that says "Doubters Welcome".

We all doubt from time to time. Doubt itself is not sinful or wrong. It often can be the catalyst to new spiritual growth. I found an interesting article recently that noted that our doubts come in three categories:

First: there are intellectual doubts. These are doubts most often raised by those outside the Christian faith. Is the Bible the Word of God? Is Jesus the Son of God? Did he really rise from the dead? These are the doubts raised by the da Vinci Code, and the modern day apostles of atheism.

Second: there are spiritual doubts. These tend to be the doubts of those inside the church. Am I really a Christian? Have I truly believed? Why is it so hard to pray? Why do I still feel guilty?

Third: there are circumstantial doubts. According to the article, this is the largest category because it encompasses all the “whys” of life. Why did my child die? Why did my marriage end? Why did my friend betray me? Where was God when I was suffering abuse? These are the questions we meet at the intersection of biblical faith and the pain of living in a difficult world. The author feels that these are the toughest doubts of all, and we tend sometimes to sweep them under the rug and to put down those in the church who struggle with these issues. But when we refuse to deal with circumstantial doubts, they soon become spiritual doubts, and those spiritual doubts eventually become intellectual doubts. And then people start leaving the church altogether.

So my question is, how can we move from doubt to faith? How do we find the faith to truly believe?

First, remember that God is not fragile. God can handle our doubts, our fears, our worries and all our unanswered questions. God is a big God. God runs the universe without any help (but God does get a lot of hindrance, I’m afraid). Our doubts don’t upset God. Once we come face to face with our doubts, once we can look at them honestly, God will help us move toward true faith.

Then we must act on our faith, not on our doubts. That’s what Noah did when he built the ark. That’s what Abraham did when he left Ur for Canaan. That’s what David did when he faced Goliath. I’m willing to bet that all these great heroes of the faith had their doubts. They didn’t know in advance how everything was going to turn out. But they took a deep breath, decided to trust God, and they acted on their faith and not on their doubts.

Do not doubt your faith. Doubt your doubts. Don't cast away your faith simply because you are in a valley of darkness. All of us walk into that valley from time to time. But when you find yourself in that valley where there is great uncertainty and you are tempted to give in to your doubts, remember to keep walking, because soon the light will shine again.

Keep going back to what you know to be true. After considering the sufferings of this life, and the perils and tribulations of following Christ, Paul concluded his letter to the Romans by triumphantly declaring, "For I am persuaded". And he declares that nothing in all the universe can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And Paul says, "I know whom I have believed".

In that locked room when Thomas first saw the risen Christ, when his doubts were relieved, when he heard Jesus say to him "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe", he was not rebuking Thomas. Rather, he was blessing all those who would come to believe without having had the benefit of a flesh-and-blood encounter with Jesus.

The evidence was right there for Thomas to believe. The rest of us don't have that evidence, but it is still faith that leads the way to the truth of it all. To paraphrase a traditional aphorism, if you don't have faith, then there will never be enough evidence to convince you, and if you do have faith, no evidence is needed. *Without faith, no evidence is sufficient, with faith, no evidence is necessary.*

At the end of our reading from John 20, John steps out of the drama he is narrating to look his readers straight in the eye. "Now listen, friends", he says. "I have left out a ton. Jesus said and did lots of other really amazing things that I just have not gotten around to even mentioning. But what I have given you is enough. Read it and believe!"

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief! Amen.