

Chris Murphy

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Scripture: John 20: 19-29

Sermon Title: Faith and Doubt

Prayer...

Introduction:

Who is your favorite disciple? Do you have one?

I have shared this before, but my favorite disciple is John: I like John, partly because he is fast. He is a good athlete. We know this because he outruns Peter to the tomb after the resurrection. He is also very close to Jesus. He is described as the one Jesus loves. He gets to take care of Mary. On the cross, Jesus asks John to take care of his mom. I think that's cool because Mary, the Mother of Jesus is awesome and he takes care of her. He lives the longest on an island. He is exiled on the island of Patmos. I am not sure living on an island was an easy life. Maybe Patmos is not Maui. I am not sure, but he does live on an island. He writes his own book. John is a famous author, his book is a bestseller.

Some say he also wrote 1, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John. 4 books to his credit. He talks about God as love. John is really great! I told Liam McNeal that he was lucky to play John in our drama presentation on Maundy Thursday. But one of my other favorite disciples is actually Thomas.

Why may you ask? Is this not Bright Sunday? Should we not talk about a more popular disciple than Thomas. Get back to talking about John.

Why would you like the disciple who doubts? Well, I like Thomas because if you ever struggle with doubt, Thomas is the disciple for you. Actually, I think this story about Thomas needing to see the hands and feet of Jesus to believe is included in the Gospel of John, because it is important that doubters can relate to someone in the Bible.

In our story today, Thomas has his doubts about the resurrection of Jesus, but it is not his fault that he was not around when the disciples first see Jesus. It is natural that he wants to see Jesus for himself. Right. Would not you wish to see Jesus in person if others have seen him? Let me remind you of the story we are exploring today....

Jesus appears first to a group of the disciples minus Thomas. He appears out of the blue, even though the doors are locked to the home where the disciples are hiding out. He says Peace be with you twice and breathes on them, saying receive the Holy Spirit. He also reminds them of the power to forgive others. He shows them his hands and feet to prove his resurrection.

When Thomas shows up after Jesus has left, he cannot believe that Jesus really was there, even though the disciples tell him. Thomas explains that he will need to place his finger in the mark of the nail in his hands and his hand in Jesus' side to believe. A week later, the disciples are together again, this time with Thomas and Jesus shows up. He once again says peace be with you, the traditional greeting of the day. (Shalom) Jesus must have heard what Thomas had said before, because Jesus invites Thomas to put his hand in his side and Thomas' finger in his hands. Jesus encourages Thomas not to doubt but to

believe. Thomas touches Jesus' scars and exclaims, "My Lord and my God."

Have you ever been like Thomas wanting to believe in a miracle. For Thomas it was the resurrection of Jesus. For us, it might be to believe that Jesus is still alive today through a Christian ministry that proclaims his love to the world.

**My story of Tulsa...** Wanting to see miracles for myself. Wanting to feel God. I struggled with doubt at different times in my life. During part of my Senior year in high school, I even wondered if I believed in Jesus. Whitworth College helped me grow my faith, but even after college, I knew I needed to explore my doubts by learning more from Charismatic Christians....

After I came back from Tulsa, I tried my best to reconnect to the Presbyterian Church. I worked at Seattle Pacific University in Campus Ministry and hung out with Free Methodist and a lot of non-denominational evangelical Christians. I went to Fuller Seminary

because it welcomed Presbyterians, Charismatic Christians, and a whole bunch of other evangelical Christian types. Seminary was actually a safe place for me to wrestle more again with my doubts, but I also had a lot of personal experience with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, so I was not afraid of losing my faith in seminary.

I want to remind us that part of the journey of faith also must include healthy doubt. Sometimes for our faith to grow, we need to doubt some of the ideas of our childhood faith. Brian McLaren wrote a book entitled **Faith After Doubt**. In it, he talks about four stages of faith. The first stage is simplicity.

**Simplicity** — You're either for us or against us. It's all or nothing.

Brian McLaren grew up in a very conservative Christian tradition. Brian jokes that when he was growing up in a fundamentalist Christian church, Billy Graham was viewed as liberal.

Example of simplicity- 6 day literal creation story. God actually created the world in six 24 hour days. If you don't believe that, then you are not a Bible believing Christian. This would be an example of someone who is either all or nothing in their view of faith.

**Complexity** — There's more than one way to do things.

More than one denomination. Different ways to study the Bible that have merit. Different types of theology that one might explore about God.

**Perplexity** — Everyone has an opinion. Who knows who is right?

This is what we like to call these days as deconstruction. People in this stage struggle with faith and have a lot of doubts. Some even wonder if they will stay Christian.

**Harmony/Humility** — Seek first God's Kingdom... love God, love neighbors... in essentials unity... focus on a few grand essentials.

Example of harmony might be I am a follower of Jesus and I believe in the inspiration of Scripture, but I also understand that God is bigger than my ideas about God and the focus of my faith is mostly on following Jesus and loving others than having all of my beliefs line up in a neat row. Some things remain a mystery. I major on the major things like God is love, Jesus is God, the Holy Spirit is with us and heaven is real. Some other ideas I trust to God.

“Faith before doubt: it’s about correct beliefs. Faith after doubt: it’s about revolutionary love.”

Here is a longer quote from Brian McLaren that is really a blessing over those of our who struggle with doubt and seek greater spiritual transformation.

“May God give you grace never to sell yourself—or God—short. Grace to risk something big for something good. Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, And too small for anything but love. So may God take your mind and think through it. May

God take your lips and speak through them. May God take your hands and do good with them. May God take your heart and set it on fire.

Finally, I offer this simple benediction, modeled on the beatitudes, to remind you that your honest doubts are not a curse but, rather, a blessing indeed: Blessed are the curious, for their curiosity honors reality. Blessed are the uncertain and those with second thoughts, for their minds are still open. Blessed are the wonderers, for they shall find what is wonderful. Blessed are those who question their answers, for their horizons will expand forever. Blessed are those who often feel foolish, for they are wiser than those who always think themselves wise. Blessed are those who are scolded, suspected, and labeled as heretics by the gatekeepers, for the prophets and mystics were treated in the same way by the gatekeepers of their day. Blessed are those who know their unknowing, for they shall have the last laugh. Blessed are the perplexed, for they have reached the frontiers of contemplation. Blessed are they who become cynical about their cynicism and suspicious of their suspicion, for they will enter the second innocence.



Blessed are the doubters, for they shall see through false gods. Blessed are the lovers, for they shall see God everywhere. ”

— Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do About It*

I think Brian is right that the heart of Christian faith is our call to love others. There is a movement in Christianity that values beliefs, but that values the action of love as the key aspect of our faith.

I like what Brian emphasizes in his writing. He encourages Christians to focus more on a love relationship with God in Jesus than specific doctrinal ideas. What I would like to add though, is that the Church today also is invited to believe in miracles. There is a form of Christianity that believes that the miracles of Jesus were for the past in order for us to believe that he was the Son of God, but that miracles no longer happen today. This strand of Christianity doubts that God will move in miracles and tends to doubt any Christian groups that highlight

miracles, particularly Pentecostal or Charismatic churches. Our Presbyterian Churches have often been cynical about Charismatic Churches. I think we do need to be careful about extreme teaching from some Pentecostal groups that put pressure on people to have faith and that seem to overemphasize the demonic everywhere you look. I do believe though, that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so in this church we pray for healings. We pray for miracles and we bring our faith with our doubts to God and ask Jesus to move and grow our faith.

There is a type of doubt that helps us to grow to greater spiritual maturity. We need to doubt some theological ideas from the past for example, that emphasize God's wrath over his love. There are Biblical teachers and pastors that have become comfortable with violence, prejudice, and patriarchy and have taught terrible things from the Bible that we must question and doubt.

As we doubt some things, though I invite us to have faith for other things. Let us follow the example of Thomas, who after touching Jesus' scars went forth to be a missionary for Christ in the world.

Although Thomas initially struggles with doubt, he ultimately grows to be an Apostle of deep faith. Many Church historians say that he was a missionary to India and gave his life for the Gospel. He helped plant seven different churches there. Today, a whole group of Christians in India are known as St. Thomas Christians who trace their origin to the mission work of the Apostle Thomas.

If you are a person who struggles with doubt, know that God can make you a person of deep faith. Doubt is part of the journey of faith and your doubts will actually help you form a more authentic faith that honors Jesus' heart for the world.

Faith and Doubt, both are necessary elements in the journey of our faith. As Christians, we are invited to bring our doubts to Jesus and let him lead us to let go of false teachings that harm the true spread of the

Gospel and to embrace the living Jesus who wishes to transform the world with his love.

Will you pray with me...

Jesus we recognize that just as you entered the room of the disciples and offered them peace. You come to us with our doubts and wish to show us yourself. Just as you mercifully showed your hands and side to Thomas, so reveal yourself to us. Blow on us and let us be filled with your Holy Spirit. Show us your power, your healing, your miracles. Heal our hearts, so that we can walk in a profound faith born out of our experience of knowing you deeply in times of doubt and times of deep trust and faith. Thank you that you meet us where we are and offer us unconditional love. We love you and on this Bright Sunday, we thank you for the gift of resurrection power and the gift of eternal life. In the Name of Christ we pray...AMEN.