

Easter 2022 – Doubting Thomas

What do you do when your **doubts seem overwhelming**?

What do you do when **the Bible** doesn't seem as credible to you as it used to?

What do you do when you've been a Christian your whole life but right now you're pretty **ashamed** of the way a lot of Christians are acting?

What do you do when you're **dragged to some Easter service** because it's what your family wanted, but you don't even believe that any of this stuff is true?

What do you do with doubt?

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I want to say **welcome** to Easter at Grace Church. Now I know this is not how we normally start our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Usually it's more ribbons and lasers and dancing bears.

Well don't worry. We're going to get to the celebrating.

But first, we're going to talk about doubt. Because we are living in a time where the **credibility gap** with the Church is widening every day. Where many people are **walking away** from their faith in Jesus.

We are living in a time of **skepticism and disbelief**. And I'm just going to go out on a limb and say that I bet there are plenty of us in this room and watching online who are facing those same things.

What do you do with doubt?

JESUS APPEARS

For the last few months, we have been working our way through the gospel of John, and as we've seen, it's a provocative, in-your-face account of Jesus that really leaves **no room for gray**.

It's light and dark, life and death. And every verse is asking a simple question:

do you believe it?

Well today we're going to look at the story of someone who doesn't. A man who we often call "Doubting Thomas."

Go ahead and grab a Bible, and turn with me to **John 20:19, Page ____**

[PRAY]

What we're about to read takes place on the evening of **the first Easter Sunday**. Jesus rose from the dead that morning, he revealed himself to Mary Magdalene, and she told all the other disciples that she had seen Jesus alive.

A few hours later, this happened:

John 20:19-25

That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

Just a few comments before we go on.

It's important to note that the disciples are in a **locked room**.

For one thing, it tells us that apparently Jesus' **resurrected body** is not limited by spacetime. He just appears. Which is really interesting.

But I think a more important takeaway from these locked doors is that it shows us the mental state of the disciples. They're **terrified**.

The rabbi they had been following for years, the one they believed was going to be the new king of Israel, the Messiah, the one who was going to rise up and defeat the powers of Rome and save the world... had just been brutally executed on a humiliating Roman cross.

Everything was falling apart. And now, as far as the authorities were concerned, these disciples had been in league with an insurrectionist and were traitors to the state.

So in their grief they're also **very afraid**. And it's in that setting that Jesus reveals himself to them. "Peace be with you."

There's just one problem. One of the disciples, Thomas, isn't there for this. And he refuses to believe that it happened.

MY LORD AND MY GOD
Let's keep reading...

John 20:26-31

Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," he said. Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"

"My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed.

Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.

I want to start with this. I think we've been a little **hard on ol' Thomas**. I think he's gotten a really bad rap.

Seriously, for the last 2000 years he's been referred to as "*Doubting Thomas*." For one little moment.

It's like **tripping on a rock** in second grade and in high school everyone

is still calling you “trippin’ Tim.”

Now, for a long time I just thought “Doubting Thomas” had earned the nickname. Because he obviously screwed up, and we see Jesus just **dunking on him** here as this *idiot* who didn’t believe, right?

Well I’m not so sure anymore. Let me show you why.

First of all, let’s remember what these disciples were going through. Before Jesus showed up to them it had been **three days of hell**. Like I said, they’re terrified they are going to get executed themselves.

But they’re also facing deep grief, abandonment, shame... They fled when Jesus died. **Peter** denied even *knowing* Jesus just hours after saying, “I’m ready to die for you.”

It’s not like these other disciples were all paragons of faithfulness.

And sure, Thomas doesn’t believe the news that Jesus had risen from the dead, but **neither did the other disciples** at first. In the gospel of Luke we see that when Mary shared the news that she had seen Jesus alive, *none* of them believed it either.

So is Thomas really such a *moron* for not believing? I don’t think so. I just think he is **a young man in indescribable grief**. When they tell him Jesus is alive, his despair won’t *allow* him to believe.

And think about what Jesus says to him in verse 27. “Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side.”

Is he trying to shame Thomas? No! He is **offering him exactly what he asked for** back in verse 25. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Jesus understood Thomas was speaking not out of hostile disbelief. He was expressing the skepticism of someone whose entire world had fallen apart.

And into that skepticism Jesus says lovingly, “Look. If this is what you need to believe, than I’m going to give it to you.”

But of course Thomas doesn't do any of those things, does he?

No. The moment he sees Jesus he simply responds, "**My Lord and My God.**"

By doing so, he becomes the first person in the gospel of John, other than the gospel writer himself, **to refer to Jesus as God.**

We call him "Doubting Thomas," but here he's the first one to acknowledge that truth.

So, yeah. I think we may **a bit unfair** by assuming this whole story is trashing Thomas for his doubt.

BLESSED

Ok, so if that's the case, and Jesus is *not* dunking on Thomas here, then what is he getting at in verse 29? "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

Is he saying Thomas *isn't* blessed?

No. I don't think Jesus is talking about Thomas at all when he says, "blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

Who *is* he talking about? **He's talking about you.** He's talking about me.

He's **breaking the fourth wall**, looking right at the camera, and speaking to all the readers of John's gospel from the first century until now.

We will be blessed if we believe.

Look what John says right after, in verse 30. "The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But *these* are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him **you will have life** by the power of his name."

That's what blessing means: **life**. Whole, abundant, peaceful, vibrant *life*. Life lived in the presence of God.

Blessing means **a return to Eden** - to God's intentions for this world. Free from the curse of death, free from brokenness and sin, free from shame...

And, as we see in John, this is a kind of life that goes beyond just this existence. **It stretches into the New Creation**. Where we too are resurrected into new life. Jesus calls it *eternal life*. Life of the age to come.

When we believe, according to Jesus, we are blessed – we experience that kind of life now, *and* forever. Jesus is talking to *us*.

That's why I believe John tells the story of Thomas' initial doubt and ultimate belief. It's **not a cautionary tale** about the dangers of doubt.

It's an invitation for *us* to believe as well *in the midst* of our doubt. For Jesus to meet us where we are as well *in the midst of* our skepticism.

That's **the whole point of the gospel of John**. The whole thing is an invitation for you and for me to believe. To find life. Even if we struggle with doubt. John's message is simple:

Jesus Christ rose from the grave. We will find life if we believe it.

So do you?

MY JOURNEY

Let me talk for a moment about **my own faith journey**. Because I see myself in Thomas.

It may seem ridiculous to you to hear me say this since I'm a pastor, but I am a **very skeptical person**. I am well acquainted with doubt and disbelief and I almost never take anything at face value.

Now, obviously I *do* believe (I wouldn't be here if I didn't), but my journey through doubts and skepticism is a part of that belief.

By the way, that's one of the things I love about Grace Church. This is a **safe place to wrestle**. And I've wrestled!

I just concluded teaching a four-week **Bible Class for Bible Skeptics**, where I shared some of my journey finding a path through my skepticism. And I want to tell you some of what I told the class.

The way I see it, either God does not exist, or he does but doesn't reveal himself in obvious ways. Right? He didn't carve, "I am here" on the moon.

My quest for the last 20 years has been trying to answer this question: If it's the latter - if God *does* exist - then how *does* he reveal himself?

I've traveled the world, spoken with people from many different cultures, studied science, pored over history books, and sought the voice of God in everything from nature to music to this book.

And there is **one fundamental idea** that makes sense of everything I've learned and experienced.

One idea that makes sense of the many **Christ-followers** I've met who serve their suffering neighbors with staggering humility and selflessness no matter the cost.

One idea that makes sense of the **spiritual experiences** I've had and the crazy **calling** I find myself swept up in - me, this nobody!

One idea that makes sense of both the **horrific pain** I've seen in the world and the ways I've seen that pain **being healed**.

It is an idea so powerful I've chosen to build my life on it. And here it is:

That the Creator of this universe is a self-sacrificial God. One who enters into our reality, who loves us so much he willingly takes our self-destruction, our violence, our pain, our *death* on himself so that we can discover a new way to live.

A God who wants us, these sinful, shame-filled nobodies, to join him in **his grand mission** to heal the world.

This God of self-giving love doesn't blast his identity onto the moon. He whispers his identity in our hearts.

He shows up in a locked room saying "peace be with you" as he shows us the holes in his hands.

I've encountered that God of love. He's **gently met me** again and again *in the midst of my doubt*.

He's surprised me with his presence in unexpected places. Filthy orphanages, horrific slums, in the broken bodies of the dying and destitute. I have seen him there breathing healing and life.

And today all I can say, like Thomas, is "My Lord and my God. Here... this life of mine is yours."

Now, **I could be wrong** about all of this.

I could be wrong, but I have chosen to make this truth the foundation of my life, and it has led me to experience more joy, more purpose, and more healing than I could have possibly imagined.

No, I haven't *seen* Jesus. But **I have heard his voice** resonating through the fabric of my reality, and I have found life because of it. I *have* been blessed, just as Jesus promised... because he is alive.

Again, I resonate a lot with "Doubting" Thomas who, *through* his disbelief and *through* his skepticism encountered the living God and chose to give every last breath of his life to follow him.

Ancient sources claim that after this moment with the resurrected Christ, **Thomas became a missionary**, taking the good news of Jesus as far as southern India and maybe even to China.

There are more than 4 million Christ-followers today in the state of **Kerala** alone who trace the origins of their churches right back to the preaching of Thomas.

Tradition has it that Thomas even gave his life as a **martyr**, being killed for his belief in Jesus. Thomas had found a truth worth sacrificing everything for. Jesus is alive.

I have found a truth worth sacrificing everything for. Jesus is alive!

My question for you this Easter Sunday: have you? **Have you found "life by the power of his name?"**

PUT IT TO THE TEST

I am not asking whether you have eliminated all your doubts. I'm not asking if you've rejected your skepticism. I don't think that's what belief requires!

Look. What is courage? **Courage is not the absence of fear.** Courage is what you choose to do in the *presence* of your fear.

Belief is not the absence of doubt. Belief is what you choose to do in the *presence* of doubt.

Have you made a choice to take the leap of faith? A choice to believe in the risen Jesus and say, "My Lord and my God." Or maybe it's about taking the leap *again* after your faith has crumbled.

Yes, it is a leap into the unknown, but trust me. There is life on the other side. But don't just take my word for it.

Generations upon generations of Christ-followers have claimed to have found this life and abundance in saying 'yes.'

They have **passed down these words** like a priceless family heirloom, sometimes even dying to protect them, so that you too can find the life they had.

And I'm not just talking here just about modern American Evangelicals. We've missed the point in a lot of ways. I'm talking about the vast body of Christ-followers around the world and throughout history.

I'm talking about the **community of Jesus** that has sacrificed everything to live out a love that changes the world. I'm talking about Thomas, who

doubted the resurrection but went on to touch the lives of millions.

This community has made the claim that Jesus holds the key to life, and I believe **there is only one way for you to know if that claim is true**: You have to put it to the test.

You try to live it out. And you see if there is any merit to what this book and this community claims. Test it!

- Does a posture of self-giving love like Jesus' truly lead to greater joy?
- Does trusting in God's direction instead of my own self-sufficiency truly lead to a better life?
- Does radical nonviolence, a commitment to justice for the marginalized, and a rejection of greed and power truly heal the brokenness of our world?
- Does this community of faith truly offer me a new life free of my shame and mistakes?
- Does this resurrected Messiah truly reach for me and offer a second chance?

I can tell you categorically that in my life I've found the answer to all those questions is *yes*. But the only way for *you* to know for sure is to test those claims for yourself.

Thomas believed because he *saw* Jesus. But "Blessed are those who believe without seeing."

Take the plunge. Offer your life to Jesus. Trust Him to be your guide.

If it's all made up, that'll become clear in time. But if it's real, I believe you will encounter a kind of life and love and grace that changes everything.

BAPTISMS

Next Sunday we are going to be celebrating baptisms.

gracechurch.us/baptism

We will see people making a public declaration that they have chosen to surrender their lives to Jesus. That they believe.

Some of them still have doubts. Some of them are still skeptical.

But you are going to see with your own two eyes individuals who have tasted the life that God has for them and are ready to follow where he leads.

Maybe **the time has come** for you to join them. Maybe it's time for you to say, "My Lord and my God. I am done trying to be the master of my own life. I'm done trying to be my own savior. I trust, like Thomas, that you truly are alive."

I will be in that tank and I would be deeply honored to baptize you.

Jesus loves you. I love you. And we'll be waiting.

Christ defeated death on Easter, and now it's time for *you* to come alive.

[PRAY]