

Lingering Doubt

[John 20:24-29](#)

Lingering in the Shadows of Easter

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Sunday, April 10, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

In our restless hearts, merciful God, may you now speak a word of peace in our doubts. May you speak and proclaim the power of your resurrected presence. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

The gospel of John is unique among the gospels. It begins with an emphasis on the light shining in darkness. At the point of the resurrection in our celebration of continuing Easter, we recognize that that light of the resurrection continues to shine in the midst of shadows and darkness. If we are in touch with reality, we know that the resurrection is before us but our lives continue to struggle in the vicissitudes and difficulties of life.

This past week we have seen that in a major worldwide demonstration of a world grieving the loss of a pope and the celebration of the resurrection of his life in the presence of Jesus Christ. The grief and the life exist right next to each other. We continue to wrestle with doubt in the same way. We have doubts about many things but mostly our doubts are about the presence of God, the reality of God, and whether or not God cares about us in this world. We have doubts at times about religious leadership or political leadership. Bob Dole in his book, *Great Political Wit*, tells the humorous story of John F. Kennedy who was asked many times during the 1960 election how he felt about the infallibility of the pope. Reporters are constantly asking this, and he wasn't sure what to say. So he went to his friend Cardinal Spellman and asked, "What I shall say about the pope's infallibility?" Cardinal Spellman said, "I'm not sure what to tell you, Senator, all I know that is that the pope keeps calling me 'Spillman!'"

We have doubts. Pascal said we must know where to doubt, where to feel certain, and where to submit to either one. Dan Taylor, in comments about Pascal, said, "have enough knowledge to waken our appetites without having enough to satisfy them." Pascal made another point: "Seeing too much to deny and too little to be sure, I am to the state to be pitied." Dan Taylor in his book, *The Myth of Certainty*, reflecting on the Pascal patterns of doubt, takes a shot at the church and points out that in the churches where he has been a part, it is not okay to doubt. Either you have certainty about God and his will or you might not even be a believer in some church contexts.

In other words, thou shall not doubt. Taylor says that a person is left with only two options: to try a lot harder to be without doubt, which is impossible, or to leave the church. He goes on to say in the midst of certainty, doubt is seen as sapping faith strengths. Why not the reverse? Where there is doubt, faith has its reason for being. Clearly, faith is not needed where certainty supposedly exists but only in situations where doubt is possible and even present. T.S. Eliot said about doubt, everyone who thinks and lives with any kind of thought must have their own skepticism: that which ends in denial or that which leads to faith. We live in the middle ground between those two things.

This is the point of Thomas facing Jesus. Jesus says to Thomas, don't give in to doubt; become a person who is full of faith. They are opposite terms. Don't give in to being doubtful but give in to the development of becoming faithful. In our own view of Thomas we often call him doubting Thomas. We attach his name to a reprimand as if it's bad to be that way. If you have the name Thomas, you'd better beware. It's as though Judas is the betrayer, and Peter is the denier, and the disciples are all deserters.

Well, I'm here to give an alternate view. Doubt is not only normal; it is demanded as an expression of faith. All disciples are doubters. You cannot be a follower of Jesus unless you have doubts. Doubting is part of the process of spiritual growth. Without doubt we will not change, we will not grow, we will not be sanctified. Doubt is normal; it is a healthy pattern of human life that leads us to hunger after God. Even at the end of the gospel of Matthew, when the disciples have experienced the resurrection of Jesus and been

with Jesus for days, it says that while they worshipped Jesus, some doubted. While you worship Jesus today, do you have doubts? I hope you say yes because if you don't say yes, you're out of touch with reality. And I frankly don't want to be with people who are out of touch with reality.

In Mark, chapter 9, Jesus is engaged by a man who wants his son to be released of demons. The man says, I believe that you can heal him, but help my lack of belief, my doubts. Jesus doesn't attack the man for his lack of belief; he heals the young boy. And my guess is the man's belief increased.

Jesus says to Thomas, do not give in to being controlled by unbelief, but give in to the pattern of becoming a person who is more full of belief. Let go of being distrustful and engage in becoming trusting. Move through the continuum of giving up doubts and becoming a person who is more full of faith each day.

Doubt is a good thing; it will help us to grow and change and be formed in the nature of God and the character of Jesus Christ. Doubt should not be held within our own minds and hearts. Doubt is not just for you. If there is one thing that's clear in this text, it is that Thomas shared his doubts with the other disciples. And you will notice that the other disciples are not given as examples of people who pass judgment on Thomas for his doubts. They've all been there, and some of them continue to be there.

The community around us needs to hear our doubts. The community gives us a witness to their faith while we doubt. We worship together today to affirm the faith of the resurrection, the presence of Jesus Christ, while we yet doubt. We linger in the shadows of doubt, even in the resurrection and Easter celebration. But Jesus shows up in the midst of that in community. It is important we have groups where we can tell the truth about our doubts.

This past week I received an email from a couple that I married in 1982. The essence of their email was that when we met there in my office in the church in Sherman Oaks in 1982, they came with all sorts of questions and doubts. They had no clue about the faith; they had no clue about Presbyterian pastors. They called me father. I was too young to be father at that point. We did not talk as much about the wedding as we talked about their hunger to find God, which led them to look this church up in the Yellow Pages.

After a long conversation I agreed to do the wedding in the name of Jesus, and they said but we can't do that, we have doubts. I said, I can live with your doubts if you can live with my wedding in the name of Jesus. They said, that's good.

After the wedding they took a honeymoon trip to a place in Europe called L'Abri. Where they were able to spend 30 days asking all sorts of questions, lingering in their doubts and being helped by people who were there who were Christian who allowed them to be people of doubt. During that period, they met Jesus face to face. And the email was affirmation that after all these years they were thanking me for sending them to Labrie where they met Jesus and allowing them the freedom to have doubts and ask questions.

Tony Hall, who delivered the keynote address at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast last year, made a very strong statement that one of the key principles that has kept him alive and well as a follower of Jesus Christ is the gathering of people where he can share his doubts. He can share his hopes; he can share his fears. And then he went on to talk about a particular time in his life when he was really in the midst of doubt and even anger with God. His 15-year-old son was dying from leukemia. This was a point in his life when he was so angry and so full of doubt, he wanted God to come down physically and confront him face to face so he could tell God where to go. Incredibly, he said his faith became stronger. He had more belief in the resurrection when his son died than before. And I would maintain that that's because he has a place in community with friends where he can talk about his pain and his doubts.

It is important that you have such a place. You need to have a group of friends who can allow you to talk about your questions and deal with your doubt. Doubt is not something you keep buried within your own soul. It is something to be expressed so that the community of faith can love you and care for you and be there with you while you struggle. And they are not there to criticize, condemn, or attack you because you are a person of doubt.

I hope you get that today. I hope that you are not in a group where you are criticized for doubting. I hope

you are not a part of community relationship where people attack you because you ask too many questions. My own daughter was in a group in college and the group finally sent her away saying, you ask too many questions. We can't have you in this group. So much for Christian community.

In many ways, I became a Presbyterian out of the freedom in this Presbyterian community to ask questions and deal with doubts without being attacked or condemned. I hope that you find a place in our community to wrestle with the reality of the shadows of doubts.

Doubt triggers curiosity. Doubt triggers a hunger and a desire to know if God is who God says he is. Without doubt we are not motivated or driven into the face of God. We are simply passive. With doubt we are able to aggressively and assertively move toward God in challenge. Jesus shows up for Thomas while he is asking the questions. You'll notice that Jesus does not attack Thomas for asking questions or having doubts. Jesus allows Thomas to be who he is. Jesus meets Thomas to respond to his questions and his doubts on his own terms. Thomas, you wanted to see my body, here are my hands. You want to see my side, just put your hand right in there and feel it. You want to see me, I'm here. Thomas' doubts are met by the resurrected Jesus in the midst of the community. The philosopher and theologian said, the non-committed have no right to ask any questions. Only those who are seriously searching and asking and dealing with their doubts can ask the questions.

It is good to ask questions about the nature of God. "God, how, if you are so loving, is there such pain in the world?" "God, if you are constantly present, why does it seem like you are so absent?" "God, I hear silence. I do not hear you speaking. Where are you going to speak to me?" "Does Jesus really save?" "Does Jesus heal?" "Is there such a thing as miracles?" These are important questions never to let go of. They are the questions that will drive you into the presence of the resurrected Lord.

My father used to have a pattern that he modeled for the whole family. He told us to be able to deal with our doubts. To ask questions and never give up on the questions was important. He would often come after the service on Sunday morning, after hearing the preacher preach, and he would put the Bible on the table at our family lunch. He would say something like this, "Now let's see what the preacher said is what the Bible really says."

He encouraged us to be skeptical about preachers. I encourage you to do the same thing. Challenge, have doubts, ask questions, because it is there where you will grow. And you notice that my father did that in the midst of family and community. I have to say that it was often in that context that I had the experience of the resurrected Lord coming and answering the questions. Doubt moves us to ask questions. Particular questions. In one of the tools of discipleship that many of us have used over the years is the Serendipity Study Bible on Small Groups by Lyman Coleman. It is interesting in that context that Lyman Coleman asks these questions about this particular text. How do you think Thomas and the others got along during the week between the first and the eighth day? Between the first Sunday and the second Sunday. They had seen Jesus. He had not. How do you think Thomas felt?

Another question he asks is how did Jesus deal with Thomas' doubt. That's very important to answer here. You notice that Jesus doesn't in any way critique Thomas for having doubts. He doesn't put him down; he doesn't attack him -- he doesn't make any statement. He responds to him completely, Thomas you want to see me, I'm here. Touch me. Thomas is so blown away that he forgets to reach in and touch. He just simply says, my Lord and my God. It is in the context of doubts and the context of community that the resurrected Jesus shows up.

Dr. Timothy Johnson, in his book, *Finding God in the Questions*, talks about his own experience of doubt. "My path of faith has wandered through both doubt and belief, he says, "often at the same time. Doubt does not have to tear down belief. However, it can purify it. It is possible to find God even while you're still asking the questions." And he tells the story that when he went to theology school, he was so riven by doubt and questions that he became physical ill, because he realized he was giving up the faith of his youth and childhood and his family. He discovered that in the midst of the doubt his resurrected Lord showed up. Doubt wasn't bad for him, it has led him to ask questions and now to write a book that is a national best seller. Jesus will show up if you keep doubting and asking questions.

Now let me discern the difference at this moment between two kinds of doubt. One is skepticism, which I believe is a healthy kind of doubt, and cynicism, which is really the kind of doubt that refuses to keep searching and just shuts down. I believe that Jesus responds to the skeptic but Jesus can't even speak to the cynic. Skepticism is a good behavior but if you turn to the point where you've rejected all possibility of God's response to you and you stop looking, you've given in to cynicism. Then you are in a very dark place.

Jesus will show up for people who ask questions and have doubt. Doubt leads to the moment where Thomas confesses to Jesus personally, "My Lord, my God." What Jesus wants to do with you today is to meet you in the midst of your doubt. Keep asking the questions; keep struggling with the concerns; keep living in the shadows of the doubt. And one day you too will meet Jesus face to face, and he will call you by name and you will be left with only one response: my Lord and my God.

Doubt drives us into a deep personal relationship with the resurrected Lord because that's what the hunger of our heart and spirit determines in our lives. Today, if you have doubts or questions, keep asking them, keep struggling with the doubt, keep asking for Jesus to show up personally in your life and share those doubts with the Christian community, with the community of people who allow you to do that in grace and love. And one day you, too, will hear from Jesus personally, take a look, I'm here. And you will be moved to the place where you will say, my Lord and my God. Amen.