

"Resurrection Hope in the Midst of Doubt"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(John 20:19-29)

Introduction.

There was once a 9-yr-old boy named Joey who was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School that day. Joey answered, "Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge, and all the people walked across it safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters and call in an air strike, and they sent in bombers to blow up the bridge, and all the Israelites were saved."

The little boy's mother looked at him strangely and asked, "Is that really what your teacher taught you?" And Joey replied, "Well, no, Mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"¹

There are some events in biblical history that are hard for some people to accept and believe, and we find one such event, and one group of people, and especially one such person in the passages of Scripture we've read together this morning. The event is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the people who had a hard time believing it were the disciples.

Our passage in Matthew says that when Jesus appeared to His disciples for the last time and gave them the Great Commission, they worshipped Him but some doubted. And the disciple who probably personified this doubt more than any other is Thomas. Thomas was a doubter. He's the patron saint of doubters, and his name seems to be forever linked with doubt – Doubting Thomas. The Bible never describes Thomas in this way. It only relates a particular moment of doubt in his life. And yet the epithet continues to be tied to this follower of Christ.

However, I believe that Thomas' doubt actually brings comfort to those of us who struggle with a fragile faith, or who wrestle with maintaining our intellectual integrity in the face of the claims of Christianity. And the reason for this is because, if we're honest, we see ourselves in Thomas and the other disciples who doubted, and we discover that we're not the only ones who have had a hard time believing in Jesus and His resurrection at times.

This morning there are three matters in particular that I want you to consider with me. 1) The nature of doubt; 2) the limits of doubt; and 3) when doubt becomes belief.

I. The Nature of Doubt.

"Now Thomas (called Didymus [which means "twin" - Thomas was a twin]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it'" (Jn. 20:24,25).

Thomas had difficulty believing the report of his fellow disciples, and he doubted that Jesus had really risen from the dead. Perhaps he thought that the claim that Christ had risen was just the deluded wish-fulfillment of a few people who were unstable because of their grief, and they needed to fabricate a resurrection in order to console themselves and vindicate their naive faith. So he wanted proof. He wanted to put his finger in the nail wound of Jesus' hand, he wanted to put his hand into the gash in Christ's side.

In these words of Thomas, I think we discover the three-fold nature of doubt. First, notice that doubt is conditional. "*Unless I see it with my own eyes, and touch it with my own hands, I won't believe.*" That's what Thomas said. There was a provisional quality to it. "*Unless....*" We look for proof, we want explanations, and unless they're forthcoming, we have a reluctance to believe.

Notice also that doubt is personal. "*Unless I....*," said Thomas. Doubt is a personal thing, and we find ourselves wrapped up in the middle of the struggle. It's not just anyone's intellectual objections with which I wrestle, they are *my* objections, *my* doubts, *my* questions. But if we're not careful, the focus can become too inward, too personal, and we begin to lose objectivity. So concerned about ourselves, we fail to see the forest for the trees, and we can trip up over the root of truth that's right in front of us.

The final aspect of doubt I would mention is that it is rarely satisfied. Mark Buchanan, who is a pastor in British Columbia, wrote a wonderful article entitled "The Benefit of the Doubt." And in that article, he writes, "...the basic flaw of all doubt is that it can never be fully, finally satisfied. No evidence is ever quite enough. Doubt always wants to consume, but never consummate. It clamors for an answer, it demands proof, but it often doubts even when that proof is offered. If we are not careful, doubt is like an appetite gone wrong – its craving increases the more we try to fill it, and it turns into unbelief."²

In 1997 the astronomer Carl Sagan developed cancer. He was a man of science, not faith. When he learned of his terminal illness, he let his friends know that he didn't want prayer, instead he wanted proof. Sadly, he died waiting for the proof. Christians tried to talk to him, and they did pray for him. Before he died, Sagan had a conversation with a friend who was a Presbyterian pastor, the Rev. Joan Brown Campbell.

He said to her, "Joan, you're so smart, why do you believe in God?" She found that a rather surprising question from someone who had no trouble believing in the reality of black holes in space which no one has ever observed. Sagan responded that he just knew they were there because the calculations seemed to indicate that it was true. So Joan said to him, "Carl, you're so smart, why don't you believe in God?"³

Doubt is usually conditional, it's personal, and it is rarely fully satisfied. But that's the nature of doubt, isn't it?

II. The Limits of Doubt.

Doubt has its limits. On some occasions doubt can be a shot in the arm to one's faith, and it can be a cleansing and invigorating force. However, it can also quickly turn corrosive or cancerous. It can soon become an evasion of the truth or a smoke screen behind which we simply try to hide.

I recall that before I became a Christian many years ago, I had all kinds of objections to Christianity. I was disturbed by the hypocrisy I saw in the church. I wondered how people could be so sure about an historical event that took place nearly 2000 years ago, and I doubted the claims of Christianity. And yet, as I came to see, these objections were really intellectual smoke screens behind which I was hiding, and the real issue was that I wanted to run my own life and I thought that I could do a better job of it than God could. However, eventually I discovered I was completely wrong.

We live in an age of skepticism, and the cult of scientism dominates the intellectual landscape of our world in so many ways today. The strength of these things is beginning to lose their grip on this post-modern world of ours, but they still have a stronghold, especially in academia. Many people think that the job of the skeptic is to question and doubt everything. However, the word "skepticism" has an interesting etymology. It really means "to look at a matter closely, to scrutinize, and to study with great care and in minute detail."

Mark Buchanan writes that he once met a man who told him that he didn't believe the Bible because he was a skeptic. But when Mark asked him if he had ever read the Bible, the man said, "No, not really. I told you, I'm a skeptic. I don't believe it." But that isn't skepticism. It's just the opposite. It's a refusal to investigate, to scrutinize, and ponder deeply.

Skepticism and doubt should never be an excuse for evasion or an alibi for laziness. Again, Buchanan writes, "Any skeptic worthy of the name is both hunter and detective, stalking the evidence, laying ambush, rummaging for clues, dredging the river bottom, wiretapping phone lines, setting traps. Skeptics are passionate about finding truth out. True skeptics want to believe, but safeguard against the hypnotic power of that wanting, and so they test."⁴

If you're not a believer in Jesus Christ, I encourage you to study the evidence for the resurrection yourself. Read the life of Jesus in the gospels, and be open and honest in your search for truth. I think you'll find that Jesus is a very fascinating person who is worthy of your respect and, more importantly, your trust. I think you'll also discover that there is ample evidence for believing in the historicity of the resurrection, because there is nothing else that can explain the radical turnabout of the disciples, the writing of the NT, and the existence of the Church today. Only the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ can account for these things.

Blaise Pascal, the great French physicist and philosopher, once wrote, "The very evidences of our faith are of such a nature that they make as much sense, if not more, as evidence to the contrary, so that it is malice of the heart and not reason that causes men not to believe it."⁵

In other words, Pascal said that while the propositions of Christianity cannot be proven empirically, they are nevertheless reasonable to believe, and, if we're honest, they appeal to the mind. Therefore, ultimately it is an unwillingness to believe that causes people to reject the faith and not the lack of credibility of Christianity.

We need to be careful that we distinguish between honest doubt and unbelief. Doubt says, "I *can't* believe;" unbelief says, "I *won't* believe." Doubt is honest; unbelief is obstinate. Doubt looks for light; unbelief is content with darkness. There are limits to how far you can go with that kind of doubt.

III. When Doubt Became Belief.

"Then Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to Him, 'My Lord, and my God!'" (Jn. 20:27,28).

The Sunday after Easter, the Lord appeared to His disciples again, and this time Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Christ appeared in their midst, and after greeting His followers, He looked straight at Thomas and invited the disciple to carry out the tests he had listed as conditional for belief that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Christ accommodated the doubter's questions, and He urged Thomas to make His faith sure.

However, in the end Thomas wasn't quite the skeptic he thought he was, and at the sight of Jesus all of his doubts vanished. Thomas found that he didn't need to apply any of his tests, and in amazement and worship he said, "My Lord, and my God!" The doubter became a believer, and in that instant Thomas uttered the true confession of faith that has been a model for all disciples of Jesus Christ who would come after him. He acknowledged that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and he bowed before Christ as the Lord of his life.

What enabled Thomas to overcome his doubts? What was it that changed his mind? Was it that Jesus was able to walk through locked doors? Was it that the Lord knew everything Thomas had said a week before in laying out the conditions for believing? Or was it that Jesus accommodated his weak faith in meeting those very conditions?

Perhaps all of these were involved to some extent, but I think what really captured Thomas' heart and changed his mind were the wounds of Jesus. When Christ appeared to the disciples, He showed them His scars, and in showing them His scars they knew Him. No halo, no sounding of trumpets, just scars. And it was in the wounds He bore on the cross of Calvary that the disciples knew how much Jesus really loved them.

Have you come to the place where you have seen the scars of Jesus which He bore for you? Have you responded to that love by saying, like Thomas, "My Lord and my God"? This passage in John 20 ends with these words, *"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name"* (Jn. 20:30,31).

Conclusion.

Earlier I spoke about Carl Sagan. Despite the best medical treatment, the great astronomer developed pneumonia and eventually died. And when he passed away, Sagan's wife issued this statement: "There was no deathbed conversion, no appeals to God, no hope for an afterlife, no pretending that he and I, who had been inseparable for 20 years, were not saying goodbye to each other forever." She was asked, "Didn't he want to believe in God?" And she answered, "Carl never wanted to believe; he wanted proof."⁶ I think that is one of the saddest statements I've ever read.

Jesus' concluding words to Thomas should serve as a warning to all of us that the quest for proof is not necessarily the path of God's blessing. Our Lord said to Thomas, *"Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed"* (Jn. 20:29). In the end, it will be our encounter with the risen Christ, and not simply the proof of His resurrection, which takes hold of our hearts and captures our imaginations, and that makes all the difference in the world.

I close with this. Alexander White was one of Scotland's greatest preachers in the 20th century. One day he noticed that a famous scientist began attending worship services at his church. White resolved that he would do everything in his power to win the man to Christ, and for the next several weeks his sermons were of the sort that he thought would appeal to the scientific mind.

One day the scientist came to see the pastor and said that he wanted to join the church. Dr. White asked him what had convinced him that this was something he should do. The pastor hoped that the famous scientist would mention the compelling nature of his sermons, how they had removed all doubt, but the scientist never mentioned them. Instead, he told how an elderly woman spoke to him on the steps of the church one Sunday, and she asked him, quite simply, "Sir, are you a Christian?"

The scientist replied, "Well, I am thinking about it."

Then the woman said, "Oh, do come further in than that. Jesus Christ means the world to me!"

The scientist then said to Alexander White, "As I looked at her radiant face with those shining eyes, I knew that she had a secret which I didn't have, and I wanted it with all my heart."⁷

This Easter, let's celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and His presence in our lives through the person and power of His Holy Spirit. Let's take comfort in the fact that He accommodates our frail faith and even shatters our doubts with His conquering love and powerful presence. Jesus has overcome the grave, and He has promised to give us new life in Him. Let's rejoice in the victory He accomplished on our behalf nearly 2000 years ago. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹A friend sent this to me over the internet.

²Mark Buchanan, "The Benefit of the Doubt" in *Christianity Today*, April 3, 2000, p. 65.

³Taken from Kenneth Woodward, "Is God Listening?" in *Newsweek*, March 31, 1997, p. 64.

⁴From "The Benefit of the Doubt" in *Christianity Today*, April 3, 2000, p. 64.

⁵Source unknown.

⁶Taken from Kenneth Woodward, "Is God Listening?" in *Newsweek*, March 31, 1997, p. 64.

⁷Adapted from Lection Aid, April-June 1997, p. 3.