



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Well, this morning I want to add myself to the chorus of preachers who have come to the defense of Thomas in recent years, because upon closer review, in my mind, he is no more of a doubting Thomas than the rest of them. No more of a doubting Thomas than the rest of us.

For starters, today's gospel is in many ways a beat for beat replay of Mary's own attempts to convince the disciples that Jesus has risen. Remember, it's Easter Sunday still in our reading. Mary has just discovered the empty tomb where Jesus appeared to her. And He tells her to go and tell the rest of the disciples.

And while John doesn't give us the details of their reaction, it's pretty clear they don't believe her because later in the same night, where do we find them? Hiding behind locked doors, huddled in fear. And when Jesus appears to them, did they recognize Him? Did they rejoice? Did they drop to their knees and worship Him? No. Just like Thomas, it's only after they see the wounds that it becomes real and it's only then that they become overjoyed at having seen the Lord.

In the same way that Thomas couldn't believe them, they couldn't believe Mary until they had seen some evidence. And if you think about it, it's a pretty normal response, isn't it? Think about your own life when you have received unbelievably good news, something totally unexpected, something that's a complete reversal of what you thought things were going to be. What was your reaction? Was it disbelief? Did you wonder if it was too good to be true? Did you ask somebody to pinch you to make sure you weren't dreaming?

I got some pretty good news recently regarding the possible forgiveness of some of my student loans, thanks to a public service program that I applied for years ago, and I am still not sure I believe it. I got the notice a couple of weeks ago, and yet I'm still going back to that website every day just to make sure. Were there some details I missed? Was there a fine print somewhere? Another shoe to drop?

I think that's perfectly normal to be in a state of disbelief when we receive news that's hard to believe. And that gets to my larger point here because I don't want to just defend Thomas. I want to defend doubt itself. Specifically the role of doubt in our faith because derisively referring to him as a doubting Thomas,

perpetuates a misconception that doubt is something to be ashamed of, that it's something we ought to avoid or even be afraid of.

I see it all the time in classes or small groups where we are reluctant to admit our doubts for fear of being shamed or perhaps judged. And when we do share them, I see how we sometimes want to rush in and try to solve it and try to explain it away as quickly as possible, as if doubt were a kind of virus, as if it was like a kind of religious rebellion that can spread if left unchecked.

At coffee hour not too long ago, someone mentioned to me that they had recently heard a really good question of faith, one that caused them to question their belief in God. And I was like, really? Bring it on. And just as he was about to share it, he stopped and he said, you know, are you sure? Worried that he might shake my faith as well. Are doubts like that? Are they like a bad cold? Can they be contagious? By the way, if you want to know what that question was, you're going to have to come to coffee hour and you can ask me. It wasn't that bad. It was a good question, but it wasn't that bad.

The point is, we can get uncomfortable around doubt. My doubts or your doubts. Because it's gotten into our head that somehow doubt is the opposite of faith. That it can be a threat to our faith when in fact doubt can be essential to our faith. Some have even argued that the opposite of faith isn't doubt at all. The opposite of faith is actually certainty. Because when you have absolute certainty, when you have it all figured out, when there are no more questions to ask, when there are no more holes left to fill, there's nothing you have to put your trust in. And when you don't have to put your trust in it, then there's not a lot of need for faith.

And I tend to agree with this view because without a doubt, without doubt there's nothing to struggle with. There's nothing to wrestle with, and that goes right back to the beginning. The word "Israel" means those who wrestle with God. And if you look back upon scripture, it is filled with believers wrestling with God, wrestling with doubt. When God tells Abraham that his wife Sarah will bear a son in her old age, Abraham laughs at God. When God appears to Moses and tells him he will lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses says to God, you've got the wrong guy. Even Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane falls to the ground pleading with God that this cup might be passed from Him.

Doubt is not a sign of a weak faith, but of a faith that is alive, that's engaging us, that's challenging us, that's pushing us, that is threatening to change us. And I know it doesn't always feel that way, at least not in the moment, not when doubt has us in its grip. It doesn't feel very faithful, does it? We don't feel safe. We don't feel secure. Our connection to God can feel severed. It can make us feel alone, even abandoned. It can even make us feel angry or foolish for having

given our heart over to God only to find ourselves with more questions than answers.

So if doubt is an essential part of our faith journey, and yet can feel like the absence of faith, how can they coexist? How can doubt deepen our faith rather than derail it? One place to begin is to remind yourself that those feelings that come with doubt, those feelings of confusion and despair, and feeling lost, they are themselves a sign of faith. They are a sign that no matter how bad it feels, we are still feeling.

And so we're not out of the game yet because we still care. We still hunger. We still hunger for answers. We still hunger for a truth we can rely on. We still hunger for God's love once more. The struggle itself can remind us that no matter how lost we might feel, we haven't quit. And if we haven't quit, then we are still in relationship with God, even if it doesn't feel like it at the moment.

Another thing we can do when faced with doubt is to remind ourselves of our past struggles with doubt. You know, the ones that we can look back on today and wonder how did we ever get so worked up over that? And we can remind ourselves what we learned from them. Were they attempts to control and manipulate God and control the world in reality? Was it more about our ego and pride not getting its way? Were my doubts more about my anxieties that God wasn't solving the way I wanted? Were my troubles multiplied by my running after other gods, as we heard in the psalm? Was I blaming God when the idols of my own making didn't deliver?

Whatever they were, we can remind ourselves that we eventually worked through them. We can remind ourselves that we eventually rose above them, or in some cases simply outgrew them. And most importantly, we can remind ourselves how our doubts of the past were a catalyst, how they helped us and led us to a new understanding of God in the present and how they can do so again.

Finally, whenever I struggle with doubt, I remind myself to reach out. For whatever reason, my struggles with faith and doubt always start off as something that I think I need to solve on my own. But always, always, they end up being something that I can only overcome with others. Invariably, one of you says something, or you do something, or you offer a new perspective, or you show me something that I had forgotten and it rekindles my faith. It fuels my faith so that I can be there for you when you need it. The journey of faith was never something we were intended to do alone. We need each other to be encouraged, to be challenged, to offer new perspectives and new approaches, and sometimes we just need each other's faith to carry us.

Notice in our gospel today, when, despite his doubts, what does Thomas do? He hangs in there. He stays with his fellow disciples. He waits an entire week hoping against hope that they might be right. Whatever despair, whatever disbelief he was experiencing, he stays in relationship. He leans on his friends and he leans into his hunger. His hunger to see Jesus again, to be in relationship with Him once again. It was that hunger for God that kept him in the room and it is that hunger that showed his deep faith long before he saw the wounds.

Perhaps this is why the great Christian mystics never had a problem with doubt. For them, it was never something to be ashamed of or avoided, but met head on, because for them it was a pathway to a deeper experience of God. One that would be found not in certainty, but in new openness to God's mystery and God's grace. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe." That is not intended to shame Thomas for his doubts, but as a reminder to us all that the journey of faith, the destination is never, and was never about certainty, but was always about having more love.

The journey of faith was never about getting the right answers or having the right beliefs. It was always a journey towards more love. As Paul says to the Galatians, nearly everything in the church that we tend to think is so important, everything we spend so much time fretting about and arguing over, our doctrines, our beliefs, our creeds, our liturgies, our theologies, all of it, all of it will eventually be swallowed up in something far deeper. None of them will have the last word because the last word is love. Nothing else matters, Paul says, except faith expressed in love. When we let our doubts be a sign for our hunger for God and our hunger for one another, doubt is no longer the death of faith, but the birth of a new kind of faith. A faith that is beyond beliefs. A faith that trusts our hunger for God more than our ideas about God. A faith that is expressed in love.

Amen.