

Doubt and Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, and welcome to worship at Church of the Advent again. If we haven't had a chance to meet yet, my name is Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here, and as Tommy said, if you're new here, we'd love to meet you after the service.

We are in the second week of Easter, a season where we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. And one of the beautiful gifts, I think, of the Anglican tradition is that we don't just celebrate Easter for one day, but we celebrate it for a whole season.

Because that is what the resurrection of Jesus deserves. It deserves a whole season. But it's interesting when we think about the passage this morning, that in that kind of season where we celebrate something so central to our faith, our faith in the resurrection of Jesus, that we would come to a passage about a story of somebody who doubts.

The story we read in John 20 is about Thomas, who's one of Jesus' disciples, who initially doubts that the resurrection could possibly happen.

And on one hand, this story I think is very surprising, that one of the people who knew Jesus the best, who was closest to him, who saw him do ministry, who saw him do miracles, would also be one of the most skeptical.

[1 : 2 3] But on the other hand, I think this story is also a breath of fresh air, because I think a lot of us, to some degree, can resonate with Thomas.

Whether we would say that we're a skeptic, or we're an agnostic, perhaps even atheist, or whether we've been a Christian for a long time, we can all resonate with Thomas to some degree, because we all experience doubt in some form or another.

Sometimes we can have doubts that are more intellectual. We might wonder whether belief in God is rational, whether belief in God is true, whether we can square things like miracles and the resurrection with reason and science.

For others of us, from time to time, doubt might be more experiential or emotional. We may not doubt the truth of our faith, but maybe the particular season that we're in, maybe God feels absent.

We might wonder, why is this difficult thing happening to me? Does God really love me and care about me? That's a different kind of doubt. There's a range of doubts that we can experience in this life, and often they come, different kinds of doubts can come in different seasons of our lives.

[2 : 4 3] And so the question then is, what do we do? What do we do with our doubts? And this passage here in John 20 is an excellent case study for that question, because I think it speaks to everybody.

Whether you're a lifelong Christian, or whether you're a skeptic or agnostic, whoever you are, it speaks to everybody who has questions about truth.

And what this passage teaches us about what to do with our doubts is it shows us three things. It shows us how to uncover our doubts. It shows us how to consider the evidence, and how to remember his scars.

How to uncover our doubts, how to consider the evidence, and how to remember his scars. But before we look at that, this passage this morning, let's pray together. Our God and Father, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that this story is in the Bible.

And I pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit that you would speak to us and enlighten our minds and our hearts about what to do with our doubts. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.

[3 : 55] So first of all, the first thing I think that this encounter with Thomas and Jesus shows us is how to uncover our doubts. In this scene, John really kind of sets the scene for us that in the few days after the resurrection, most of the disciples have had a chance to see Jesus alive.

But for whatever reason, John doesn't tell us why, Thomas, the disciple, hasn't had a chance to see Jesus alive yet. And the rest of the disciples are telling him, hey, look, we've seen Jesus alive.

Like, this is amazing. But even though they are all telling him the same thing, he is not convinced. Verse 25, Thomas says this. He says, 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.

I'm not gonna believe until I see the evidence. And to be honest, I think that Thomas sometimes gets a bad rap because sometimes he's referred to as Doubting Thomas.

You know, probably not the senior superlative he was looking for, you know, right? But the nickname Doubting Thomas that he has acquired over church history, I think communicates a couple unhelpful things, probably unintentionally.

[5 : 25] That the desire for evidence, for believing, is somehow a weakness. Or that to have doubt is somehow to have a lack of faith. I think those things are unhelpful.

Because if I'm being honest, I probably would have reacted in the exact same way. Somebody that I know, being raised back to life after I saw him tortured and beaten and killed, yeah, right.

There's no way that I'm gonna believe that without seeing evidence for it. And maybe you would identify with Thomas a lot too. Maybe you would say, you know, I'm a person of reason.

I'm a person of science. You know, this is why I find it really hard to believe in God. I find it really hard to believe in something like miracles or the resurrection because I don't see any evidence for it. And what this story invites us to do is to not turn off our brains when we come to church.

It invites us to not minimize or ignore our questions or our doubts, but actually to think about them more deeply. Not to be less rational, but to be more rational.

[6 : 38] Not to want less evidence for believing, but to want more evidence for believing. And so let's think for a moment, let's think together about the question and the objection that Thomas raises here.

Because it's a good and honest question. But let's put it in more modern terms. I think if we were to put Thomas's question and objection in more modern terms, I think it would go something like this.

You know, a lot of people say, you know, science, empirical evidence, is the only reliable way to know truth. Other people might have beliefs or faith, and that's all good, but at the end of the day, that's just an opinion.

In order to really know something is true, you need empirical evidence. You need data, you need facts. But let's look for a second at that statement. Science or empirical evidence is the only reliable way to know something.

And let's think about that for a second. Is that a statement that you can prove scientifically? It's not.

[7 : 59] Why not? Because it's not a scientific claim. It's a philosophical one. It's a statement of epistemology. It's a statement of how we know what we know. The problem with saying that the only way to know something through empirical evidence is that you can't prove that that statement is true through empirical evidence.

And that's because at its core, it's a belief. It's an article of faith. Now, that doesn't mean it's not true. It just means you can't prove it empirically.

And what we all have to be honest about is that at our core, we all have beliefs that we can't prove it. We all have beliefs that we can't prove empirically. It's not as if religious people have faith and non-religious people have reason.

No, everybody has faith and everybody has reason because on some level, everybody is reasoning and trying to live their lives in alignment with their core beliefs.

Maybe it's a belief like science or empirical evidence is the only reliable source of truth. Maybe it's a belief like Jesus literally bodily rose from the dead.

[9 : 11] But whoever you are, faith and reason are always working together. And that's why if you uncover your doubt, if you look underneath it, what you actually find is a belief.

What you actually find is faith. Doubt can't exist in a vacuum. It's always resting on, it's always standing on some core belief.

And the question is, what core belief is your doubt standing on? What is it based on? And does it hold up? Is it strong enough?

Thomas' core belief was what? Dead people don't come back to life. But when he was confronted with new evidence, he had to reconsider his core beliefs.

And that's what we have to do as well. All of us are like Thomas to some degree. Whether we have intellectual or emotional or spiritual doubts, we all need reasons and evidence for our core beliefs.

[10 : 21] And that's not a weakness. That's being human. So first of all, we need to uncover our doubts. We need to look underneath and see what's the core belief underneath.

But secondly, we have to consider the evidence. We have to consider the evidence. In verse 26, John tells us that all the disciples were gathered together in a room. And he says, the doors were locked.

And suddenly, Jesus just appears among them and says to them, peace be with you. And we can only imagine what that moment felt like. I have to imagine that there was probably dead silence in the room.

You know, jaws dropping on the floor, disciples just looking at each other wide-eyed going, what in the world just happened? Like, how did he do that? The doors were locked and he just appeared.

And as everyone is still processing in the silence of that moment, in the awe of that moment, Jesus turns his attention to Thomas.

[11 : 29] And notice the way that he engages with Thomas in verse 27. He says, put your finger here and see my hands.

And put out your hand and place it in my side. Stop doubting and believe. Jesus doesn't scold Thomas for his doubts.

He doesn't shame him. He doesn't ignore his presence in the room. He doesn't say to him, stop trying to be so rational and scientific. Just have more faith.

No, that's not what he says at all. He invites Thomas to engage with his whole being and to honestly examine the truth for himself. And as Thomas reaches out his hand and touches the nail marks in Jesus' hand and touches his side, the only way that he can respond is by saying, my Lord and my God.

It's through engaging his doubt that Thomas moves into deeper faith. And if you're here this morning and if you're someone who has honest doubts, honest questions about whether all of this is true or not, you're in good company.

[12 : 58] You're in good company with Jesus because Jesus doesn't dismiss or scold those who have honest questions and doubts. No, he engages them honestly. And he invites them to see for themselves.

The Christian life isn't about having blind faith. That's naive. It's also not about having zero doubts because you've researched all the answers and you know everything.

That's unrealistic. To be a Christian is to be someone who considers and wrestles with the reasons for believing and through that process that God's love comes into a deeper faith.

And I would say that that has definitely been true in my life. Throughout my life, I've had both intellectual doubts and more experiential, emotional, spiritual doubts. In the times in my life when I have worked through my questions and my doubts by reading books, through conversations with others, by studying scripture through prayer, through prayer, the times in my life when I have engaged my doubts the most have led me to a deeper faith.

And so all of this then raises a really honest question, I think. Because we're talking about the resurrection, it's worth asking, so what historical evidence do we have for believing in something like the resurrection?

[14 : 26] I think that's a great question. Unlike Thomas, we unfortunately don't have the resurrected body of Jesus to look at and touch. But we do have lots of good historical evidence that the resurrection actually happened.

Pastor Tommy mentioned two aspects of this evidence last week in his sermon. So I'm gonna review the two aspects that he mentioned and I'm gonna add a third. First of all, one of the first aspects of historical evidence for the resurrection we can think about is this.

Nobody in the first century was expecting a resurrection to happen. And yet people suffered incredibly for it. The idea of someone being raised back to life didn't fit anybody's metaphysical categories.

The Greeks believed that the soul was good, but that the body was a prison. And that upon death, the soul was released and freed from the body. And so in Greek thought, the idea of a bodily resurrection wouldn't have just been irrational, it would have been detestable because the body was a prison.

Jews believed in a corporate resurrection for the whole people of God at the end of time, along with the renewal of all creation, but they weren't expecting the resurrection of one person in the middle of history.

[15 : 49] And so nobody was looking for this to happen. Nobody was expecting it. And yet, people gave their lives to a message that had absolutely no social benefit that made them suffer incredibly and many of them gave their lives and died for it.

And you've got to do something with that. You've got to do something with that piece of evidence. The second piece of evidence that Tommy mentioned last week that I think is worth repeating is that regrettably, tragically, in the first century, we know from history that a woman's testimony was not admissible evidence in a court of law.

And here's why that matters. And here's why that matters. Because if you're trying to convince people in the first century of this extraordinary claim that somebody rose from the dead, you wouldn't include the testimony of women.

It would actually hurt your argument. It would hurt your credibility. But this is exactly what we see in the Gospels, that women were the very first witnesses, eyewitnesses to the resurrection. And you have to ask the question, why would you include this detail if it would actually hurt your credibility?

If it would be self-defeating? The most probable explanation is that the Gospel writers were simply writing what happened. They were telling the truth, even though they knew it could have hurt their credibility.

[17 : 15] You've got to do something with that. The third piece of historical evidence I think we should consider is the widespread nature of eyewitness testimony. The widespread nature of eyewitness testimony.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul says that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to hundreds of people. Why does he do that? Well, he's saying, don't just believe what I'm telling you on blind faith.

Don't just take my word for it. If you're skeptical of what I'm talking about in the resurrection, go talk to these people. They're still alive. You can go interview them and ask them, and they will tell you what they heard and saw.

They're the sources. If you want to look into this further, the best scholarly work on this is a book called Jesus and the Eyewitnesses by Richard Baucom.

And he does a lot of things in that book, but one of the things that he does that is really fascinating is he draws on the insights from modern psychology about recollective memory.

[18 : 19] And what he says is that, based on what modern psychology tells us about how recollective memory works, we have every reason to trust that the eyewitnesses in the Gospels were highly reliable sources.

And so if you're going to honestly engage the fact of the resurrection, you're going to have to do something with the hundreds and hundreds of eyewitness sources we have. You can't simply ignore them. Now I realize that that was a very brief sketch of the historical evidence.

I'm happy to recommend some books, including that book by Richard Baucom that I mentioned, if you want to explore this further. But here's the point. Here's the point.

Thomas had to examine for himself the evidence for the resurrection. And when he did, he had to allow that to inform his core beliefs. Are you willing to do the same thing?

Are you willing to consider the historical evidence for the resurrection, even if it might change your core beliefs? Jesus doesn't ask us to check our brain at the door.

[19 : 32] He doesn't dismiss our doubts or questions. He invites us to check our brain at the door. He doesn't dismiss our doubts or questions. He invites us into an honest conversation. He says, here I am.

See for yourself. Ask away. Investigate. Explore. You might believe that it's totally impossible that Jesus could have risen for the dead.

But I invite you, don't believe that unless you have good reasons for it. Don't doubt the resurrection on blind faith without considering the evidence.

Now I realize so far, we've mostly been talking about intellectual doubt. But what if our doubts are more emotional or experiential? Many of us here in this room might say, you know, I believe Christianity is true.

I believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but I'm having a hard time experiencing it. I'm having a hard time trusting in the goodness of God and His mercy and His love.

[20 : 43] Maybe you're in a difficult season. You're wondering, does God really love me? Does He really care? Does He really know? No. And what we need to do, what we need is perhaps not more historical evidence, what we need is to remember the scars of Jesus.

To remember the scars of Jesus. Here in this passage, Jesus not only invites Thomas to believe in Him, but to believe by touching the scars on His body.

The marks from the nails that pierced His hands on His side. And this is really remarkable if you think about this for a second. That Jesus in His resurrected glorified body still bears the marks of His crucifixion.

And I don't know about you, but this is totally not what I would have expected at all. If God had the power to raise someone from the dead, don't you think He would have had the power to heal a couple scars?

Right? This is not what I would have expected. Why did Jesus, why does He keep His scars in His resurrected body? There's a lot that we could unpack here on a deep theology of suffering.

[22 : 05] That the risen Christ still bears our wounds. But I think one reason based on this conversation, this encounter with Thomas, I think is directly related to our doubts.

I think that Jesus knew that some of the people who knew Him the best, who loved Him the most, who were some of His most faithful, committed followers, would still have questions and doubts from time to time.

Some of you have been following Jesus your entire life. And yet you still wonder if God is with you in difficult moments. Some of you would never doubt the historical resurrection of Jesus, but maybe you wonder if He can actually bring His resurrection power in your life today.

Like, can He actually help you change? Some of you might be utterly convinced your faith is true intellectually, but you might wrestle with, does God actually love you like He says He does?

I don't know the individual circumstances of your life, but I imagine that this is where some of us might be this morning, and eventually, I think inevitably, we all get to a place like this.

[23 : 31] It's that place in Mark 9, where the man comes to Jesus and says, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

And friends, that is the Christian life. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Help my unbelief. And I think this is one of the reasons why even in His resurrected body, Jesus still has scars as a way of identifying with us, of identifying with us in our suffering and in our doubt.

The scars of Jesus are the objective evidence that the one who has conquered sin and death and ascended to the right hand of the Father in glory and victory, the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords is not absent from our pain.

He's not aloof from our questions and our doubts. Amen. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace.

Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace.

[24 : 53] Peace. Peace. Peace. One more day. Peace. Peace. Peace.