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Doubt?

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~ Scripture: John 20:19-31 ~

ILLUS> A defendant was on trial for murder in Oklahoma. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a **trick**. "Ladies & gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within 1 minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom." He looked toward the court-room door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I, therefore, put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty." The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, they returned and pronounced a verdict of GUILTY. "But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door." Answered the jury foreman: "Oh, we did look. But your client didn't."

DOUBTS! They can be nagging. They can be overwhelming. They can even devastate your faith. Today we are going to go to God's Word to learn how to deal with doubts. We are going to look at the most famous doubter: THOMAS. He's not the only one:

- John the Baptist – In **Matthew 11 (vv. 2-3)**, John is in prison and he has a moment of doubt. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one was to come, or should we expect someone else?" This is the same one who announced Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". . .the one who said, "He is greater than me. I am not worthy to untie the thongs of His sandals". . .and also said very clearly, "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God". **[John 1:27,29,34]**
- The Disciples – In **Matthew 28 (vv. 16-17)**, the eleven go to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go (probably just before His Ascension). It says, "When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; *but some doubted.*" These guys had been with Jesus for 3½ years. They had seen him walk on water...raise the dead...heal the blind. They had seen him be crucified and then come back to life. It was back-n-forth with the disciples: between worship & doubt...trusting & questioning...hoping & worrying.
- Mother Teresa – It might surprise you to know that Mother Teresa was deeply tormented about her faith and suffered periods of intense doubt—not about the existence of God, but about the felt presence of God. She wrote in a letter to a pastor in 1979: "*Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, I listen and do not hear.*"¹

¹ From Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light, a collection of letters written to colleagues and superiors over 66 years (Doubleday, 2007).

➤ Billy Graham – As a young preacher, he went through a period of doubt about the Bible. If it wasn't God's Word, then he felt he didn't have a reliable message to give to people. After a period of intense searching and struggle, he did come away convinced that the Bible is indeed God's Word.² So, those of us who have ever struggled (or are now struggling) with doubt are in good company!

NARRATIVE

THOMAS, also known as Didymus (which means *the twin*), was one of the 12 Apostles. Although perhaps not as well known as Peter or John, millions of people are familiar with him by his popular nickname, "***Doubting Thomas***". His story is told in **John 20:19-31**.³

Despite the label that has been put on him, Thomas was not lacking in courage or loyalty. Couple weeks ago, I preached from **John 11**—the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. A little part of the story I passed over had to do with the disciples trying to keep Jesus from going to Bethany because of the danger from those in the area who had earlier tried to stone Him. But it's Thomas who pipes up and says: "*Let us also go, that we may die with Him*" (v. 16).

The one day Thomas misses church, wouldn't you know he misses an incredible blessing. Jesus met with the 11 in private and gladdened their hearts by just being with them. . .by telling them many things they needed to know. It was on this occasion that Jesus breathed on them and said: "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" See what he missed! No wonder we continue to meet and assemble together. When we come together on His holy day (the 1st day of the week—in remembrance of His resurrection), He will meet with us, speak to us, minister to us. . .and we build one another up in the most holy faith. Not something I want to miss; and I'm sure you don't want to either.

But Thomas did miss this one occasion when Jesus appeared to some of the apostles right after His resurrection. Why? Not exactly sure. But the other disciples tell him what has happened. . .

"Thomas, we were in that upper room where we'd been meeting. We locked the doors for protection. Then all of a sudden, Jesus appears. 'Peace, Shalom,' he says. Then he shows us his hands. There are jagged holes where the nails had been. He pulls back his tunic and shows us where the spear penetrated his chest. But he isn't weak or sick or dying. He is alive. . .raised from the dead!"

"I don't believe it," barks Thomas. "I don't believe a word of it. You're seeing what you *want* to see. Jesus is dead! I saw him die, and part of me died with him. He's dead, and the sooner you accept that fact, the better off you'll be. Give it up!"

Peter pleads with him. "Thomas, I saw him myself. I tell you, he was as real as you are!"

Thomas is cold. He has an edge in his voice that cuts like ice. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

But Thomas' anger cools, and by the next Sunday evening he is eating with his fellow disciples in that same locked room. Suddenly, Jesus is standing among them once again, and speaks:

"*Shalom, peace be with you.*"

All the blood drains from Thomas' face. Jesus turns to him and speaks plainly, without any hint of rancor or sarcasm: "*Put your finger here. See my hands.*" Jesus holds out his scarred hands for him to examine. Thomas recoils. Not out of fear, really, but from a mixture of amazement and revulsion.

Jesus begins to open his outer garment and says, "*Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*"

² From *My Answer*, by Billy Graham. Go to Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's website: www.billygraham.org.

³ This paraphrasing of **John 20:19-31** is based on *Learning Faith from Doubting Thomas* by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson (www.leaderu.com/theology/doubting_thomas.html).

Thomas is weeping now and then begins to sob out loud. Jesus reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder. Then Thomas slips to his knees and says in awe, “*My Lord and my God!*”

Thomas—*Doubting Thomas* as he is sometimes called—is the first disciple to put into words the truth that Jesus is both Lord + God. “Doubting Thomas” utters one of the truly great confessions of faith recorded in the Gospels; it ranks alongside Peter’s in **Matthew 16**.

What happens to him? Doubting Thomas does not stay a doubter. When he sees the risen Jesus, all that Jesus had taught over the years clicked in, and to his death Thomas was an outspoken advocate for his Lord.

Church tradition has it that he preached in ancient Babylon, near the Tigris & Euphrates Rivers (where IRAQ is today). Then he traveled to Persia (present-day IRAN), and continued to win disciples to the Christian faith.

Then he sailed south to Malabar on the **west coast** of INDIA—where he preached, established churches, and won many to Christ—including high caste Brahmins. There is some possibility that he may have baptized the Magi who visited Jesus in his infancy.

Later he traveled to the **east coast** of India, preaching relentlessly. He was martyred with a spear. His remains are under the Basilica of St. Thomas, built in his honor. Greg & Melissa Kuhn have visited that church in Chennai, India.

Thomas needed proof. Notice Jesus didn’t berate Thomas for his need of proof. Rather, He gave Thomas what he needed to enhance and encourage his faith. Jesus will give us what we need to come to faith or to restore belief. It may come through hearing a story about how God works. . . through a step by step search. . . through an answer to prayer. The presence of God may be manifest in a piece of music. . . or in the birth of a newborn child. God has many ways of revealing Himself to us and bringing us from doubt to faith.

What I want you to get this morning is that working through doubt is part of our spiritual growth.

Having doubts creates a crisis for many people who are seekers and as well those who are believers. Can I truly become or be a Christian with all these doubts? Great insecurity comes from doubts. [That’s why I put a **?** on this morning’s sermon title.] Because of what we fear “doubt” might reveal about us, we hold back saying anything. But the questions just won’t go away. They fester. They choke out our faith—and along with it, the peace, comfort, security, and strength we draw from it.

So, what can we learn about doubt and how to deal with it from this narrative?

- 1) Doubts are a part of faith. They do not disqualify us from following Jesus. A person can have doubts and be a Christian. If you’re a “seeker” today, and wondering, “Do I have to have all my doubts resolved and all my questions answered before I can follow Christ?” NO!
- 2) Let’s not confuse *faith* with *feelings*. I might not feel “high” all the time; I may even be in the valley—but that doesn’t mean I don’t have faith. It doesn’t mean that what I experienced when I was on the mountain-top wasn’t real. You can begin to wonder, “Maybe I don’t have faith. Maybe what I experienced wasn’t real.” I remember going through a period when I questioned whether I was really called to the ministry; or did I just call myself into it?
- 3) It’s OK to ask honest questions. Some people say we should never question our faith—but that’s not so. Jesus did not rebuke John the Baptist when he expressed his doubts and questioned his own faith.

- 4) It is not doubt that disqualifies, but unbelief. There is a difference: Doubt is *can't believe*; unbelief is *won't believe*. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness.

While some people have legitimate doubts, others hide behind their doubts while trying to poke holes in Christianity. They don't want it to be true—because then some things might have to change (e.g.: perhaps an immoral or self-obsessed lifestyle).

Let's be honest with ourselves this morning. Are our doubts "honest"? Or are they smokescreens that we throw up to hide the fact we really don't want to believe or to change? Are we in fact looking for excuses not to take Jesus more seriously?

Doubt is very much in fashion these days. We live in a very skeptical age (especially when it comes to Biblical claims and the claims of Christ & Christianity). Nowadays, doubt is seen as the most logical, responsible position.

Many of us wrestle with doubts and questions about the beliefs that have been handed down (from generation to generation):

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- Some of it is intellectual. We question whether or not God is real. We question what the church believes about God. We question whether Jesus actually (literally, physically) rose from the dead. What one of us, if we were in Thomas' shoes, wouldn't want to touch and to see for ourselves—just to be sure!?
- Some of it is emotional. We question the reality of God because we don't "feel" His presence (cf. Mother Teresa). . .we don't feel connected to Him.

We live in a day in which SCIENCE is supreme. It seems to explain everything. But does it? While science can tell us a great deal about the physical world, it cannot give us a full picture of what it is to be human. The physical sciences cannot tell us what *beauty* is...what *love* is...what the *meaning* of human existence is. The physical sciences cannot tell us about realities of the non-material world (like God). FAITH is another way of knowing. We all have a second set of eyes that don't operate same as our physical eyes.....

ILLUS> There's a neat illustration in Lee Stroble's book *The Case for Faith*:

[Reach into pocket and pull out a coin]. Do you know what's in my hand? A coin, someone might guess. Do you know that for sure? No. It's an OPINION. Faith is not an opinion.

Let me tell you, I've got a quarter in my hand. Do you believe that? Anyone?

I'm telling you it's true, but you haven't seen it. That's FAITH. Hebrews 11:1 says faith is "being certain of what we do not see".

Open hand and show quarter. Now it's no longer faith < KNOWLEDGE.⁴

Sometimes people think that faith is knowing something to be true beyond any doubt whatsoever, and so they try to prove faith through empirical (scientific) evidence. But that's the wrong approach. You can see and touch this quarter, so you don't need faith. But God, for His own reasons, does not subject himself to that kind of proof. He has revealed Himself. And you have to make a choice—whether to accept that revelation (by faith) or not.

THE POWER OF BELIEF

I want to say to you this morning that there is power in belief. Doubt does have a purpose. It is part of the journey. It is on the syllabus. Working through it is one way you grow in faith. From it, as we have seen in

⁴ Lyn Anderson in an interview with Lee Stroble for his book *The Case for Faith*.

Thomas' life, great confessions can come forth. . .and great things can be accomplished for God.

But what we really believe gives power to our living. What you believe is more than an idea or theory. It's a part of the driving force of your life. Beliefs have power! They shape our attitudes; they influence the way we think & talk. They guide what we choose to do (or not do), and they dictate what we support vs. what we oppose.

I don't want to minimize the role that doubt plays in our spiritual life. But what you believe... what you really believe... what you believe in has the power to guide and direct your life.

- The beliefs of Adolph Hitler + Nazi followers were the motivation behind their actions.
- The beliefs of the Apostle Paul, John Wesley, et.al. also gave direction to their lives and empowered their living → but with very different results.

So, the question of what we believe (really believe) is the most important question. This morn-ing we are BAPTIZING some "believers"—some are young in age, all are young in their faith journey. We **ask** some ancient questions having to do with what they believe...what they are willing to hinge their life on. But these questions are not for them alone. They belong to the whole congregation...to all who call themselves "Christians". These questions have to do with basic beliefs==the "stuff" that gives our lives focus and direction and empowers us to live as disciples of the living Christ.

And you're either of a mind to believe or not to believe. Which are you?