

"Encounters With Jesus"
"Thomas"

Years ago, two friends who went for a drive in the country. One of the men was sharing a dream with his friend, Art. They drove off the main road, through a grove of trees into a large expanse of land. The man said he had a dream for what he could do with this land, and that he planned to develop a family attraction there - but the venture would use all of his money. He told Art that the land on which they were standing bordered the proposed building site, and asked Art if he would consider buying up all of the adjacent land to build restaurants and hotels, because the land values would soar in just a matter of time. Art's only response was doubt and disbelief. He said to his friend, "You're crazy! Why would anybody drive for miles from the city to the middle of nowhere?" There was no way he was going to spend money on a crazy dream like that.

Well, the "Art" here was Art Linkletter, a prominent TV personality of the day. And Art's friend was named Walter - Walt Disney! And the dream he had came true – and became Disneyland. It all seemed unbelievable to Art Linkletter – and because of his doubt, he lost a whole ton of money!

Today we're going to look at Jesus' encounter with a man who doubted – who just couldn't believe what he was told could ever be true! The man's name is Thomas. Perhaps you remember the story. Jesus had risen from the dead. That evening – Easter evening – Jesus appeared to the disciples as they huddled together in fear and despair in an upper room. But Thomas, one of the Twelve, wasn't there. And when the disciples said, "We have seen the Lord!", remember how Thomas responded? "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 21:25).

Now it's a week later. The disciples are together again, and Jesus shows up! This time, Thomas is there! How does Jesus deal with Thomas? He doesn't chew him out for his lack of faith. He doesn't ridicule him in front of the others. But he doesn't ignore him either. He addresses Thomas directly. "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe'" (John 21:27). It's kind of gross, isn't it. Putting his finger in the nail hole in Jesus' hand, and placing his own hand in the wound in Jesus' side! Thomas doesn't do that. He's overawed with the reality that Jesus is alive, and in reverence says, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 21:29).

It's this event that gave rise to the phrase, "Doubting Thomas." "Don't be a doubting Thomas!" By the way, Thomas wasn't the only one of the 12 disciples who doubted that Jesus really did come back to life! Matthew writes: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but some doubted*" (Matthew 28:16-17). Mark tells us: "Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen" (Mark 16:14). So, Thomas doesn't have a corner on doubt in the face of Jesus' resurrection. It was hard, after seeing Jesus hanging on the cross – suffering horribly, all bloodied - to believe that He was really and truly alive again!

Thomas doubted. Do we have any other references to Thomas in the New Testament, to help us get a better picture of the kind of man he was? We have a few in the Gospel of John. (In the other gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the only mention of Thomas is in the listing of the names of the disciples). In John, chapter 14, Jesus is speaking to the disciples, shortly before His death. He tells them not to be troubled, to believe in Him. In the Father's house are many rooms or dwelling places. He's going to go and prepare a place for them, so they can be where He is. And they know the way to where He's going. Thomas speaks up: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5). His question prompts Jesus to say those timeless words: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

You could say Thomas is doubting, here. But I don't see it that way. He's humble and candid enough to say he doesn't understand what Jesus means. And I have a feeling that the others were wondering the same thing, but didn't have the courage to question Jesus.

There's also a reference to Thomas earlier in the Gospel of John, chapter 11. It's the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus doesn't go to Lazarus as soon as He's told Lazarus is ill. He delays for several days. When Jesus decides to go, the disciples try to stop Him. Lazarus lives in Bethany, very near Jerusalem. It's too dangerous to go there, because the authorities are out to kill him. When Jesus says, "No, I'm going", Thomas says to the other disciples, "Let's also go, that we may die with him!" (John 11:16). *Thomas had his doubts – but he also was a deeply devoted follower of Christ!*

In looking at Thomas we're reminded of the classic battle between trust and doubt, faith and unbelief! Last week in the message about Mary Magdalene, I talked about her faith, when she could have easily doubted. I'd like to think a bit more about faith, and doubt.

I pointed out in my last message how the mood of our American culture today is one of skepticism and doubt – much more so than a generation ago. Fewer people attending church. The fastest growing group when religious surveys are taken are those who claim no religious affiliation. The negative (even hostile) attitude people have towards Christians and the Church. The disdain towards traditional religious values that pervades the media. The skepticism and anti-religious mood that has pervaded our secular colleges and universities now for decades.

There is a phenomenon called *deconstruction* that's happening in our society now. Raising serious doubts about the Bible, and traditional Christian beliefs. Some people wind up losing their faith altogether—becoming atheists, agnostics. Some who've deconstructed remain civil and respectful toward Christians. Others cross the line and become disrespectful and disparaging toward Christians, ridiculing their beliefs & practices (that they themselves used to believe & practice).

Our Sunday School class dealt with this issue when we studied the book *Another Gospel*, by Alisa Childers – how she was invited by her pastor to be in a group that "studied the Bible", only to discover that the pastor was subtly leading them to question (and even ridicule) traditional

Christian beliefs. So, our present culture, in many ways, doesn't encourage faith in Jesus!

When we talk about faith, versus doubt, there is, of course, that *fundamental faith we must have in Christ for our salvation*. Is He all He claimed to be? Is He the only Savior of the world? Did He rise from the dead? Is He Lord of all creation?

There are some wonderful resources available to help us see the validity of Jesus and His claims. A classic is Lee Strobel's *A Case for Christ*. Lee was a newspaper reporter and an atheist, who set out to debunk Christianity. He wound up believing in Christ, and has become one of the great apologists of Christ and His claims. I'm reading a book now called *Cold Case Christianity*, by J. Warner Wallace. Wallace is a police homicide detective, who specializes in working with cold case murders. He was an atheist, who decided to look at the evidence for Jesus and His claims, approaching it as he would trying to solve a murder case. In the end, he became convinced that Jesus' claims were true, and he became a believer. He too has become a powerful witness for the Lordship of Christ.

But even when we've made that commitment to follow Jesus, the struggle between faith and doubt doesn't end, does it? Just like for Thomas! So let's say a bit more.

Doubt is normal. Even some of the greatest Christians can struggle at times with doubts. I think we'd all agree that Mother Teresa was one of the most spiritual and devoted servants of Christ in modern times. Yet, after her death, a book was published based on some of her letters. In them she revealed a terrible darkness within her, a profound doubt about her mission to the poor, and even the existence of God. She wrote, "The silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." A columnist, Leo Morris, writing about Mother Teresa' doubts, said, "Faith does not exist without doubt. The purpose of faith is not to deny doubt but to overcome it." (I like that!).

Honest questioning, sincere exploration, is important if our faith is to grow! A pastor shares that when he was ministering on a college campus one of the concerns he had to deal with was restoring college student's faith in God. So many young people told how when they shared their honest questions about Christianity with leaders in their churches, but so often the response they got was, "You just need more faith." Soon they stopped asking and stopped believing. My own faith, my understanding of Jesus, and the Bible, is different than it was when I was 17, or 30.

It's okay – in fact it's quite normal – to have honest doubts about God. Thomas was a passionate follower of Jesus, but he had his doubts. Isn't that us! In some areas of our life we trust God. But in other areas maybe we have doubts. Right? In some ways our faith is *strong and sure*; in others *weak and uncertain*. Seek to strengthen those weak areas. Which leads to my last point.

Focus on your faith, and not your doubts. We all struggle with doubts in our spiritual life, and it's important to be honest about them, but too much doubt can get in the way of a joyful, fulfilling life in Christ.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was a passionate follower of Jesus, an ordained priest in the Church of England, yet he contended with his own lack of faith – not even sure of his own salvation. Someone gave him this advice: "Preach faith until you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith!"

Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him." God wants to bless us and give us good things!

When you think about it, we exercise faith every day! When we drink water from a spigot or a bottle we trust it is clean and safe. When we drive our car we trust that the person in the vehicle coming towards us will stay on their side of the road (if not, we'd never drive). When you get a prescription, you trust that the pill you are taking is actually the medication you need. Your coming here to church today probably means you had faith that we would have a worship service planned, music and a sermon prepared.

Focus on your faith, not your doubts! I love this example of faith on the part of a teenager. A pastor, Gavin Reid, tells of a boy in his congregation who shattered his back, falling down the stairs at the age of one. For years, the boy went in and out of the hospital. When Gavin interviewed the boy in church, the boy remarked, "God is fair." Gavin asked the boy, "How old are you?" The boy replied, "Seventeen." "How many years have you spent in the hospital?" The boy answered, "Thirteen years." Gavin asked, "Do you think that is fair?" The boy replied, "God's got all of eternity to make it up to me."

Be honest about our doubts. But focus on the faith we do have, and ask God to make it stronger!

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Community United Methodist Church
April 7, 2024

