

Un-Certain Sermon Series  
Faith vs. Doubt – John 20:19-29  
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I thought I knew what to expect, but I was wrong. A few years ago, my daughter Sydney and I traveled to Northern Virginia, where I went to high school. It was the summer before her senior year in high school and I wanted to show her all the places that were meaningful to me at that age, the places where I spent most of my time – the mall, the movie theater, the ice cream shop, the other ice cream shop. And I wanted to show her the house where I lived Fort Lyon Drive in Lake Ridge.

The problem was, I had no idea who lived there. It had been 25 years since I had stepped foot in that house. So, I wrote a letter – on actual paper – that started, “Dear homeowner, you don’t know me but I used to live in your house and I’d like to come and see it again.” And, to my surprise, she responded graciously and invited Sydney and me to come and visit when we were in town.

When we got there, the outside of the house looked exactly the same. But once we stepped inside, everything had changed. The walls had all been painted with new colors, the furniture was rearranged differently, the hook where you were supposed to hang your keys was on a different wall. We went downstairs so I could see what used to be my room, and I couldn’t believe it. It was now a storage room, in complete disarray, trash and clothes everywhere. It looked exactly like it did when I lived there. When we left, I felt this sense of disorientation, like a time in my life that I had solidified in my mind had been completely upended.

Of course, life goes on. Things change. Walls get painted and furniture gets moved. We expect that in our lives, but do we expect that in our faith? What happens when what we thought we believed changes or gets challenged? During this sermon series, called “Un-Certain,” we’ve been exploring how certainty may actually be a sin because it doesn’t allow room for God’s spirit to move in our hearts and for our faith to grow. If you build walls around what you believe, you limit your capacity for experiencing God’s ongoing work. And when you have those walls, any challenge to your faith is repelled. There’s no room for doubt.

Should there be? Some people will tell you that faith and doubt are opposites, that if you have faith, you have no reason to doubt, and if you doubt, you must not be faithful. But I don’t think that’s true. I side with Rob Bell, who said that faith and doubt are excellent dance partners. Doubts are questions asked from inside faith, not outside of it. If you didn’t have faith, there would be nothing to doubt. But if you have faith and try to live it out, you’re going to run up against some really hard questions that will cause you to doubt.

This isn’t a new phenomenon for us. Doubt has been a part of faith since human beings were created. The Bible has in it a rich history of doubters, and in our story today, Thomas is just taking his place alongside other folks who dared to doubt. We call him Doubting Thomas as if that’s something to be ashamed about. But Doubting Abraham laughed in disbelief when God told him his 90-year-old wife Sarah was going to give birth. Doubting Moses told God several times that he had the wrong guy when God tapped him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. And Doubting Peter asked Jesus to let him walk across the Sea of Galilee, but got a nose full of sea water when he started to doubt. Abraham doubted. Moses doubted. Peter and the rest of the disciples doubted. So, if you have doubts about God, you’re in good company, and we can add

Thomas to that list. If those people doubted, and they made it into the Bible, then having doubts can't be all wrong, can it?

Rather than being wrong, I believe doubt is essential to faith, because it shows that we are letting our faith infuse and inform our real lives, and that's going to raise some questions. I had a spirited discussion this past week with a good friend who was wrestling with why God would let things happen. I'm sure there are a lot of folks in Florida who are asking that same question. But I asked him if he thought God had the power to stop storms from happening and airplanes from flying into buildings, and if God did, then why didn't God stop those things? And we just sat there with that question, questioning the scope of God's power and the reach of God's love. And we left without having any answers.

And I'm completely OK with that, because I believe genuine faith is a lot more about asking hard questions than it is having pat answers. Author Jacqueline Bussie calls this "audacious why-asking." And sometimes – most times – there's not an easy answer to asking "why." It would be nice if Jesus showed up like he did with Thomas, inviting us to see him and touch his wounds and know that he is real. But then he says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Folks, that's us. We are the blessed, those who have not seen and yet believe, no matter how imperfectly.

And yet, there are some believers who criticize doubters. We're called "weak" or "wishy-washy" because they believe faith is something that should be strong and sure and unchanging. I wish I could believe that way. It feels like a prerequisite for my job. Life would be so much easier if I didn't have to wrestle with questions, if I could read the Bible and understand clearly what God wants me to know and do. And yet, God gave us brains so that we could figure that out for ourselves, so that we could do the hard work of trusting in God, even when life bombards us with reasons to give up on faith.

Like watching a person we love and follow get killed on a cross. I mean, can you blame Thomas? He's not there when the resurrected Jesus first shows up, and when his friends tell him about it, he just can't believe it. To understand Thomas' doubts, you have to put yourself in his sandals. If someone came up to you and said, "The guy we watched die horrifically on the cross three days ago is walking through walls and bringing us words of peace," how can you respond with anything but, "I don't believe it?"

Thomas is not the only one with doubts in the face of overwhelming evidence of the resurrection. Did you catch what it said in Matthew, when the disciples were gathering around the risen Jesus? The writer tells us, "When the disciples saw the risen Christ, they worshipped him; but some doubted." Disciples pastor Fred Craddock says this passage should be translated another way: "They worshipped him and some doubted." They worshipped and they doubted. Do those two things go together? Worship and doubt? You bet they do. Even when the resurrected Jesus was standing right in front of them, they worshipped and they doubted. If the disciples couldn't be certain then, what hope do we have?

Our hope comes from accepting the fact that the opposite of faith isn't doubt, it's certainty. Faith means trusting in things you can't be certain about. Our doubt opens us up to God's movement, but certainty shuts that door. That's the curse of certainty. We'll endeavor to hold so fast to our certain beliefs that we'll do so at the expense of who God is calling us to be. God never calls us to stay the same, and yet to be open to change means admitting that we may not have all the right answers and that previously held beliefs may need to be reexamined and struggled with to see if God might be speaking a new word to us. We hold so tight to our certain

beliefs because we're afraid of the change that might come with letting go, and yet, when we look up, Christ is already out ahead of us, beckoning us to let go of what we think we know and trust in who he is calling us to be. We can either stick to what is comfortable and familiar, or we can open ourselves to the ways God's Spirit is moving through our lives.

If you are having doubts, I want to encourage you not to run from them, not to assume you're a bad Christian, but to lean into them, to ask the questions that are stirring in your heart. Peter Enns says that doubt happens when needing to be certain has run its course. Doubt means spiritual relocation is happening. It's God's way of saying time to move on. Enns then asks this question, and it's one that's been working on me ever since I read it: "Doubt can feel like darkness, but what if the darkness is actually a moment of God's presence that seems like absence, a gift of God to help us grow up out of our little ideas of God?" Maybe our doubts signify that our old way of thinking is dying and something new is being resurrected, something that may not look like it did before, something that may call us out of our complacency or certainty into new ways of trusting, of living, of loving.

That's hard for us because change is hard for us. The past few years are a perfect example. How many times have you said, "I just wish things would go back to normal"? You know, back when we could be certain about things? But there is no normal, there is no time when everything was good and we could be certain. That's an illusion we've created in our minds to escape the real questions we face today. Instead of normal, what we have is today with all its storms and viruses and violence and racism, and we have to figure out how in the world to trust in God in the midst of all of it. So, we do what we are doing. We worship and we doubt, and we trust God will show up in the midst of it to remind us that God is not calling us to be right, but to be faithful.

Our world is going to keep changing. What we thought we once knew for sure is going to be challenged over and over again. And when that happens, we're going to have doubts. That's a part of being human. My prayer is that we are willing to let go of the need to know and replace it with trust, that we are able to grow up out of our little ideas of God. Once, I thought I knew everything. Now, I have doubts. Thanks be to God.