

Faith Vs. Doubt  
John 20:19-31  
April 12, 2026  
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“Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and do you accept him as your Lord and Savior?” Those are the words I said when I joined First Christian Church in Jeffersonville, Indiana, in the early 90s, my first public confession of faith that articulated out loud a feeling that had been growing in my heart. Most Disciples churches ask this question when someone joins the church.

But not Crestwood. After a conversation I had with Sue Ann Cowgill, a founding member of this church and absolute spitfire of faith, I changed what I asked when someone joins our church family. Now I said, “Do you trust that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, do you accept him as your Lord and Savior, and do you promise to spend the rest of your life figuring out what that means?” Most people focus on the phrase added to the end, which acknowledges that faith is a lifelong journey and no one ever gets it right. I’m still trying to figure it out myself.

But that’s not the only change. The other one is more subtle but no less powerful. Instead of asking if a person believes if Jesus is the Christ, I ask them if they trust it. Belief vs. trust. Some may not hear a difference there, that believing is the same thing as trust, but I would disagree. I would boil down the difference to this. Belief is an intellectual assent, often based on facts or conviction. But trust is a deeper, emotional reliance that determines behavior. So, I can believe someone is a good person, but I may not trust them with my secrets. To do that, I need evidence.

So did Thomas. The disciples tell him the incredible news that Jesus, who was nailed to the cross just a few days before, is now awake and alive and walking through doors, and Thomas simply doesn’t believe them. It’s not that he didn’t like them; I’m sure they were pals. But in order to accept their news, Thomas needs more than second-hand accounts. He needs evidence. “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.”

I think Thomas has gotten a bad rap down through the years. He’s been saddled with the label “Doubting Thomas,” but that’s a grossly unfair characterization of him, scapegoating him as the representative of a Bible full of doubters. 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 final printing of the Bible, then having doubts can’t be all wrong, can it?

Do you ever have doubts? I do. I sometimes doubt the extent of God’s power, or I doubt the breadth of God’s love, or I doubt the reach of God’s forgiveness. Is God powerful enough to silence a tornado? Is God’s love big enough to include those who actively practice racism? Can God forgive even a child molester? Author Jacqueline Bussie calls doubt “audacious why-asking,” and it feels like most times there’s no easy answer and my faith is like swiss cheese,

gaping holes of doubt in between moments of faith. Is that OK for me to admit? Do I still have a job? Like Thomas, I have my doubts. I struggle to believe.

Believing is a big deal in John's gospel. Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined use the verb 29 times. He uses the verb over 90 times. But for John, belief isn't an intellectual assent to a set of religious tenets. Instead, belief is tied to action. For John, to believe is to wash another's feet, to lay down one's life for one's friend. Belief and action are connected. But at some point, the church has separated those two things, and now having the right beliefs has replaced the active concept of believing. But how can I have the right beliefs when I'm still figuring out what all this means? I have faith and I have doubts. Is that possible?

Some folks would say, "No way." They 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. Why do we go to war? Why does cancer exist? Why would someone nail Jesus to a cross? How can you live in this world today and not doubt?

The opposite of doubt isn't faith, it's certainty. I wish my faith was that strong, that I could be certain about everything. But I find life to be too ambiguous to be certain about many things. To have a faith of absolutely certainty, you either have to be perfect, which none of us are, or so narrow-minded that there's no room for questions, which none of us are, either. We have faith, we want to believe, but sometimes, like Thomas, we need something more than words or books or second-hand testimony; we need to experience Christ for ourselves. To have doubt is to truly have faith, because it honors the fact that God can never be fully understood by us humans.

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. "Do you promise to spend the rest of your life figuring out what this means?"

I think all of us, when faced with the story of the resurrection, respond at some level with disbelief. How can you not? What we're talking about – coming back from the dead – is physically impossible. And yet I think we are so familiar with this story that we run the risk of taking it for granted. I heard a comedian once joke about how we do this in our daily lives. He said, "I heard a lady complaining the other day about how her plane sat on the runway for 40 minutes before takeoff. I wanted to say to her, 'And then what did you do? Did you sit in a chair and FLY through the AIR?'" The comedian said, "Everybody on every plane should constantly be going, 'Oh my gosh! Wow! We're flying!'"

I think I know why Thomas struggled so much to believe what his friends told him. Did you hear the timing in this passage? Jesus first came to the disciples on Easter evening, when they were locked in a room for fear of suffering the same fate as he did. They only had a few hours to process all that had happened before Jesus showed up. But not for Thomas. John tells us, "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them."

A week later. Thomas had a whole week to contemplate the death of Jesus and the reports that he was still alive. It's easy for me to believe in the resurrection when the sounds of the

“Hallelujah Chorus” are still ringing in my ears and the tulips are just starting to open up and the news of Jesus’s resurrection is as fresh as the peanut butter inside my Reese’s egg. But what about seven days later? Is Easter still be as powerful today as it was last Sunday? The music has been stopped, the tulips are drooping, and the Reese’s Eggs have dried out. To be fair, I’ll still eat them. Seven days of life getting in the way, creating space for those pesky doubts to creep back in, for us to forget the new life Jesus promised us. Seven days is a long time to sit with our questions.

But I believe those questions are essential to our faith, and I trust that Jesus answers them here. Just as Thomas was given the invitation to touch and feel, we are given the invitation to taste and see. Each time we come to communion, we are reminded that the risen Christ is among us, bringing peace, offering forgiveness, sharing the Holy Spirit. Communion is our opportunity to ask our questions, name our fears, hear words of assurance like “This is my body, broken for you,” and then to respond faithfully. When you taste the bread, when you drink the cup, Christ says to you, “I am here.” And we are compelled to respond, “Oh my gosh! Wow! Resurrection!”

I used to believe a lot differently than I do now. I used to believe I knew exactly what the Bible says, and who God loves, and who God wanted me to be. But then, I started paying attention and realized I didn’t know a whole lot more than I knew and I started doubting what I thought was certain. My little ideas of God died and something new started growing, something much bigger and more expansive and completely impossible to understand, something Barbara Brown Taylor calls “the sublime uncertainty of faith.” And my beliefs turned to trust. There’s so much I don’t understand, but I have faith.

I hope you have doubts. I hope you have persistent questions about God. I hope you engage in “audacious why-asking.” I hope you keep asking questions and voicing concerns and expressing doubts, because the story of Thomas shows us that when we are willing to voice our doubts, Jesus shows up. And when Jesus shows up – through a particularly moving hymn, or a well-timed hug, or a casual conversation that suddenly takes a deep dive, or a simple cup and loaf – we are moved to respond with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” And then we can spend the rest of our lives figuring out what that means.