

“Doubt is Actually Good”

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Text: John 20: 19-31

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Welcome to this second Sunday of Easter. Easter actually is a celebration that extends through many Sundays as we reflect on the meaning of the Resurrection.

A nine-year-old boy was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school. He told his mother that the teacher had told them how God had sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. He used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters and call in an air strike. They sent in bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Hebrew's were saved.

“Now Joey” his mother said, “is that REALLY what your teacher taught you?”

“Well no, Mom, but if I told IT the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!”

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Today our focus is on Thomas, known throughout the church as “doubting Thomas”. I believe that Thomas has been given a bad rap in this regard.

Thomas has often been portrayed as a “bad guy”. When the other disciples tell him that they saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion, Thomas refused to believe their story. He demanded that he had to see the Christ himself before he would believe. So for ages Thomas has become the symbol of “doubt” and doubt has been presented as the opposite of belief. “Don’t be like doubting Thomas!” the church has said.

Yet, if we take a closer look at Thomas we find that he is a practical sort of fellow. In John’s gospel Thomas insists that the disciples accompany Jesus to Bethany even though there is the threat that they will be stoned to death. Thomas also supports Jesus when Jesus says he must go into Jerusalem and die. Thomas says, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” Also during Jesus’ long farewell discourse it is Thomas who speaks up and asks when Jesus

says that no one knows where he is going. Thomas asks, “Where are you going and how are we to know?” Thomas is that practical, down-to-earth, call-it-the way I see it, sort of person. In truth John does not present him as a negative character but uses Thomas to cut to the heart of the matter.

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For a long time Thomas has been misused by those who want to stifle questioning and challenges.

We now know that the early church was exciting in its dialogue and discourse about Jesus. With the discovery of long lost books such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and others scholars are now seeing that instead of everyone agreeing and being on the same page there was great diversity in the early centuries in understanding.

It was only when the Church became legitimized as the faith of the Roman Empire that we see a change. It became important to decide what proper belief consisted of and to systematically eliminate opposition opinions. As the church grew in power, especially after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, there was more pressure to keep dissent

down. When in the 15th and 16th centuries the dissent finally exploded in Europe the result was decades and centuries of religious warfare whose aim was to vanquish opposition.

In more modern times the discoveries using scientific method has challenged some long held beliefs that we Christians held. The effect has been that some have drawn a firm line between belief and reason. Even when evidence contradicts long held beliefs many retreat into the axiom that believers must “Believe and not doubt”---to doubt is to be unfaithful.

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In the Thomas passage if we read it closely we will note that Jesus never condemns Thomas for his doubting. We might expect something like, “You have to believe and not doubt” but that point is absent from the text. Instead the key verse is verse 29, *“Jesus said to him (Thomas), ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’”* A curious statement, isn't it?

To understand this we have to appreciate John's time and audience. John's gospel was written at the end of the First Century A.D. or early into the Second Century. Even earlier dates puts the gospel decades after the events it describes and decades after the death of most of the original witnesses. Assuming that in that time a generation (because of earlier death and earlier marriage) was about twenty years then John's main audience were third and fourth generation Christians.

For the church from John's time onward they would not have the benefit of witnesses who had known Jesus or who had known the disciples. John has Jesus simply stating a fact of life. There would be no definitive proof or testimony but future believers would have to simply believe. This passage is not a criticism of Thomas but a simple statement of the way it is and will be from John's time onward---- "*blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*"

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We live in a time in which “SEEING IS BELIEVING”. In other words much of our daily life is based on the ideas of science and reason and proof. It is the world we live in and that world is a good world.

The Age of Enlightenment has led us to understand our world differently. We now understand many of the processes of the universe, the processes of life, the cause of diseases. This has led to an explosion of knowledge in medicine, astronomy, physics, and history and so forth. Most of us are immersed in the ideas that seeing is believing and demand evidence.

Today with the Internet and the great accessibility of information the ability of a person to ask a question or check out what someone says is easier. To be fair, our ancestors in the 18th and 19th centuries were pretty adept at doing this without the benefit of the Internet. The 19th century produced movements of democracy, the ending of slavery, the explosion of inventions, the reforming of social structures, and the uncomfortable asking of questions of

religious doctrines and beliefs. Seeing is Believing has led us to many new understandings and advancements.

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Yet, there is also another valid approach to knowledge, one that many in our day have lost contact with. This is the idea that BELIEVING IS SEEING. The idea is that how we look at the world, what we believe about life influences the shape and scope of that world.

We also see this everyday but often do not notice. An artist looks at a blank canvas; a writer looks at a blank page; a designer looks at an empty lot and they BELIEVE they can create, build, or design something. A business person has an idea, a church has a vision, a doctor has a calling and they believe and then that belief becomes reality. We see this every day but often do not notice.

Faith falls into this realm. Faith is about believing and then seeing the world in light of that belief. Faith sees the world as a world that God works within and faith sees that the world can be better. As people of faith believe and act on that belief the world changes.

Easter is about the truth that God is present in the world and that the ministry of Jesus did not die but lives on. We, unlike those of Thomas' time, must believe without seeing. That Belief can and does change the world.

There is a story by Douglas Wood entitled OLD TURTLE.

Once, a long, long time ago, yet somehow, not so very long...when all the animals and rocks and winds and waters and trees and birds, and fish and all the beings in the world could speak...and understand one another...there began an ARGUMENT.

It began softly at first...Quiet as the first breeze that whispered, "He is the wind who is never still."

Quiet as the stone that answered, "He is a great rock that never moves."

Gentle as the mountain that rumbled, "God is a snowy peak, high above the clouds."

And the fish in the ocean that answered, "God is a swimmer, in the dark blue depths of the sea."

“No” said the star, “God is a twinkling and a shining, far, far away.” “NO”, replied the ant, “God is a sound and a smell and a feeling who is very, very close.”

On and on the argument went. “She is a great tree” murmured the willow. “You are wrong!,” argued the island. The argument grew louder, LOUDER, AND LOUDER!!!!

STOP!!! A new voice spoke. It rumbled loudly, like thunder and whispered softly as a butterfly sneezes.

The voice came from OLD TURTLE. Old turtle hardly ever said anything and certainly never argued about God. But now Old Turtle spoke. “God is indeed deep and much higher than high. He is swift and free as the wind and still and solid as a great rock. She is the life of the world, always close and yet beyond the farthest twinkling light. God is gentle and powerful, above all things and within all things, GOD IS.”

Old Turtle continued, “There will soon be a new family of beings in the world and they will be strange and wonderful. They will be reminders of all that God is.

They will come in many colors and shapes with different faces and different ways of speaking. Their thoughts will soar to the stars and their feet will walk the earth. They will possess many powers. They will be strong, yet tender, a message of love from God to the earth, and a prayer from the earth back to God.” AND THE PEOPLE CAME.

But the People forgot. They forgot that they were a message of love and a prayer from the earth. And they began to argue...about who knew God and who did not and where God was and was not; and whether God was or was not.

And often the people misused their powers and hurt one another and killed on another. And they hurt the earth. Until finally the forests began to die...

And the rivers, and the oceans, and the plants and the animals and the earth itself.

Because people could not remember who they were, or where God was.

Until one day there came a voice, like the growling of thunder, but as soft as a butterfly sneezes. PLEASE STOP!!!

The voice seemed to come from the mountains, "Sometimes I see God swimming in the dark blue depths of the sea." And the voice seemed to come from the ocean, "He is often among the snow-capped peaks." And from the stone, "I sometimes feel her breath as she blows by." And from the breeze, "I feel his presence as I dance among the rocks."

And after a long, lonesome, and scary time....

The people listened and began to hear and began to SEE GOD in one another...

And in the beauty of the earth.

And the Old Turtle SMILED AND SO DID GOD.

You see sometimes seeing is believing and sometimes believing is seeing. If we believe that God is actively working we will see that work. If we believe that Christ comes to us in the suffering people we help, we will see Christ. If we believe we will see----but questioning and

seeking and changing is not bad---it is good. “Blessed are those who believe without seeing.”