

# Being Believers with Doubts

John 20:19 – 31

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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On this third Sunday of Easter, the lectionary's gospel reading addresses the tension between our ability to believe and our capacity to doubt.

Our role model for doubt is the disciple Thomas. How would you like to be in his shoes, remembered for just one thing you said but later regretted? That's Thomas's unfortunate fate.

For some unexplained reason, he wasn't hiding in the Upper Room when Jesus first appeared to the others on the night of the Resurrection. When he did finally return and was told, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas declared he couldn't believe them unless he could see and touch Jesus. For this he's forever stuck with the nickname, Doubting Thomas.

Since we're all by nature doubters, let's not be too hard on poor Thomas. In his defense, Thomas was still under the influence of Good Friday. He believed Jesus was the Messiah. When Jesus died, Thomas's belief in Jesus died with him.

You could also argue it wasn't his fault for being absent when Jesus unexpectedly showed up. And just because someone tells you something's true doesn't necessarily make it so.

Sometimes you do need to see before you can believe. That's why Jesus returned a second time when Thomas was present in the Upper Room. But why did Jesus wait a whole week to show up again?

Did Jesus want Thomas to stew his own juice before seeing him? It looks that way, especially since it appears Jesus made him squirm even more when he dared Thomas to touch his wounds.

Blown away, Thomas could only fall on his knees and confess, "My Lord and my God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe."

But besides assuring those who believe without seeing, this story also assures those who doubt God gives us room to doubt. I'll repeat that. God gives us permission to doubt, but with one condition: Be willing to also doubt your doubts.

We all experience seasons of faith and doubt. For instance, after a joyful worship service or being on a powerful weekend retreat, you might feel pumped up and ready to take on the world.

But that feeling doesn't last forever. Eventually, that pumped up feeling gets deflated when suddenly feeling the frustrations of everyday living. That's when feeling the presence of God gives way to feeling the absence of God.

Other times it gets even more complicated. You may very well believe in God's presence until you start doubting yourself. Soon enough that feeling of self doubt overlaps into your doubts about God.

Feeling inadequate, you start wondering, "What happened to that joyful, affirming feeling I once had? Is God punishing me?"

This is where we go wrong. Now believing is confused with feeling. That explains people suddenly feeling enthusiastic about a cause and just as suddenly losing interest, because it doesn't feel right anymore.

Maybe that's the same reason why teenagers of all ages fall in love but just as quickly fall out of love. It doesn't feel right anymore.

Hopefully growing older and wiser, we realize the most important things in life shouldn't be based on feelings. Feelings come and go with the wind. Something deeper, wider and more permanent needs to keep us grounded, otherwise we become confused globs of feverish emotions.

It may be surprise to hear that ultimately the Bible doesn't care about how we feel. Paradoxically, feelings are essential to our humanity.

According to the gospels, even Jesus felt the full fury of human emotions but at the most critical time of his life, even he couldn't feel the presence of God. Why else would he cry out from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

God didn't forsake Jesus. The totality of God suffered with Jesus on the cross. Being human, Jesus felt abandoned but God's divinity stayed with Jesus to the bitter end, just as God stays with us even though we don't always feel God's with us.

Still living under the dark cloud of Good Friday, Thomas wanted to see and touch Jesus. During our seasons of crucifixion, we want to see and touch Jesus. We want to feel his presence so we can once again feel one with God.

As it turns out, what we want is not always what we need. There are times God knows we need to feel God's presence and other times we don't. We may not agree with God about this, but sooner than later we've got to start trusting God knows what's best for us.

This is especially true of new believers. Maybe you can remember the first time you really felt connected to God. You experienced a burst of joy. You were at peace with yourself and felt energized. Nothing seemed to get you down. But out of the blue that initial joyful, energetic explosion of feeling dissipated.

Having this experience isn't unusual. It's called growing pains. Remember, experiencing ups and downs is part of the rhythm of life. God knows when we need to feel the presence but God also knows when we need to feel his absence so our faith can mature.

It's like what happened when you first learned how to ride a two-wheel bicycle. Most of us started with training wheels. We thought we were all grown up peddling down the driveway. But then one day, mom or dad said, "It's time to take the training wheels off."

Now we had to learn how to peddle on our own. Of course, God never leaves us to peddle on our own but it can still feel that way, until we learn to make the decision to trust God, even without the training wheels.

Making that decision and sticking with it is one of life's hinge moments. You decide to do the right thing even when you don't feel like it. You decide to love your neighbor, even when you don't feel like it. You decide to commit your life to Christ, even when you don't feel like it.

That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe,"

It's not seeing or touching Jesus but by living your life as if you can that grounds your faith.

So we don't take all the responsibility for growing an adequate faith. Belief is a two-way street. We can only believe in God because God first believed in us.

Both the Old and New Testaments stories reveal God is faithful even when we're not faithful. These stories also reveal God trusts us more than we trust ourselves.

Think about the patriarchs and prophets God called into service. Doubting their abilities, they often tried convincing God to find someone else. But God was patient until they realized God could see what they couldn't see: their hidden capacity to trust that God alone was responsible for doing the heavy lifting. They just had to decide to show up and go with the flow to accomplish God's plan to bring his kingdom to earth

This was especially true of the twelve disciples. Too often they doubted God and themselves, especially on Good Friday. But what did Jesus say to them when he first appeared in the Upper Room?

Jesus was in his rights to fire them all on the spot for running away. Instead, he said, "Peace be with you."

Although they lost their nerve on Good Friday, Jesus still believed in them. Despite their multiple flaws, Jesus still stuck with them because he believed in them.

That thought should comfort us. When we don't believe in ourselves, God still believes in us. In return, God asks us to believe God knows what he's doing. Maybe you don't have a clue why God chooses you and me to do anything, but God knows what he's doing.

Last Tuesday, while visiting a nursing home I was introduced to a man wheeling himself down the hall. Knowing I was a pastor, the man asked me for healing prayers. He has multiple health problems giving him constant pain. He's a perfect candidate for someone who could be overwhelmed by doubt.

Instead, he's Exhibit A for someone who decided to believe. Despite all his health issues, he's become a Christ like presence in that nursing home. Every day he visits and comforts the other patients, especially those he says are worse off than him. Doing this keeps him from obsessing over his own problems. It also makes him an instrument of God's peace and healing in a place where both are desperately needed.

Here's a man living in reduced circumstances who learned that despite everything, any life worth living is grounded in deciding to believe the unseen. That decision empowers him to do the right thing for others even when he doesn't feel like it.

Thomas was shocked into belief when he experienced the resurrection in a way we never will, in this lifetime.

Until the time comes when you and I step into eternity and see the Risen Christ right before our eyes, claim for yourself this beatitude, "Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe."

God's belief in you makes it possible to be one of the Easter people. The world needs people deciding to doubt their doubts long enough to make room for enough faith to bring God's kingdom to earth every time God's will be done on earth as it is heaven.

May the unseen and sometimes unfelt presence of Christ rise up to prepare you for loving and serving in your corner of God's kingdom.