

(Easter) But Some Doubted (Matthew 28: 16-20)

All four Gospels record doubts about the resurrection. This sermon acknowledges that doubt is part of faith, and offers guidance on how to deal with and eventually overcome religious doubt.

But Some Doubted

Matthew 28:16-20

Several years ago, I saw a cartoon that gave me a chuckle. To understand the cartoon, you need to know that preachers always fuss about people who only come to church on Easter. Well, the cartoon depicted a church. The sign out front said, “Easter Sunday Schedule.” So it was Easter Sunday morning. The service was over, and the pastor was greeting folks as they left the service. A man was shaking hands with the pastor. He said, “Preacher, you are in a rut. Every time I come to this church, you preach on the same subject.” It was a funny jab at people who only come to church on Easter Sundays. But the truth is, most preachers ARE in a rut on Easter Sundays. The standard operating procedure on Easter for every preacher I know, including me, is to attempt to put together a glory hallelujah celebration of the resurrection of Christ. I’ve tried to do that for the past 25 years as a pastor. And, I had planned on doing that today. But a couple of weeks ago, I changed my plan. Why? Because I went back and re-read all four Gospel accounts of the resurrection. And as I read them, it hit me—like a brick—that in all four Gospels, the disciples have doubts and skepticism about the resurrection. They heard the glorious news that Jesus had risen from the dead. But they did not believe it, at least not at first. Let me show you what I mean. Look at the listening guide in your order of worship (the listening guide can be found at the end of this sermon).

Matthew 28 says, “When they saw him, they worshipped him, (read with me) but some doubted” v. 17. Mark 16 says, “When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she (speaking of Mary Magdalene) had seen him, (read with me) they did not believe it” v. 11. Luke 24 says, “When the women came back from the tomb, they told all these things (about the resurrection) to the eleven and to all the others, (read with me) but they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense” v. 9-11. John 20 says, “When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, he declared, (read with me) “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it” v. 25. In all four Gospel

accounts of Easter, there is skepticism and doubt and uncertainty about the resurrection. Which got me to thinking—there are probably a lot of people here today who can relate. Oh, we probably wouldn't admit it. But I'm sure some religious skepticism exists in this place today. We come here and sing wonderful songs like "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," and we wear nice clothes and we smile, but beneath all of that, a lot of people here today have real questions about God and faith. We wonder where God is in the midst of war and terrorism. We wonder if our prayers make a rip of difference. We wonder if God really cares about the struggles we are facing. We wonder, if Jesus has been raised from the dead, why we don't feel more victorious? If you, like those early disciples, bring some doubts and questions and skepticism to this place today, I want you to know—you are in good company! God's people throughout the Bible and throughout church history have often struggled with questions and doubts. You see, doubts and questions and struggles are not the enemy of faith, they are a part of faith, and they have been from the beginning, even among the early disciples. All of which raises the question—how do we deal with those inevitable times of skepticism? What can we do to carry us through the doubts and questions and struggles? Today's text offers us three practical strategies for dealing with doubt. Let's review them quickly. Please follow along in the listening guide.

1. Stay With the _____ [Community]. Read with me, "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them" (v. 16). Remember, Judas is out of the picture. After betraying Jesus, he killed himself. So, there are only eleven disciples left—and they are together. In spite of their skepticism about the resurrection, the disciples stuck together. They went to Galilee—together. When we have doubts and struggles with our faith, we need the community of faith more than ever. When we can't believe, our church can believe for us. They can support us, pray for us, and encourage us. If you, like the early disciples, are struggling with faith, *stick with the community*. There is room in this church for doubters and skeptics. Let us believe for you until you can believe again for yourself.

2. Continue to be _____ [Faithful]. Read with me, "Now the disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them" (v. 16). Even with their doubts and skepticism, the disciples kept on obeying Jesus. Remember, they don't even know if Jesus is alive or not. They have heard stories from the women, but they are skeptical. The women told them that Jesus ordered them to go to a mountain in Galilee, so what did they do? They went to the mountain as Jesus commanded. When we feel our faith is weak,

that's when we most need to be faithful to the directives of Christ. When we struggle with faith, we need to continue to pray, continue to serve others, continue to be ethical, continue to love others, and continue to be a faithful disciple. In his book, "The Screwtape Letters" C.S. Lewis said, "Satan's cause is never in more danger than when a human looks round upon a universe from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

3. Continue to _____ [Worship]. Read with me, "When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted" (v. 17). When we struggle with faith, we need worship more than ever. Even when the songs and the prayers and the creeds get stuck in our throat, we need to continue to worship God.

So that's what the disciples did. Even with their doubts, skepticism and struggles, they stayed with the community, they continued to be faithful, and they continued to worship. And the results of those three actions were encouraging. First, Jesus came to them. They saw the risen Lord. Second, Jesus gave them a great mission to go into the world and spread the Gospel. Third, the risen Lord gave them a great promise. Jesus told them, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world." Jesus said, "I am with you in good times and in bad times. I am with you when your faith is strong and when your faith is weak. I am with you when you feel my presence, and I am with you even when you feel abandoned by me. I am with you always."

Today's scripture reading reminds me of a woman named Jennifer. Jennifer was a faithful member of a church I used to serve. But like most every Christian, she went through a time of struggle and doubt. Her dark night of the soul came in the context of a difficult divorce. And in her struggle, she did exactly what those early disciples did. First, she stayed with the community. In spite of her skepticism, she continued to be active in church. She came to see me and admitted that she was having a hard time believing. I said, "Jennifer, it's OK that you are having a hard time believing right now, all Christians do from time to time." I told her, "Before long, your faith will return. In the meantime, *we'll believe for you.*" Jennifer stayed with the community and found great support in that. Second, Jennifer remained faithful to God and her church. She continued to pray, to read her Bible, to give her tithe, to live by Christian ethics, and to love other persons. Although she didn't feel like it, she fulfilled her commitment to work on a Habitat for Humanity house. Every Saturday for eight weeks, she was there, hammering nails and being faithful, even though her faith was dry and lifeless. Well, like those early disciples,

Jennifer stayed with the community, and Jennifer continued to be faithful. And, like the disciples, Jennifer continued to worship. In spite of her doubts, she came to church every Sunday and sang the songs and said the prayers and recited the creeds and listened to the sermons and took communion. The end of that story is that over the next few months, Jennifer's faith slowly returned. In time, her faith once again became alive and vibrant. Like he did for those early disciples, Jesus came to Jennifer. She, like them, encountered the risen Lord. And she heard him say, "Jennifer, I am with you always, even to the end of the world, even through the pain of this divorce."

Today, some of you are struggling with your faith. If so, I want to encourage you to be like Jennifer, and to be like the early disciples. Stay with the community of faith. Continue to be faithful to Christ. And continue to worship. If you will do these three things, in God's time, the Risen Lord will come to you, just as he did for those early disciples. And you, like them, will hear him say, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

LISTENING GUIDE

Sermon: *But Some Doubted*

MATTHEW

"When they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted." (Matthew 28:17)

MARK

"When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen Him, they did not believe it." (Mark 16:11)

LUKE

"When the women came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the others . . . but they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." (Luke 24:9,11)

JOHN

"When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, he declared, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'" (John 20:25)

1. Stay With The _____

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.” (Matthew 28:16)

2. Continue To Be _____

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.” (Matthew 28:16)

3. Continue To _____

“When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.” (Matthew 28:17)