

(The week after Easter) The Benefit of the Doubt (*John 20:19-29*)
Important lessons from Thomas on dealing with doubt

The Benefit of the Doubt (*John 20: 19-29*)

Some of you have heard of the well-known author, John Updike. In Updike's novel, *Roger's Version*, he introduces his readers to a young evangelical Christian named Dale Kohler. Dale's mission in life was to prove the existence of God mathematically. He believed that Christians needed logical, airtight proof of the existence of God to counter the arrogance of secular science. He told a colleague, "If we could prove God's existence, we could rout the Devil." His colleague asked Dale who he thinks the Devil is. "The Devil," Dale replied, "is doubt." Many Christians believe the Devil is doubt, but they are wrong. And that brings me to the story of Thomas, who we usually refer to as "Doubting Thomas."

The story of Thomas' doubt begins on Sunday night, the evening of Easter Sunday. Jesus appears to his disciples, but Thomas was not there. When the other disciples told Thomas they had seen the risen Lord, he remained skeptical. He wanted to believe, but he could not blindly accept the news without some hard evidence. Thomas wanted his faith to be based on something more than rumor and wishful thinking. So at first, he could not believe.

Thomas was not a bad guy. Nor was he unique in his doubt. Earlier in the day Mary told the same story, that she had seen the risen Lord, but most of the disciples didn't believe her either. Like Thomas, they had not seen Jesus with their own eyes and they were not convinced. In fact, all four gospels record that Jesus' followers initially expressed skepticism about the resurrection. For example, in the closing verses of the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples met the risen Jesus on a mountain. The Bible says, "When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted." That's an interesting passage of Scripture. They worshipped him, but some doubted. And it's easy to see why. These disciples watched Christ die on the cross. How could he be alive? Doubts were understandable, including Thomas' doubts. Thomas wanted to believe but he wanted his faith to have substance. So, at

least for a while, Thomas could not bring himself to believe that Jesus' resurrection was true.

If we are honest, most of us can relate to Thomas' struggle to believe. Like Thomas, we all live in the shadow of the cross at various times in our life. We all experience shattered dreams, lost hope, suffering, and pain. We all have questions about God and life which we cannot answer. Doubts are inevitable. Every believer—at one time or another—will experience them. The Bible is full of examples of God's people, good people, who struggle with doubt. Sometimes they doubt God's existence. But more often they doubt God's justice, love, fairness, or involvement in the world. Even the most dedicated believer will have times of doubt. Look at Thomas. He followed Jesus for three years. He touched him. He talked to him. He heard Jesus teach with power. He saw Jesus perform miracles. He even saw Jesus raise a dead man from the grave. In spite of all that, Thomas still doubted. If Thomas, who spent three years with Jesus doubted, we certainly will as well. Times of doubt are inevitable. And times of doubt are also permissible. It's OK to have doubts. It's not evil, sinful, or wrong to doubt. Faith does not mean we will never question our beliefs about God. Almost every character in the Bible had a time of doubt. Even Jesus felt abandoned by God on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Doubt is not the opposite of faith but is actually a part of faith. Tennyson was right when he said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." Doubt can even have value. When we wrestle with faith it usually comes out stronger and more mature. At the very least, faith that struggles with doubt is more real and authentic.

Let's go back to the story. Thomas heard about Jesus' resurrection, but at first was unable to believe. Then, eight days later, Jesus returned to his disciples. Eleven days had passed since the cross. Eleven days of doubt and agony for Thomas. Finally, Thomas' doubts ended. Jesus said, "Thomas, see and touch my hands and side. Believe and don't doubt anymore." When Thomas saw Jesus he cried out, "My Lord and my God!"

This is an important story with important lessons for today's believers. Thomas teaches us that doubts are inevitable. Everyone will doubt from time to time, and

that's OK. In fact, Thomas teaches us that doubt can even have good results. Faith refined through the fire of doubt comes out stronger, more mature, more honest, and more real. Thomas also teaches us that doubts can be overcome. So with the time left let's ask the question, "How can we deal with doubt?" Thomas' experience suggests at least four strategies for coping with times of unbelief. Let's rapidly review them. They are listed in your listening guide in the bulletin.

1. *Remember Past Faith.* No doubt Thomas spent a lot of time during those eleven days thinking about the past three years with Jesus. He recalled moments of intense faith, times when God had been very real for him. Times when he had seen the power of God, and his heart was full of the reality of God. When God seems distant in the present, when faith is hard to come by, we would do well to remember past faith.

2. *Anticipate Future Faith.* Recalling past faith gives rise to hope. When we recall past faith, we can better anticipate future faith. If God has been real to us in the past, it's a good bet God will be real to us again in the days to come. By remembering past faith, and anticipating future faith, we are better able to deal with the present lack of faith. In a way, faith is like marriage. Times come in every marriage when feelings of love are hard to come by. Every marriage experiences some dry times. But a mature husband or wife remembers that they have felt love for their spouse in the past, and they anticipate that feelings of love will return in the future. Therefore, they can better cope with the temporary loss of feelings in the present. Surely Thomas remembered past faith, and anticipated future faith, and this helped him through his current lack of faith.

3. *Remain with the community of faith.* Although Thomas couldn't believe what the other disciples believed, he did not leave the disciples. Although he didn't have their faith, he stayed with them for strength and encouragement. When we are struggling with doubt and questions, that's when we need to connect with other believers the most. Even when our faith feels dry and lifeless, we need to gather with believers and worship and fellowship with them. None of us can live out our faith alone. Not in the good times, and certainly not in the bad times.

Years ago I met a woman named Ellen. She told me her faith story. When she was in her 20's she left the church for almost a decade. Her faith felt weak through those years, and she often struggled with doubt. But in her 30's she returned to church, primarily for the sake of her young daughter. She told her pastor that she was coming mostly for her child, that she really didn't believe anymore, although she wanted to. Her pastor, a woman named Susan said to Ellen, "That's OK, we'll believe for you." Over the next year, Ellen came to church regularly. She worshipped, studied and served among other people in the church. To her great surprise, her faith slowly re-vitalized. Her church believed for her when she could not believe for herself, and eventually, she was able to believe again. You and I cannot do Christianity solo. It's a religion of community. It's a "we" faith, not a "me" faith. And when our individual faith is faltering, the community of faith can help us through.

4. *Seek Renewed Faith.* Although Thomas struggled with doubt, he remained open to new evidence of God's reality. He wanted to believe and looked for reasons to do so. And we must do the same. In times of doubt we need to seek renewed faith. It may happen in a worship service, perhaps through a sermon, song, Scripture reading, prayer, or through the celebration of Holy Communion. It may happen when we look again at the beauty of nature, especially in the rebirth of spring that we are currently enjoying. It might come through the love of a family member or friend. But when we are struggling with doubt, we need to be on the lookout for a new encounter with God. Thomas' renewal of faith came in the upper room when he saw the risen Lord. But even then, it was not proof positive. Although Jesus invited Thomas to touch his hands and his side, Thomas did not. He simply fell down and confessed his faith. We will never have absolute scientific proof of God. That would be math, not faith. But if we will seek renewed faith, we can find enough evidence of God's reality to believe again.

Some of you here today are struggling with doubt. You are in good company, for God's people have done so from the beginning. If you, like Thomas before you, are struggling with doubt, I encourage you to follow the four steps we've discussed: (1) remember past faith, (2) anticipate future faith, (3) remain with the community of faith, and (4) seek renewed faith. These strategies are not a magic solution, but they can help. And if you, like Thomas, struggle with doubt today, let me

encourage you to have hope. The living Lord will come again. He did for Thomas. And in God's timing, He will for you.

Listening Guide: The Benefit of the Doubt

1. Remember Past Faith.
2. Anticipate Future Faith.
3. Remain with the community of faith.
4. Seek Renewed Faith.