

“A Virus Named Doubt”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Scripture: Acts 2:14a, 36-41 “Peter Preaches about the Risen Jesus”

John 20:19-31 “Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room”

given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on

April 23, 2006

<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

Thomas isn't there. The Bible doesn't explain for us the reason why he is not there.

Throughout Christian history, the disciple Thomas has been given the name “**doubting Thomas.**” The moniker derives from this one upper room appearance of Jesus that he missed. When Thomas returned, his fellow disciples excitedly told him they had seen Jesus. Thomas didn't believe them. He said he wouldn't believe it unless he could verify it by touching the spear hole in his side or observing the nail holes in his Lord's hands.

Thomas was a character all right. Earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus' close friend Lazarus was reported to have died and Jesus wanted to go back to see him. Thomas reminded Jesus that they had left Lazarus' town because there were credible reports that people were planning to assassinate him. When Jesus said they were going back, Thomas sarcastically remarks to what seems like a suicide journey, “**OK, let us go there and die with him.**”

Why did Thomas doubt that Jesus was resurrected?

Thomas saw Jesus do the same things the other disciples had witnessed.

He had seen countless miraculous things from the healing of deadly diseases to the feeding of the 5000 and even the rising of the dead. But Thomas appears to be a **hardheaded cynic**. He would make a good lawyer---he is both **skeptical** and a little **paranoid**.

Thomas might make a good state patrolman.

Joan Torello wrote that her mother had a notorious **lead foot** and was not surprised to hear that a Georgia State Trooper pulled her mother over for speeding as she raced through Georgia on the way home from Florida. Hoping to get off with a warning, Joan's mother tried to appear shocked when the officer walked up to her car.

“I have never been stopped like this before,” she said to the officer.

“What do they usually do ma'am,” he asked, “shoot the tires out?”

Yes we all know people like Thomas –probably several in this room. They like to press the envelope.

Some call them “**negative people,**” but they probably prefer the term “**realist.**”

They doubt the press, they question the lies of politicians and they dismiss easy answers.

They never jump at a new fad or rush to purchase the latest “must have” gadget.

They have to be convinced.

They weigh the evidence and sometimes sit on the fence a long time.

A sign in my mechanic's garage is a good motto for people like Thomas,

“In God we trust—all others pay cash.”

It was simply **in Thomas' nature to doubt what he has not yet confirmed in his mind.** . Unless and until he got enough information from the most trusted source, he would not believe the claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

I get so caught up in the plans and details of the Holy Week celebration that I don't really think much about the claims we make on Easter morning. We are making the audacious claim that a dead man is not in the tomb but running around appearing to his friends. After all, the Romans make sure the people they crucify are *really* dead. First they suffocate them to death on the cross and then they finish them off with a spear to the main artery. Then they break all the bones, and let them bleed to death. After several more hours they finally take them down and dispose of the body.

Although I have been in worship services where the preacher gets heckled, I am surprised that I have never heard of a colleague reporting that in the midst of reading the resurrection account on Easter someone standing up and shouting, "Are you kidding me? This is the strangest thing I have ever heard. You expect me to buy that old story?"

You might have seen the book review in the Post about a book that claims the crucifixion and resurrection were faked.

I think the latest book trying to rehabilitate the image of Judas makes outlandish claims. However, I think Thomas needs another look. Historically preachers and Biblical commentary writers have taken Jesus' response to Thomas, "Thrust your hands into the holes in my hands and side," as a rebuke. I believe that Jesus was not rebuking Thomas for his doubts. Instead he was giving Thomas the proof that he needed.

I have no trouble believing in the resurrection. I have believed the story since I was a very young child and have never doubted it. But some others need other experiences to be convinced.

Certainly Thomas was not the only person who heard about the resurrection who had some initial doubts. Yet, after his encounter with the risen Jesus, few make a more personal profession of belief, "My Lord and my God," as Thomas did.

Jesus gives us **many chances to believe**. We all come to believe in different times and different ways. Some take a big Leap of Faith and then spend the rest of their life having personal experiences that confirm the leap.

The question is not why do some people doubt. It is **how do we overcome our doubts?** Lee Strobel, who was a hardened and cynical Chicago Tribune reporter before his conversion to Christianity as an adult, suggests that "*People are especially vulnerable to doubt if they don't know why and what they believe.*"

I was blessed with a mother who read to me every night; often using the old illustrated Bible storybook. I knew the content of the stories by heart and I also knew that she believed the Bible and wanted me to trust it as well.

The old best seller, "*All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,*" suggested that all the important lessons in life are learned by children by the time they finish kindergarten. The author did not mean that 5 year olds have the ability to reason clearly or have the capacity for abstract thought. He meant that matters of who is trustworthy and what beliefs are important are learned early in childhood. Maria Montessori said as much, "Give me a child for five years and I can create a world leader."

I remember the long ten-year debate that Presbyterians had about opening communion to children. When I was growing up you had to be confirmed in order to partake of communion. This stance was based on the belief that you had to comprehend the mystery and understand the theological significance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper before you were “worthy” to receive it. At a minister’s conference where we debated the topic, it was left for parents to decide at the closing communion service if their children would take communion. As we approached the table I decided to quiz my five-year-old daughter Shaina about the sacrament. *What is the bread about?* I asked. *“That is Jesus’ Body,”* she replied.

What about the juice? I followed.

“That is Jesus’ blood when he was speared by the guard.”

That was good enough for me. I was thankful she had learned it.

For those that don't have that rich source of Biblical knowledge and the childlike faith to draw upon—there is **no substitute for a small group Bible study group**. We tend to doubt things we are ignorant of. But it is not just the content...the faith must be “written on our hearts.”

⌘ We doubt why we believe because we don't know what we believe.

⌘ We doubt God because we think the world is an overwhelming place to live.

What Thomas makes clear is that **Faith is counter-intuitive**.

To believe is to go against almost every cultural instinct. The Bible says that it is through acknowledging our weakness that we become strong. It is when we trust God with our lives that we find freedom and confidence. These are crazy ideas to non-believers. Instead of the American conviction that “everything depends on me,” we have this counter-intuitive approach to life. When faced with an intimidating “to do list,” Christians respond this way.

1. Pray and seek the voice of God.
2. Go out and **do your best** and **trust God to do the rest**.

It is interesting that the story of Thomas' initial doubt appears only in John's gospel. Usually John is ethereal. John is abstract and spiritually focused. Mark is earthy . . . and action oriented. The word “immediately” appears 68 times. In Mark, Jesus heals in earthy ways. But John's Jesus talks in allegories. But when it comes to the resurrection, John's gospel is the most physical, flesh and blood focused. Only John makes the reality of **stigmata**—the physical wounds on Jesus hands and feet; the nails and the gash on his side from the spear—a matter of extended conversation. **WHY?**

First, John wanted to communicate that Jesus was not some spiritual ghost.

He was the same physical Jesus the disciples had known and loved. By singling out Thomas—the known realists, the skeptic---John was preemptively answering later generations who would try to spiritualize the events of Holy Week.

Secondly, John makes each of us descendants of Thomas. We cannot see the Risen Christ face to face. We must rely on the witness of scripture and trust in the testimony of people who believe and share their faith with us. That is why the family is the earliest and most important witness to faith in Jesus Christ. When the family fails—the church must take seriously that important role of nurturing faith—including getting into the Bible with beginners and showing them how to pray and how to live by faith.

It is all right to have doubts...**if**...it leads to a greater desire to know and follow God. But doubts can be like those deadly computer viruses. Those things come in and wipe out our hard drive and send obscene pictures to everyone on your e-mail address book and eventually conspire to shut down the beltway at noon!

Doubt can be a spiritual virus that wreaks havoc. It can feed on itself—undermining trust in God's love. Unchecked it can create uncertainty in your self worth—and make you question the purpose of your existence. **DOUBT IS NOT YOUR FRIEND!**

On Tuesday Andrea and I took the Metro to DC and walked around the American History Museum and then walked along the Tidal Basin to the FDR Memorial. This was my first visit to that memorial. Like many Mall Memorials it is quite fitting. The architecture and statues aptly capture his character. On the brown rock walls are several famous quotes from this very quotable figure.

Next to the stone with the famous “Four Freedoms” was a quote I had not seen before. Later as I did some research I found out why. Roosevelt wrote it the night before he suffered a stroke that killed him. It was a speech he never delivered..

*The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.
Let us move forward with strong and active faith (April, 1945)*

FDR is right. It is OK to seek evidence which will lead to deeper faith. It is appropriate to ask Jesus to give you what is needed . But you should

Never doubt that God loves you unconditionally.

Never doubt that God cares for how your life turns out.

Never doubt that you can be forgiven for your past.

Never doubt you are of inestimable worth to God.

It doesn't matter **how** you come to faith. It is critically important that you can confess as Thomas did, that Jesus is “MY Lord, and My God.”