



The Parish of Darfield
All Saints, Darfield and St Michael, Great Houghton
Sunday 25th April 2021
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sermon Supplement—Dealing with Doubt

At our Facebook service on Sunday 11th April, Carol Hunter reminded us of Thomas, one of the Disciples, whose doubts and subsequent belief is recorded by St John. With her permission we include a transcript to allow a wider audience the opportunity to share her thoughts.

Doubt: St. John 20: 19-31 (11th April 2021)

19 *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”* 20 *After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

21 *Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”* 22 *And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

24 *Now Thomas (also known as Didymus[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”*

But he said to them, “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.”

26 *A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”* 27 *Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

28 *Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”*

29 *Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

30 *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Father, what comes next, may it honour your name

This morning we’re going to look at something all believers suffer from at one time or another ~ doubt.

What do we do? ~ those of us who have received Christ as our Lord and Saviour, when we find ourselves engulfed by the darkness of deep and desolating doubt?

Let me read you a poem by Susan Lenzks ~ it’s from her book:

‘A silver Pen for Cloudy Days’

*Within the depths of His darkest clouds-
God often seems to bury His richest treasures ~
Silver streaks of growth,
Sterling faith,
Precious, gleaming truths for His children.
Has a dense cloud of doubt settled over you, dear one?
Search out the treasures of darkness!
The riches of your Heavenly Father hide there ~
With your name engraved in silver!
Growing in closeness to God.*

Is it possible to find rich treasures even in the darkest cloud of doubt?

Absolutely!

Perhaps the classic example of doubt is the disciple Thomas. We call him 'doubting Thomas' ~ an unfair label if ever there was one!

It's sad how we pick up what we consider a negative in a person and make them carry that label for a lifetime ~ or in Thomas' case 2 millennia!

Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection ~ he said he wouldn't believe unless he saw for himself ~ he wanted to believe, but he wanted that faith to be based on evidence rather than hearsay or wishful thinking.

Thomas entered a little while into the darkness of spiritual doubt, but he came out of that experience with a firmer faith than ever before ~ the darkness served to deepen his love for God.

One of the treasures that came out of Thomas dark cloud of doubt was the founding of a church in India that is there to this day ~ they call themselves the 'St Thomas Christians' and they're reputed to be some of the most finest Christians we could ever meet.

Thomas had his doubts allayed and became a believer and an achiever ~ and then he went places ~ and if Thomas could do it (and God recorded it for us in the Bible to encourage us) then so can we!

The first thing I want us to do is look at the difference between defensive doubts and honest doubts ~ because doubts can arise in us that are really defensive attempts of the personality designed to relieve us of the responsibilities of commitment.

Let me explain:

Sometimes, when we hear a challenging sermon that shows us there is something about our Christian lives that needs immediate correction, we can come up against something called Brunner's Law which says:

"The more a decision will affect your way of life, the more your sinful nature will enter into the debate".

We go on the defensive and our sinful nature can supply us with doubts about what we've heard and ~ we then use these doubts to 'get us off the hook'. Rather than face the issue with which we are being challenged, we prefer the safety of doubt.

We can use doubt as a defence preferring to believe that what we heard is not true because to believe it means we have to change.

Fallen human nature can do that ~ shrink from facing up to God's challenges by providing doubts we can use as excuses not to deepen our commitment.

When caught violating God's principals we are perfectly capable of using anything to protect ourselves ~ even doubt!

Charles Wesley wrote these words:

*Jesus the hindrance show
Which I have feared to see
Let me now consent to know
What keeps me out of thee*

But what of honest doubts?

Those doubts which arise from the difficult and perplexing situations in which we find ourselves and which appear to give the lie to the promise of God.

For example we may find it difficult sometimes to equate the truth of God's love with such things as earthquakes, floods and tsunamis, physical suffering, child abuse and so on.

A painful crisis arises which doesn't have any quick solution and we can't help but wonder about all those promises of a prayer-answering God.

Or some particular part of Scripture doesn't seem to stand up to our experience.

Or the people of the church let us down and for a moment we wonder if God will let us down too.

These are honest doubts and they rise in the heart of even the best and most mature Christians.

Some Christians (and churches) attempt to resolve the problem by saying Christians ought never to doubt, full stop! ~ but that's not an answer because the truth is that sometimes we do doubt and that's a fact!

Let's be clear on this ~ doubt is not an indicator of 'no faith' ~ it is not the same as unbelief ~ one writer puts it like this:

"Doubt is a state of mind in suspension between faith and unbelief, so that it is neither of them wholly and only each partly"

There's a Greek word used in the Bible that captures this: 'Dispukos' it means hesitation ~ the no-man's land between faith and unbelief ~ it's not a sin, but it does need resolving.

You can't stop doubts arising but you can use them to ask question which will enable you to take a firmer grip on God ~ this is the treasure ~ doubts can be valuable if they motivate us to search more deeply into God's Word for the answers that are surely there.

Our reading for today gives us a look how Jesus dealt with the doubts of Thomas

Remember, the Bible isn't a just this wonderful record of tremendous people who are perfect in every way.

And a quick look through the Gospels show us that it wasn't only Thomas that doubted ~ the others took some convincing as well!

Let's just look a little at the bigger picture ~ after the events of the previous week Thomas was drained emotionally and physically and (not surprisingly) seems to be exhausted spiritually. When we get run down physically, the emotions and the spirits also tend to plummet don't they?

Thomas (like the others) had heard Jesus say what was to happen ~ how He was to be handed over to the authorities, killed and on the third day rise again. But he wasn't present the first time Jesus showed up and now it seems that he is not so sure. There seems to be some confusion surrounding the fulfilling of God's promises and, like the rest of Jesus disciples he can't quite fathom out how Jesus can be both the triumphant victor of God and the suffering servant. If Jesus is the one sent by God then what's happening? Why hasn't He booted out the blighters that are giving so much grief and establish God's Kingdom of peace and love!

And so Thomas begins to wonder ~ is Jesus really the Christ or have I got it wrong?

The point is this ~ if the great saints of the Bible can find themselves doubting, then don't be thrown off balance if even after years of being a follower of the Lord Jesus you find yourself doubting too ~ it doesn't mean you're a bad person ~ it means you are simply human.

So what to do about them:

First ~ accept the possibility of doubt as part of your Christian walk.

Second ~ face your doubts. Thomas didn't pretend he didn't experience them or deny they were there ~ we can do 4 things with uncomfortable feelings ~ all beginning with 'F':

We can **Forget** them ~ pushing them down into the unconscious.

We can **Flee** them ~ and run away (perhaps enter into a little self-medication ~ perhaps indulge in some distraction techniques?)

We can **Fight** them ~ come out slugging and get exhausted in the process

Or we can **Face** them ~ this is God's way as our faith is based on reality.

Thirdly ~ do something about it. That's what Thomas does ~ he looks for proof, evidence.

We're not told if Thomas prayed about his doubts (though I bet he did) ~ but he had stickability ~ he stayed and worked through them ~ in fact it was a whole eight days before Jesus showed up again showed him His hands and side.

It may be that (a bit like Thomas) we have doubts which are a result of a faulty understanding of scripture ~ of not having the right information, which in turn leads to wrong expectations ~ in such cases we need to get the right information.

I read recently about a Scientist who had serious doubts about certain parts of the Scriptures ~ she

was afraid that one day she would wake up and discover that science had disproved large chunks of it. This lady sought help and found her doubts were quite unfounded ~ that science (that is real science) will never disprove scripture, only confirm it. Half-baked science may appear to discredit the truth of God's Word, but real science can only validate it for The God who built the universe is The God who wrote the Bible.

The point is, Thomas posed his questions in search of faith, not as an attempt to destroy it.

I wonder, are you asking questions like:

If God is so good, why do I hurt so bad?

If God is really there, why am I stuck here?

Just why are the righteous persecuted?

Why isn't He acting NOW?

Why does He seem so quiet?

Don't let the doubts fester ~ talk to someone, God first preferably, or a good Christian friend ~ get some advice on where you can get satisfactory answers.

Use your doubts to ask deep questions of God and Scripture.

Of course I could be wrong and it may be that you're sitting here, looking forward whatever life brings next ~ not a cloud in your sky, not a doubt in your head ~ great.

There are things you can do to prepare yourselves for the troubling times you may face in the future, then when trouble does come your way you're not overwhelmed.

You don't run a marathon before you decide to eat ~ you have regular meals and maintain a healthy diet so you can run when you need to ~ so it is with the Christian life.

So how is your walk with God? How is your prayer life? Are you reading your Bible regularly?

But it's not just information we need is it ~ but emotional support ~ truth given in a kind and tender way ~ and that's just what Jesus does.

Jesus responds to Thomas' doubts with love and sensitivity and answers his questions by lifting the eyes of Thomas and the others above the circumstances to get a glimpse of the One who is the Lord over the circumstances

So there we are ~ a three step recipe for dealing with doubt:

Accept the possibility of doubts ~ they rise in even the best and mature Christians

Face your doubts ~ don't pretend they're not there

Take practical steps to get them sorted.

Let me read to you again that poem by Susan Lencks:

Within the depths of His darkest clouds-

God often seems to bury His richest treasures ~

Silver streaks of growth,

Sterling faith,

Precious, gleaming truths for His children.

Has a dense cloud of doubt settled over you, dear one?

Search out the treasures of darkness!

The riches of your Heavenly Father hide there ~

With your name engraved in silver!

Growing in closeness to God.

For those who doubt and use their doubts to ask deep questions of God and Scripture will find themselves coming out with a faith stronger than ever before.

And as part of our pursuit to 'know' God more ~ as Easter children, may we all know more of God's riches. Amen.