

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, April 24, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

JOHN 20:24-29

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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."

FOUR: AN EASTER STORY #4
WHEN DOUBT MET JESUS

John's Gospel records this story from the life of Thomas in its twentieth chapter.

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

He was definitely a doubter.

(Drama: "Prove It" © 2003, Shelly Barsuhn, performed by Chris Schulenburg)

Thanks, Thomas . . . but I promise my opening story wasn't talking about you. Now, where was I? Oh yeah. He was definitely a doubter. This former student of mine had an IQ was off the charts. He was not only a brilliant student, but his personality and sense of humor made him one of the most popular students at Eden Prairie High School. By the time he had finished at EPHS he had been the star of many a school play, on the homecoming court, and was definitely one of the most influential young men on campus. He was loved by teachers and fellow students alike. He also really disliked me.

His parents had taken him to church from the time he was a young boy, and like many teenagers who grow up in Christian homes, he began to have nagging doubts about Christianity. His mom and dad asked me if I would reach out to him, so I tried. Every attempt to reach out to him was rebuffed. He had no interest in talking with me.

As he went along in his high school years he became more and more convinced that Christianity was just a crutch for weak-minded people. So convinced was he that organized religion was a sham that he started the Eden Prairie chapter of Pastafarianism. You heard me right. Pastafarianism - a club dedicated to worshipping the flying spaghetti monster. The point of the club was that it is just as ridiculous to believe in and worship a flying spaghetti monster as it is to believe in and worship a God whose adherents claim that He rose from the dead. The club actually had quite a few members, and the young man's parents were heartbroken at the choices that their son was making.

Two days ago, on Good Friday, I received an e-mail from this young man who is now a junior in college. I want to read you a portion of that e-mail this morning.

Brian,

Greetings from lovely Montreal! I know you're probably quite busy preparing for this Easter weekend, but I felt like this was an appropriate time to contact you.

As you may have heard from my mother, I have recently found a home in (a) church . . . chiefly on my mind throughout (the past week) was the unfortunate time when I had turned my back on God. When meditating upon this, I couldn't help but feel I had somewhat wronged you during this time. Given your extensive experience with the youth, I'm sure you understand what a tumultuous time the high school years are for so many students, and as such we have the tendency to be rather reactionary in our thoughts and actions.

I recalled the instances in which you attempted to reach out to me, which I rudely rejected. I allowed my frustration with many of the aspects of (our church) to manifest themselves in unflattering ways, not the least of which were in the ignoring of the very genuine efforts you were making toward me. I hope you don't find it odd for me to be bringing this up several years after the fact, but I feel it important to tell you there was no personal ill-sentiment directed at you regarding my grievances with the church at the time. It was simply a very peculiar time in my life when I was attempting to reconcile my emergence as an intellectual

being with the faith in which I was raised, and as such there were some rather severe bumps in the road . . .

While we may differ slightly on various liturgical issues, please know how fulfilled I am with the path I've chosen . . . I am tremendously enjoying the life I am just beginning as a fellow brother in Christ. There are certainly still struggles on this road; such is the human condition. However, I must thank you for the patience and wisdom you've shown in my own spiritual journey . . . May this Easter weekend be as joyful and fulfilling for you as it is for me.

Sincerely,
(A Former Student)

My former student isn't the first person in this world to deal with serious doubts about his faith, and he won't be the last. It's hard to believe some of the things that are written in the Bible.

The Apostle Thomas has been referred to as "Doubting Thomas," for the past 2,000 years. But, maybe that's not fair. Maybe we should really think about Thomas through his eyes of faith.

It is true that Thomas didn't believe right away. But, if you think about it, maybe you wouldn't have either. Jesus was dead. The whole city of Jerusalem was buzzing about it. The One, Whose arrival in the city just a week before had been celebrated with palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna," had been crucified between two common thieves. There were plenty of witnesses who saw His dead body removed from the cross and laid in the tomb. Why should Thomas believe that Jesus was alive just because of the words of some friends? It's not every day that dead people walk. History and empirical evidence were stacked against Thomas' belief. Resurrection is counterintuitive. It was then and it is now.

Leith Anderson writes that, "all belief requires a combination of facts and faith. Whether you are a scientist in the lab, a citizen on a jury or an investor buying some stock, you make your decision with a huge amount of faith. You have faith in the lab's instruments, you have faith in the judge's legal instructions and you have faith in your broker's research. But faith normally starts with facts. If there is no factual basis, what you believe may be nothing more than psychotic imagination.

In Thomas' case he had facts but not enough. In his mind it would take unreasonable faith to jump from the few facts he had to faith in Jesus' Easter resurrection. His request to see a living Jesus whom he could identify by his crucifixion wounds was not an expression of belligerence; it was a call for more facts to trigger his faith."¹

¹ Taken from the sermon, *Easter With Doubt*, preached at Wooddale Church, Eden Prairie, MN on the weekend of March 29-30, 2003 by Leith Anderson, p. 2.

Remember, the Apostle John told us in John 20:24, “24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.”

He didn't have the advantage of seeing Christ's appearance when the other eleven did. We don't know why he wasn't there, but he wasn't. Maybe he had another priority. Maybe Thomas had gone back home. John 20:24 tells us that Thomas was also called Didymus. That name means “twin.” He had a twin brother. Maybe his brother had asked him some difficult questions. “Thomas, was it worth it? You spent the better part of these last three years following your rabbi, Jesus. Now what do you think?”

Maybe, Thomas just needed some space and separated himself from the other disciples. Maybe he was someone who needed to grieve in his own way. Maybe he was a private person. Faith is difficult to cultivate when you are all alone.

Anderson writes, “Belief is usually harder to come by in isolation. We are all influenced by those around us. The more you associate with believers the stronger your faith. The less you associate with believers the harder it is for most of us to keep the faith.”²

Think about your own life. Have you experienced times of doubt? You want to believe in the resurrection. You want the joy that Easter brings. But, it's hard when the difficult times come. Let me tell you, it's much tougher when you try to do it all by yourself. We were created with a need for community with God and each other. When going through the crucible of trial, what a blessing it is to have others who have been there too. Did you know that most of the great champions of the faith have gone through times of extreme doubt? In his excellent book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, author Philip Yancey writes, “Reading the biographies of great people of faith, I must search to find one whose faith did not grow on a skeleton of doubt, and indeed grow so that the skeleton eventually became hidden.”³ Doubt is more common than we think.

The great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote, “It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.”⁴

Why would people like Yancey and Dostoevsky say such things? Because, experience teaches us that when our doubt is sincere, and we are earnestly seeking God, He will eventually reveal Himself. God isn't threatened by our doubts! He is a lot less concerned about doubt than many churches are. Like my former student discovered, God is there, whether you want to believe it or not.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah wrote in Jeremiah 29:13, “13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” When reflecting on that verse, Thomas Merton said, ““If we find God with great ease, perhaps it is not God that you have found.”⁵

² *Ibid.*, p. 3

³ Philip Yancey, “Reaching for the Invisible God” (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Zondervan, 2000), p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The Apostle Thomas wanted to believe. More than anything else, He wanted to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. I'm sure he was depressed when he saw the belief in the other disciples coupled with his lack of belief.

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 it."

I don't think that Thomas was looking for a fight with his friends. He wasn't trying to be difficult. He just needed proof. He had real questions and needed real answers. And some of you, if you were completely honest on this Easter morning, do too. It's difficult to sing the Easter songs about Christ's resurrection, because frankly you haven't felt that power in your life in a long time.

Jesus did something beautiful for Thomas.

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."

Leith Anderson writes, "Doubts have time limits. Doubts are like perishable items at the grocery store—they have limited shelf life. If food gets too far past the expiration date, what was good will eventually turn rotten.

Neither Thomas nor we can doubt indefinitely. Given enough time, Thomas could have turned into a hardened unbeliever. Jesus gave him a week.

Jesus gave Thomas additional evidence and an immediate deadline. He offered to show him his crucifixion wounds and then told him to "Stop doubting and believe!"

The point for us is clear. Jesus will use extraordinary measures to help us believe in him. He gave his life for us and wants us to believe in him and his resurrection. But, he gives us deadlines. He tells us to stop doubting and start believing.

Did Thomas have all the facts he would ever need? Probably not. Few do. There will always be a space for faith. Lots of facts but never so many facts and so much evidence that there is no room for faith. Jesus wants us to believe in him, not in scientific evidence."⁶

You know what is extraordinary. There is nothing recorded in this story that says that Thomas actually touched Jesus' wounds. He thought that what he needed to believe was empirical evidence. But, what he really needed was Jesus. When Jesus approached Thomas with love and compassion, Thomas was moved to the point of decision.

⁶ Anderson, p. 4.

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

It's a beautiful pronouncement! There was no question in Thomas' mind that Jesus was God. He had risen from the dead. The One Who suffered and died just a few days before was risen from the dead, and reaching out to a doubter, like Thomas.

Yes, Thomas has received a bad rap over the years. He went through a period of doubt and despair for a couple of weeks, missed the first appearance of Jesus to the disciples and he is pegged a doubter for all time. But, once Thomas decided that Jesus had risen from the dead, he was all in. Jesus wasn't just Thomas' God, He was Thomas' Lord. Thomas gave Christ his life, and eventually became a martyr, losing his life for the cause of Christ.

Leith Anderson tells the following story, "One thing is for sure—he was a doubter! Although surrounded by others who truly believed, he just could not. Perhaps it was his intelligence or his education. He was a thinker who did not easily jump to emotional conclusions.

So convinced that Jesus Christ never existed, Lew Wallace decided to write a book. Besides being his ticket to fame, it would once and for all set truth over the nonsense of the Christian religion.

At their home in Indianapolis he told his wife that he planned to gather research materials from libraries around the world for his book to debunk the legend of Jesus. She was a Christian, a member of the Methodist church.

Several years into his research he had completed the first four chapters of his masterpiece when he struggled with an unexpected conclusion.

Listen to his words:

"I was in an uncomfortable position. I had begun to write a book to prove that Jesus Christ had never lived on earth. Now I was face to face with the fact that he was just as historic a personage as Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Virgil, Dante, and a host of other men who had lived in olden days. I asked myself candidly, 'If he was a real person (and there was no doubt), was he not then also the Son of God and the Savior of the world?' Gradually the consciousness grew that, since Jesus Christ was a real person, he probably was the one he claimed to be.

"I fell on my knees to pray for the first time in my life, and I asked God to reveal himself to me, forgive my sins, and help me to become a follower of Christ. Towards morning the light broke into my soul. I went into my bedroom, woke my wife, and told her that I had received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior."

Lew Wallace abandoned that book but used his research to write another book. His book was made into one of the all-time classic movies called *Ben Hur*—a story riddled with references to and belief in Jesus.

Lew Wallace moved to New Mexico where he was elected to office and went down in history by the title "Governor Wallace." By contrast, his biblical predecessor went down in history by the title "Doubting Thomas."⁷

This Easter, why not do what Lew Wallace and Thomas did? Confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The Apostle Paul was a major doubter of this Jesus. So much so that he oversaw genocide of early followers of Christ. But, Jesus reached out to Paul and changed his life. Paul would write, "23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," in Romans 6:23.

Jesus came into the world to bridge the gap that sin created between man and God. He did so on the cross and His shed blood and resurrection is what makes our forgiveness possible. Today, I invite you to stop doubting and believe. If you would like to begin a journey with Christ today, I invite you to pray this prayer with me.

Dear Heavenly Father,

I know that I am a sinner. I struggle sometimes to believe that You are Who the Bible says that You are. Today I tell You that I believe. I believe that You sent Your one and only Son, Jesus, into the world so that mankind might be saved. Jesus, thank You, for dying in my place! Thank You for the forgiveness that You offer. Today I ask You to forgive me of my sins and take over my life. I give myself to You. You are my Lord. You are my Master. Today, I pledge my love and allegiance to you. I believe that You died for me, You rose from the grave, and today You live for me. Help me to live for You.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

⁷ Anderson, p. 1.