

**What Now?**  
**John 20:19-31**  
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**John 20:19-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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As I was searching for a short Easter video a few weeks ago, I found one from the Radius church in California.<sup>1</sup> They invited children to retell the Easter story in their own words and then paired their narrative with adult actors playing the roles of the disciples and Jesus. Now the adults took a few liberties in interpreting the children's words – like when one child stated that Judas turned to the dark side – the adult playing Judas donned a stormtrooper helmet; when another child commented that a whole bunch of Mary's went to the tomb on that Easter morning – the video showed 8 women – all with Mary on their nametags – at the tomb; You get the idea – the children provided the narration in their own words...the adults used a literal interpretation of what the children said. But what struck me about the video was how well the children

knew the Easter story, how well they told it and in their own words, and how simply they were able to convey a difficult subject matter.

As I prepped for today, one line from the story kept replaying in my mind: The disciples had just come from the empty tomb that Easter morning and were sharing the story with the others. They were talking, some with excitement, some with fear, when one disciple exclaimed: “There are a lot of wacky things happening today!” “Wacky things happening” as a way to explain the mystery of Easter. I love it!

This concept of a resurrected Jesus and trying to wrap ones’ head around what that means. “Wacky” is a great word to describe the events of Easter. Others may choose more dignified words like “mysterious”, “unexplainable”, “improbable”, “possibly unbelievable.” Or...maybe “doubtful”...which is why this passage sits here the first time we gather for worship after that Easter Sunday morning when the tomb was empty and the disciples realize, “Jesus is alive!” It reminds us, “Yes! That really happened.” And seems to suggest, “Now what?”

Scripture continues: On that very next day – the disciples were in hiding, afraid of what the Jews might do to them. Can you imagine the discussion? No doubt they have heard confirmation from Peter that Jesus was not in the tomb. And while Mary would have shared her encounter with the risen Christ with them, it is doubtful they believed her. I imagine their conversation being one about what happened. Where do you think He is? Could He really have done what He said He was going to do? And then, in their midst, Jesus appeared. He greets them just as He promised He would when He was dining with them on that last night, “Peace be with you.” Four words that confirmed who Jesus was and His completion of the promise He made prior to His death. They would have seen the wounds His body still carried. Those gathered in that room would have confirmation that the Jesus that stood before them was just as He promised he would be. Alive. Not dead.

After Jesus is no longer with them, Thomas shows up, late. I’m sure some of us can understand this. Who knows where he has been? Maybe stuck behind a large herd of sheep. Maybe his kid threw a temper tantrum as he tried to get out the door. Maybe his dog threw-up right as he was leaving and had to clean it up. Who knows? But he wasn’t there when Jesus appeared. But he shows-up, and the disciples start telling him what happened and launching into an excited narrative of Jesus appearing to them. And Thomas, practical, rational Thomas, responds “I’m going to need some proof.”

Every one of the other disciples were there when Jesus showed-up in his resurrected state. They witnessed firsthand the proof of the miracle that not even death could stop the love of God. That’s a lot to digest even if you witness it firsthand but, to be the only one who hadn’t would make even the most confident among us a bit suspicious.

Scripture continues with the disciples gathered again in the room about a week later and Jesus comes to them again. This time Thomas is with them and Jesus greets them with the words of peace, and invites Thomas to touch his sides and his hands. Whatever happened in that encounter, whether Thomas touches Jesus’ wounds or not, he is transformed.

This passage is where Thomas gets his label, “Doubting Thomas”. He seems to become the posterchild of what not to do – We tend to judge him for not believing in seeing the risen Christ when your friends all tell you it is true. We tend to assume Thomas’ actions are bad. But if we are truly honest with ourselves we are more like Thomas than we care to admit.

Somehow in our world, “doubt” became a bad word especially when connected to religion. We often think that doubt and belief are at extreme opposites of the faith spectrum. If we are honest, the church has seemed to suggest that – oftentimes unintentionally so - over the years. Layer on our current day world that seems to function only in extremes and it is no wonder we think you either doubt or you have faith. But what this passage tells us – what it re-enforces - is that the two often come together.

Blogger Emily Heath summarizes a story from *Time* magazine about a woman in her 30’s who had this this overwhelming spiritual experience. She knew God was present, and she felt God calling her to do something new, and scary, and hard. But she felt God so clearly that day that she couldn’t deny it. It’s the sort of spiritual experience most of us want. That moment of clarity. The clear marching orders.

The young woman did go out, and for the next 50 years she did amazing, lifesaving things and made a difference in hundreds upon thousands of lives. But inside, she doubted. She wrestled with faith. Sometimes she even questioned the very existence of God. Her lack of faith bothered her.

You and I know her as Mother Teresa, the woman whose life was lived as a saint. I see pictures of her and think, she must be so holy. So full of faith. She must be so certain of what she is doing. But in the last few years, we have learned this wasn’t the case. She was like us. She, too, had doubts.<sup>ii</sup>

I find this reassuring. If someone the caliber of Mother Teresa struggled with doubt, it lends credit to the fact that it is a part of the faith journey. That for those of us who are unable to be in that upper room – to see firsthand God’s wounds – there is hope for us.

Author and Spiritual leader, Kathleen Norris has spent a great deal of her life exploring the two. In her book, *Amazing Grace*, she talks about her struggle with the church and with her understanding that you had to believe in order to be a Christian. For years, she did not go to church because she thought she did not have the correct religious belief. She was attracted to the church, but convinced she did not belong there because her belief was not set in stone. And then she stumbled upon a Benedictine Abbey that was not far from her house. And she writes this:

I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned with my weighty doubts and intellectual frustration over Christianity. What interested them more was my desire to come to their worship, the liturgy of

the hours. I was a bit disappointed – I had thought that my doubts were spectacular obstacles to my faith and was confused but intrigued when an old monk blithely stated that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow. <sup>iii</sup>

And there it is. Doubt as a seed of faith. Not separate from, but a part of. We, as current day disciples, are on a journey. We are continually working to live into who and what God has created us to be. We study and worship and pray and act...and if we are honest, most likely doubt from time to time. But doubt is a part of that journey. It is a good thing. It is a part of growing in one's faith.

Doubt can shake us up and challenge us to seek out answers to difficult questions. Doubt can push us out of our comfortable places and into new possibility. Doubt calls us to pay attention to the ways God is working in and through and around and WITH us.

This passage is here to remind us that Jesus comes to us right where we are – through locked doors, through our fears, even into our doubt and finds ways to show Himself to us and to remind us who we are and exactly to Whom we belong. To remind us we are worthy in our faith and we are worthy in our doubt.

Gene Robinson, former Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, uses our biblical history to make this point...When we think about the Egyptians crossing the Red Sea – we like to think of the movie version when Moses dramatically opens his arms and the waters obey and part, and there is a nice dry path to cross. However, it is more likely that it only parts enough for one footfall. And once you've taken that, it parts enough for next step, and then the next, and so on. We don't get to see the other side before we start crossing. We have to put our foot down, and assume it won't be mud but it'll be dry, and then put another foot and then another. <sup>iv</sup>

The key to doubt is to not let it be the final word. Thomas could have left and never returned to that room with the disciples...but he stayed. So it is in the life of a disciple. One step at a time – not always sure of what is ahead but willing to take that step knowing that God is and will continue to be present somehow – meeting you just where we are and showing us the way.

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Radius Church "Kids present the Easter Story" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NWZ7bjNQXA>

<sup>ii</sup> Heath, Emily C. "Doubting Thomas and you and me" (blog/sermon) <https://emilycheath.com/2012/04/15/doubting-thomas-and-you-and-me-sermon-for-april-15-2012/>

<sup>iii</sup> Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace*. Riverhead books, New York, 1998. Pp. 62-3.

<sup>iv</sup> Mabuse. "Bishop Gene Robinson at Vanderbilt" Unofficial transcript <http://kraalspace.blogspot.com/2007/04/bishop-gene-robinson-at-vanderbilt.html>