

“Oh, We of Little Faith”

**Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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First Scripture Reading: 2nd Kings 5:1-14

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. ³She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.” ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Second Scripture Reading: John 20:19-29

¹⁹When 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.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.”

²⁶A 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.” ²⁷Then 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.”

²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”



Sermon: “*Oh We of Little Faith*”

On their 2005 album *Why Should the Fire Die?* the band Nickel Creek includes a song in which lead singer, Chris Thile raises questions about the strength of his own faith.

What will be left/ when I've drawn my last breath/
 Besides the folks I've met/ and the folks who've known me?
 Will I discover/ a soul-saving love/
 Or just the dirt/ above and below me?

I took a promise/
 But I do not feel safe/
 Oh, me of little faith.¹

The lyrics express the singer’s concern that though he believes, his faith is not strong enough; his questions mean that he is not a good enough disciple. But I’ve always found those questions to be fair because they speak to his searching; his desire to understand something that his eyes cannot see, and his hands cannot touch.

That song’s title? “Doubting Thomas.”

We remember that Thomas was the disciple who would not believe the report of the other disciples that they had seen the risen Jesus unless he could see and touch the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side for himself. Historically, the perception of Thomas has been that his request for proof was a sign that his faith was weaker than the others.

In the notes in the old NIV Study Bible I used in college, the editors included this little gem: “Hardheaded skepticism can scarcely go further than this.”²

When we talk about someone as having little or no faith in something, we will often characterize that person as a “Doubting Thomas.” And in fact, rarely, if ever, will you hear someone talk about Thomas the disciple without calling him “Doubting Thomas.” But, “weakened faith”? “Hardheaded skepticism”? Is Thomas really deserving of such a critical judgment?

In his character sketch of Thomas, William Barclay says that “in the phrase ‘Doubting Thomas’ there is an element of truth but there is also something very [much] like a slander.”³

In the first three gospels Thomas only appears in lists of the disciples, but in the gospel according to John, Thomas is featured as a very important character; a leader of the disciples, a man of courage and conviction.

John introduces us to Thomas in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus tells the disciples that He will be returning to Bethany to help Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus, who has fallen ill. There is a problem though: Bethany is very near to Jerusalem and Jerusalem is home to the Jewish authorities

who, according to John, have already determined to eliminate Jesus. Twice before, they have tried to stone Jesus and now Jesus is going back. As Jesus announces his intention to do so, the disciples express grave concerns saying, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”⁴ But, Thomas replies to the other disciple’s saying, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”⁵ It is Thomas alone who pledges to follow Jesus, even though it will be dangerous to do so. This is not the face of doubt, it is the face of courage and loyalty.

But our New Testament reading for today is the story by which the church so often defines Thomas. On the evening of Jesus’ resurrection, as the disciples are gathered together in a house, behind locked doors, hiding from the Jewish authorities who might persecute them, Jesus appears in front of them and shows them his hands and side.

But John tells us that Thomas was not among the disciples that night. And so later on, when the disciples tell Thomas the amazing thing that has happened and what they saw, Thomas replies that he won’t believe unless he sees too.

For generations people have taken this to mean that Thomas was weak of faith. But what we see elsewhere in John’s gospel is that Thomas trusts Jesus implicitly, even being alone in his willingness to follow Jesus back to Jerusalem, though it might mean death for them both.

When Thomas meets back up with the disciples and hears their story, what he wants is to see for himself. Who among us would accept such an incredible story *without question*? All Thomas wants is what the disciples themselves have already been given: a chance to see Jesus and to touch his wounds.

While Thomas did express doubt, those doubts don’t indicate a lack of faith in Jesus. Thomas does not doubt Jesus. He doubts the disciples. And that’s the problem we in the church so often have today. People don’t doubt Jesus’s power and love nearly as much as they doubt His followers.

But what is so wrong with a little doubt anyway? Even if we ignore Thomas’ previous expressions of faith and loyalty and take his request for proof to be a sign of straight-up skepticism, why would we interpret that as weakness? Why would that be a bad thing?

Frederich Buechner, the great Presbyterian minister and author has written of doubt that “Whether your faith is that there is a God, or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”⁶

Doubt is a natural, and I would even argue, integral part of faith. We so much want to see faith as a destination; as a point to be reached, a goal to be achieved. But faith is really a journey; a process of becoming. Faith is work. And doubt, though it can be uncomfortable at times, doubt keeps us searching; keeps us questioning; doubts keep us moving on that journey.

Well-known author and pastor Brian McLaren says that doubt can be analogous to pain. “Pain tells us that something nearby or within us is dangerous to our physical body. It is a call for attention and action. Similarly, I think doubt tells us that something in us ... a concept, an idea, a framework of thinking ... deserves further attention because it may be harmful, or false, or imbalanced.”⁷

Doubt lets us know that something isn’t working right for us; that something we’ve held to be true isn’t standing up to scrutiny and probably isn’t something onto which we should keep holding.

Our beliefs are constantly growing and changing as we grow and learn and mature. As a child my faith was much different than it is today. So was yours. As a teenager I was told that the secret to joy was to have Christ in your heart. I didn't really know what that meant but I prayed for Christ to come into my heart anyway.

But my life didn't become a joy ride. The things that were difficult before remained difficult. The worries I had before didn't magically disappear. The shoulder I had hurt playing football, still needed surgery. The girl I was interested in dating, persisted in her refusal to even give me the time of day. I was confused. I began to doubt that being a Christian met constant joy and as I got older I began to believe differently: that putting my trust in Jesus' teachings and trying to serve God in all things would not keep me from experiencing difficult days, but it would give me a purpose and a source of peace when those inevitable bad days come.

But the church has historically been bad for not letting go of long-cherished beliefs. When Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses in 1517, he unwittingly kicked off a lengthy process of self-examination by the church. Doubt sparked questions which kindled a fire of reform that has not gone out over these last five centuries. That process of reformation which led church leaders and lay persons alike to question official church doctrine and seek to better understand God's will has led to vast changes that today we take for granted, like easy access to Bibles and the advent of female clergy.

And that process of questioning and re-examining and reforming is still going on. As we Presbyterians are fond of saying we are reformed and always being reformed by God. The reformation began 600 years ago but it hasn't ended. And reform begins with doubt.

It's the spirit of doubting and seeking that led Christians to question the practice of buying and selling human slaves; a practice defended by an interpretation of scripture that was common in the church well into the nineteenth century.

Likewise, it was a commitment to doubt and questioning that led people like Galileo to challenge the long-established view of the church (a view supported by scripture) that the earth is the center of the universe and the sun, planets and stars revolve around the earth.

Doubt can lead to stronger faith. Yet there are those in the church who are afraid of doubt.

According to polls by the Gallup Corporation, nine out of ten Americans say that they believe in God.⁸ But only 59% of those same people polled said that they are a member of a church or a synagogue.⁹ Why the disparity? Perhaps, like Thomas, many people have no trouble putting their faith in God, but God's followers can be a little more difficult to believe.

I think what often keeps people out of our churches is the church's own reluctance to accept the possibility that what we believe is only one way of trying to understand our God who is far more vast than our feeble human minds are able to comprehend.

In the church, we are often guilty of denying our questions and standing on a claim to certainty. But real people have doubts. Real people ask questions. After all, why would God give us these beautifully complex brains, designed to ask questions and seek answers and capable of so much inquiry and exploration, if we were not meant to use them?

You see doubts and questions are natural. And when we don't examine those doubts and we refuse to ask those questions, they do not simply go away. They remain hidden, just beneath the surface, where they will continue to fester and cause us problems. If we are to be an honest church; if we are to fully embrace what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, then we have to embrace that part of our faith experience that raises doubts and struggles with the hard questions.

Perhaps the church has tried so hard to defend itself from what it perceives as a tendency to question and re-examine *everything*, that in hunkering-down to protect its orthodoxy, the church has shut down the very process of doubt and questioning and searching that makes faith possible.

Maybe the church has done more to hurt its own cause by denying the value of asking hard questions and searching for real answers. Which is not to say that the church should be a place where everything is relative, and everything is true. To the contrary, we are people of belief and tradition and deep theological underpinnings in everything we do.

But we must also be humble and able to acknowledge that what we do and what we believe are only the ways that *we* understand God who is infinite and beyond our ability to fully comprehend. Such an understanding should breed in us, not feelings of superiority or absolute possession of the truth, but humility and an understanding that God is bigger and more complex than our simple thought processes and belief systems are able to capture.

There is always more to the story than we are able to comprehend. There is always more to God than we know. Because doubt is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of a vibrant and active faith that struggles to understand the width and breadth and depth of God.

And I know that sounds challenging and I know that sounds hard, but that's why we call it faith. If it were meant to be easy, we'd call it certainty.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen

¹ Thile, Chris. *Doubting Thomas* Nickel Creek. Valentine, Eric & Berg, Tony, 2005. CD.

² Morris, Leon. "Notes on John 20:25." *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Ed. Kenneth L. Barker. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986. 1637. Print.

³ Barclay, William. *The Master's Men*. New York: Abingdon, 1959. 48. Print.

⁴ John 11:8, NRSV

⁵ John 11:16, NRSV

⁶ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Print.

⁷ McLaren, Brian. "'Doubt: The Tides of Faith'" *Brianmclaren.net*. Brian McLaren, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.brianmclaren.net/emc/archives/resources/doubt-the-tides-of-faith-written.html>>.

⁸ "Gallup Poll, Religion: 'Do You Believe in God?' (based on Yearly Aggregates)." *Gallup.com*. Gallup, Inc., n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx#1>>.

⁹ "Gallup Poll, Religion: 'Do You Happen to Be a Member of a Church or Synagogue?'" (based on Yearly Aggregates)." *Gallup.com*. Gallup, Inc., n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2014.