

“The Power of Doubt”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**John 20: 19-31**

Doubt can be a powerful thing. It can cause us to question long-standing beliefs. It can lead us into a frame-of-mind that is cynical and dark. It can turn our focus totally inward, and we lose the ability to trust.

When was the last time you doubted? Perhaps your toddler told you he didn't push his sister into the mud in the back yard, but you doubt it based on the look on her face. Perhaps your mechanic tells you that your car is all fixed, but you doubt it when ten minutes later you hear that same, awful noise under the hood. Perhaps you are driving down the road and, as you approach a green light, someone turns right on red right in front of you, and you doubt whether that individual knows the rules of driving. Is it obvious that happened to me a few times this past week?!

When was the last time you had doubts about your faith? Perhaps you had a life-long friend who was happily married, but you learned that they are getting a divorce because of infidelity and betrayal. You start to doubt where God is in the midst of this heartache.

Perhaps you have a family member who is your rock, your light, who is the one you cannot live without. Then one day, he doesn't feel good, and you both go to the doctor. Test after tests are run, and eventually the diagnosis is a shock: stage four cancer. Within a matter of days, you have gone from contentment to uncertainty, from joy to despondent. You start to doubt how a loving God could allow this to happen.

Perhaps you have worked for years in your job, provided for your family, supported meaningful charities, and overall you have been comfortable and secure. Then, your manager calls you in and says the company has been bought out, and your position is one that will be consolidated. There will be a severance package, but after a few months, that safety net will be gone. You're too old to reinvent yourself, too young to retire. You start to doubt God's providence and care when you seem to have done nothing wrong.

Doubt is a powerful thing. It is the opposite of certainty, of belief, of trust. It can break down our perceptions, erode away our self-confidence, and calls into question what we believe about one another, ourselves, and even God. I would be lying if I said I have never had doubts in my own faith journey. For me, doubt has crept in when loved

ones have died, when I have had struggles in ministry, when circumstances cause stress and strain on treasured relationships. Doubt is a powerful thing.

On the Sunday after Easter, we most often will read the story of Thomas. It only appears in the Gospel of John, and immediately follows his account of the resurrection and Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus. We are familiar with this story, and it is easy to identify with Thomas: he hasn't seen Jesus, so he won't believe that he really lives. It takes Jesus coming a week after that first Easter to show his disciple that his friends' testimony was true. "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaims. Doubt is wiped away in the face of resurrection faith.

But Thomas's doubt has always been what the church has focused on, to the point that he has been portrayed as "the bad guy" in Church School classes. In fact, Thomas has been the persona of doubt, skepticism, and questioning throughout the church's history.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: John's problem, which is a continuing problem for the church, was how to encourage people in the faith when Jesus was no longer around to be seen or touched. The story of Thomas gave him a way to do that. By detailing that reluctant disciple's doubt, John took the words right out of our mouths and put them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do (or do not) come to believe.

Thomas was not there the first time Jesus appeared to his disciples. He was the only one of the eleven who was not there, which tells you something about his character. Like Peter, he distinguished himself by saying things no one else would say. When Jesus was bent on going to Lazarus' home in Bethany – deep in enemy territory – and everyone else was trying to talk him out of it, Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus sat down at the last supper table and told his friends not to be afraid, because they knew the way where he was going, it was Thomas who said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas was not, in other words, a follower – at least not automatically. He was a brave and literal-minded maverick who could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after he had convinced himself that it was the right thing (*Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1999: 113-118).

At its core, doubt doesn't arise out of total unbelief, but rather out of questioning an event or belief that runs counter to our accepted realities. We don't doubt because we don't believe in anything. We doubt because it is difficult for us to accept some new reality that is opposite to our long-perceived understanding.

Thomas was not someone who didn't believe in Christ. He was the one who professed his devotion when going to the council, and he asked Jesus how they were to know where to go as his disciples.

Thomas was one of Jesus' faithful friends and followers. He had come to believe God was present in his midst. But when he saw his Lord crucified on the cross, and then laid in the tomb, he just could not believe there was any different reality than what he himself witnessed.

In the midst of doubt and skepticism, God is nevertheless present. In the midst of Thomas's questions and grief, where he has locked himself in out of fear, Jesus `stands before him and says, "Peace be with you." In the midst of our anger and doubt, the risen Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." For the power of Easter morning is that the world in which we live has changed, has shifted, and will never accept the status quo. And God is immensely patient with us, giving us time to come to terms with this new reality, coming to us over and over to help us overcome our doubt with grace, love and faith.

If you are doubting your self-worth, remember that God loves you and treasures you as one of his beloved children.

If you are doubting God's place in this world or in your life, remember that God remains patient with all of us, and will come to us and say, "Peace be with you."

If you are doubting what the church's purpose is or how you fit in, remember that God sends all of us to be witnesses to the resurrected Christ – even with our flaws, our concerns, our doubts – so that those who have not seen the risen Christ might come to believe in him.

Doubt is powerful. But it pales in comparison to the life-giving power of God's love in Jesus Christ. Trust in that love, and know you are, now and forevermore, a child of the living, loving God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.