

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
May 17 & 18, 2014  
John Crosby  
Faith + Doubt: Doubting Thomas  
John 20:24-29**

On days like this, it is, frankly, a great connection to tie together fear and doubt with the idea of a faith that sticks. I say *on days like this* because as I was looking over at the choir, I loved it but I've got to tell you, I kept looking out the window. What is that color on the trees? Is that actually green? I was afraid and I doubted we would ever see it again!

Let's talk about sticky faith. When children of any age from 8 months to 88 years, but particularly our youth, are sent off, they go out into a world that is more filled with doubt than filled with faith and they do so at just the wrong time. By that I mean, for the first time in their lives, we are not around to help. For the first time in their lives, the church is not there and for the first time in their lives, they are hearing things that are wildly different from what they have heard when they were growing up. Whether it is in a philosophy class or at a fraternity house, they are being inundated with a different culture. Lesslie Newbigin writes this of modern university,

We live in an age that favors doubt over faith. We often speak of "blind faith" and "honest doubt." Both faith and doubt can be honest or blind, but we rarely speak of "honest faith" or "blind doubt."

All of us have doubts. All of us have times when we struggle to believe. We've been talking about that for two or three weeks now in part because even if you are not in a season filled with doubts, you are surrounded by people who are saying one thing or looking one way on the outside but on the inside, they are struggling to believe this stuff. If we are ever honest enough and courageous enough to open our hearts and open our minds and open our mouths and tell somebody else that we have doubts—"I wonder if God really does hear my prayers," "I question sometimes that Jesus really could really be the only way," "Do you ever think sometimes that we've got it all wrong?"—when somebody dares to talk to you like that or you to them, I think we are standing on sacred ground. The very same facts that you hear from the pulpit to encourage people's faith inspire some of you and fill others of you with doubt and questions. Some of you have great reason to doubt because of the way that you have prayed and the pain that has come into your life. Some of you have doubts or many of your friends who don't come to church have doubts because of the way that the church has acted, not what we have said but how the people who claim to know God have acted and presented the faith given to the saints.

If we want to have a faith that sticks, how do we teach ourselves so that we can teach our kids about *honest* faith, faith that does not have to fake it, and *good* doubt? I think the way this is done best is the way the Creator of the Universe did it. When the God who made us wanted to teach us something, He told stories. One of those stories is found in John's Gospel toward the end, Chapter 20, and it goes like this.

**24** Now Thomas (also known as Didymus ), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came [back from the dead]. **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."

This shows that Thomas must have been at the crucifixion to see that. He said, "Unless I 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!"

Wouldn't you have loved to have seen the look on both of their faces?

**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,

Those famous words!

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Ever since that story was told, we've all been struggling to believe when we do not see, to have faith in something that's invisible. That is why we have doubts. Sometimes doubts lead to truth. You ought to have questions about things that come up in your lives, right? Otherwise you are the person that P. T. Barnum talked about, "There's a sucker born every minute." You'll fall for anything if you don't question some things. Those who follow God need to be unafraid to search for the truth wherever it leads them because God offers truth we have to wrestle for. There is good doubt but there are other doubts that paralyze you, the same way that they paralyzed Thomas. Some of you have had a faith that's been shaken because your faith was built brick by brick by brick by brick and when one of the bricks was pulled out, you didn't have a bunch of bricks, you had a house of cards that fell down like Matt Moberg talked about a couple of weeks ago. Some of you have been wrestling with your doubts for so long you are tired.

Thomas became paralyzed by his doubts and was afraid to go outside. Thomas found that doubt is a good servant but it's a terrible master because the opposite of doubt is not belief. The opposite of doubt is not just getting your facts straight, it is choosing something different. If doubt paralyzes, choosing frees us. When the man with the very sick boy came to Jesus and said, "Can you help my son?" Jesus says, "If you believe." The man says, "I do believe. I want to believe. Help me believe." He wasn't saying, "Tell me the facts differently. Teach me how to pass the test." He was saying, "Help me to trust You so I can put my son in Your hands. Help me."

A famous saint once said, "God cannot show us the stars unless we are willing to creep out of the darkness." That's what faith is. Faith is believing just enough to keep creeping out of the darkness. Thomas, just like you, just like me, had doubts but he was honest enough about his doubts to say, "This is what it will take for me to creep out of the darkness." Right from the start,

he knew what he needed to know, right? Thomas knew and he told other people, "This is what it will take for me to believe. Unless I see Him, unless I put my hand in His side, I won't believe." He needed to have clarity about what he needed to know.

The second thing Thomas does with his doubts is he stays around people who would reinforce a credible faith that was being lived out. One of the toughest things for our kids is, they go away and their hearts are filled with doubts and when they look around, they feel alone. There's no one living out the faith, no one who will encourage them. Thomas stuck around the other disciples.

Then it says that Thomas acted on what he learned. When some, not all, but when some of his doubts were answered, he said, "My Lord and my God!" and his hope came to life again. I often feel that my job is to offer human beings credible hope so that you keep on with the journey. I think about hope a lot. Hope is huge. Hope comes in a couple of different flavors though. Most of the time, hope means "I'm hoping for something to happen" but sometimes hope means "I hope she shows up," "I hope I can trust him." We either hope *for* something or we hope *in* someone. Usually it's "I hope *for*," right? "I hope I get that job." "I hope I get that house." "I hope I get that girl." "I hope I get that girl and she gets that job and we get that house." Sometimes the things we hope for are just parking spots but sometimes we hope for life and death. "I hope this depression lifts." "I hope it's not cancer." But one day it will be, if not cancer, then something else that we never hoped for and then faith and doubt take on a whole new meaning.

Every single day since Easter I've been thinking about one of my very best friends, Steve Hayner. Some of you have met Steve. He spoke here several years ago. He was the head of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a bright, bright mind. He is the president of Columbia Seminary. He and his wife came home for Easter and he wasn't feeling well. He didn't feel better and so on Tuesday he went in and they did a test. The doctor said, "I think it's cancer. I think you've got a little, tiny bit of cancer on the outside of the bile duct that leads into your pancreas but I think we can take care of that." A week later they did the biopsy and he told me, "The doctor came out and I could tell it wasn't good. He said, 'It's inside the pancreas and we found spots on the liver. We can't do the operation but can do some other things.'"

Steve said, "Right then I knew that faith had changed for me." I wrote him a little note and I said, "Hey, pal. We're watching you. We're all watching you and they're watching you. They are watching you stand at your post." Steve found that doubt is not answered by facts. Blaise Pascal, a brilliant Christian scholar, said that faith is more like making a bet than judging a debate. In a debate, you judge who is right and who is wrong, who is doing better and who is doing worse. Making a bet is different and it's more like faith because in life, like making a bet, we have something riding on the outcome. We put something of value on this which also means we have to choose. Sooner or later you have to choose in life. Even if not making a choice, you have chosen. Doubt stops us from choosing.

Steve now has to decide, he has to choose how he will spend the next days of his life. Doubt is a good servant but it is a terrible master that offers nothing. You and I are never going to change, you're never going to grow, you're never going to learn if your doubts paralyze you in place. If you allow your questions to have a death grip, then you will never move.

What's an interesting theory is that my doubts have a death grip on my life. They lead to death. That's why faith, frankly, is so often compared to circus acts. One of our staff, Sarah Long, said,

“I hate that” when I had told her I needed a good picture of somebody on a trapeze. She goes, “You know, I hate the trapeze. I hate to go to the circus. My heart is in my throat every time I see those crazy people doing that. Can you imagine that you’re swinging and they say say, “Okay, let go now and don’t come to me; come to that empty space in the air and I’ll meet you there.”

That’s what faith is like. “Let go and go to that empty space and I’ll meet you there.” The people who let go are you and me, trying in spite of our doubts, trying to let go and fly through the air to an empty space. The people who do that in the circus are called flyers for obvious reasons, they are going to fly for a while. What happens next? The people in the circus who are the stars are the flyers but the people who are the most important in the circus are the catchers. I want my catcher to look like that [slide shown] only bigger. They have to hang upside down, sometimes with blindfolds on, swing back and forth, and catch a flying person and their hands better not be sweaty so they coat their hands with chalk.

You and I are trying to have hands that stick, a sticky faith. We are trying to let go of the death grip we have on our doubts and fly in the prayer that somebody will catch us just like Thomas. He says, “You know what I’m going to need for a catcher? I’m going to need somebody who has holes in His hands and a cut in His side. That’s the only one I trust to catch me.

Back to sticky faith. One of the things I learned this week about faith that sticks happened last Sunday when Laura and I went to a famous church in London, Holy Trinity Brompton. That’s where the Alpha movement started. All around the world people are learning about Christ because of the questions and answers of the Alpha Course. We went to hear the preacher, Nicky Gumbel, and sure enough, we got there and he wasn’t going to preach. Of course! You know the feeling, right? Gumbel got up and he said, “A couple of weeks ago I was at a dinner party.” He is Episcopalian and they can drink. He said, “I was at a dinner party and I bumped into the Israeli Ambassador to England and we had a wonderful conversation. This ambassador, Daniel Taub, he is a lover of the Book, the same Book we love, and I asked him if he would come here.

The sermon that day was an interview Gumbel had done with Ambassador Taub, who is a Jew and loves the Old Testament and he taught it as God’s Word to all of us. At the end he said, “For us Jews faith is nurtured and passed on to our kids, not primarily in churches like this, not primarily in synagogues, our faith is learned at the Sabbath Table.” He said, “Every week at the Sabbath, we gather around the *seder* table and our kids see us. They watch us recite the story of how God comes and rescues His people and that inspires their faith.” I thought, that is what made their faith stick.

For us, it is gathering around a different table, the table at home, the table at the restaurant, but especially *this* table, celebrating the rescue of King Jesus, reassuring ourselves that when we let go, He will catch us. When we get lost, He will find us. When we fall, He will pick us up. This is the table where doubt meets love, not answers, but love that will not ever let us go. Bring your doubts; let Jesus give you faith.

Lord God, I thank You for this table when it does not come with human eloquence or intellectual arguments that can batter away doubts. You call to us to come here *with* our doubts and *with* our questions and *with* our frailties. You say, “Come here, I won’t always answer but I will always feed you. Come here and gather with the family as you watch Me take the Bread and break it and bless it again and say, “This is how much I will sacrifice to

catch you. This is My Body, broken for you.” And when you feel that you will slip, He pours the wine into the cup and says, “This is My Blood, My Blood that will wash you clean and forgive you and give you hands to hold onto.” Lord God, I ask You to bless us as we come with our beliefs and our faith and our dreams and our doubts. I ask You to give us a holy meal together that will make our faith stick to our heads and our hearts and our hands. In Your great Name, we ask. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*