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“Faith Builds on Doubt”  
(John 20:19-31)

I know we've all heard about Thomas. “Doubting Thomas;” poor ole doubting Thomas. This fellow caught grief for 2000 years and I suspect that he'll catch grief for the next 2000 years, or until the Lord returns. To be honest, I feel for him. Our tradition has singled him out as having an inferior faith because he honestly expressed his doubt in the resurrection. He made his reservations known out-loud. And because of that he has the dubious distinction of being the poster boy of skepticism.

But you know what is even worse for ole Thomas is that most people know what a “Doubting Thomas” is even if they haven't heard the biblical story. His name is simply synonymous with doubt. All you have to do is pick up a Webster's Dictionary and there it is. Actually, it is in two places: under “d” for doubt and under “t” for Thomas. According to Webster the definition for a “doubting Thomas” is a habitually doubtful person. Habitually?! Come on! We don't know a whole lot about Thomas, but the only time...**the only time**...we see his doubtful side is in this passage we just read. So, I think 'habitually' might be overkill.

However, in any case, we are still left with a man who appears to have a crack in his wall of faith through which a little doubt is oozing out. And can you really blame him? What he is asked to accept is fantastic. And bear in mind he is hearing about the resurrection second-hand. The other disciples had the advantage of seeing Jesus in person a few days earlier. So, for Thomas, not having had the encounter with the risen Lord, this tale being spun by the delirious disciples is a tad unbelievable. Even for you and me who have the benefit of knowing the end of the story, this may seem unreal. I mean, it's not every day that we hear about folks

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rising from the dead. In fact, I think I would go out on the limb and say that it is a fairly rare event.

So here, Thomas, having heard the news that the disciples saw Jesus alive, was understandable skeptical. Put yourself in Thomas' shoes for a minute; just like Thomas, pretend you have never heard the story of Jesus' resurrection. And one day, after having attended a funeral for a friend, someone comes up to you and says excitedly, "You'll never guess who I saw at Starbucks today. She looks great! Honestly, to look at her, you'd never guess she died last week,"

Think how you would react to that. I think my first concern would be for this person's emotional well-being. My second thought would be that whoever my friend saw must obviously bear a striking resemblance to our deceased friend. The idea that someone would be walking around after having died the previous week is so far out of the realm of possibility that I wouldn't even entertain the thought of it. And my guess is that not many of you would either. And yet, we somehow expect Thomas to accept this news in a matter-of-fact way, like this is no surprise at all.

Poor ole Thoms has become the scapegoat for the church which sometimes says that doubt is wrong, or that it is somehow less than faithful to need a sign, or a touch, or a vision, or a personal encounter. We get the impression that we are not allowed to ask the hard questions without being labeled a cynic, or a skeptic, or a liberal. Since when are questions bad? Since when is it wrong to clarify something? Read the account of Job, or the Psalms. Both are filled with uncertainties, complaints, and questions of

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God. Even Jesus while hanging on the cross cried out to God, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Thomas is just one in a long line of faithful people who have raised their voices to ask the hard yet faithful questions.

My friends, faith lies in conversation. I guess what I'm saying is that faith is really what prompts the conversation. Faith is when we are willing to embrace the doubts, ask the questions, and face the answers. Faith is believing in something that is beyond our ability to comprehend it, but it is not afraid to try.

I think this story is a testimony to the difficulty of faith-how hard it is to believe. Faith takes work, because it gets us in uncomfortable places and begs us to ask tough questions. I also think this story validates our need for God's touch. It says that it is OK for us to ask questions of God and...to wish for a personal encounter. There is nothing cut-and-dried about the Christian faith. It cannot be reduced to a set of rules, where everything fits, where everything makes sense, where all we have to do is connect the dots. That is the kind of thing the Pharisees tried to do. They tried to explain everything in a formula; to make all of life so that it could be answered by a set of rules. And if it didn't fit within that set of rules they rejected it as heresy and blasphemy. And consequently, their hearts were closed to the renewing of Christ simply because he didn't meet the criteria. Their unwillingness to look “outside the box” blinded them to the miracle of Jesus Christ who stood in their presence.

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God comes in places where we sometimes least expect it, showing us that “possibility” has nothing to do with our being able to explain it. Sometimes our faith asks us to look outside the box, to color outside the lines and to believe some things that the rest of the world says are ridiculous. Or...our faith may ask us to do things that the rest of the world says are folly.

Make no mistake about it, this story is a story of doubt, but it is also a story of God's ability to change that doubt into faith-not erase the doubt, but reverse it with an irresistible encounter with the impossible. Faith is that crazy thing that allows us to believe when everything else says, “impossible.” This story is important because when we see the possible through our own cloudy, disbelieving eyes, we suddenly can see an entire world of possibility far beyond what skepticism would allow. God has overcome the grave, and now God even overcomes those things that lead to our death-things like disbelief, fear, hatred, and narrowness.

And even though this is a story of doubt, it is the miracle of faith that we are ultimately left with. Minds are opened, hearts swell with words, “My Lord and my God!” All because of a personal touch and a vision of our Lord. Without it, we just continue to wallow around in our own doubt, or remain a hostage by the world's rules that cling to the impossibilities.

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I began this message by sticking up for poor ole Thomas. And I think his reputaion needs a little polishing. He really wasn't such a bad guy. In fact, he wasn't much different from the other disciples; he was just a week late. The other disciples also needed a personal encounter with the risen Christ, **JUST AS MUCH AS THOMAS DID**. If you'll read the story again, you'll see that all of them, **ALL OF THEM**, reacted with fear and disbelief at first.

Faith and understanding began only after Jesus made himself known personally to each of them. And isn't it exactly the same for us? We remain solidly in our own skepticism until the Lord breaks through the locked doors of our hearts. The miraculous news in all of this is that God searches and finds us even when we don't want to be found. Even when we lock ourselves away from the world, even when we try to keep out the good news, Jesus breaks through that door.

The stone door that barred the tomb couldn't restrain him. He had conquered death and he was going to make it known to his friends and to the world. And no flimsy wooden door could stop him from coming into the disciples' room. And whe they saw him they rejoiced. They cried out in faith. And for the rest of us as well, the Lord appears, breathing his Spirit into our hearts, literally blowing away the mountain of doubt. We all need a personal encounter with the Lord before we can declare, "My Lord and my God." A second-hand Jesus just will never do. We need God to break into our locked hearts and to give us that encounter.

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I suppose what I'm trying to say is that we have all been doubting Thomas at some point in our lives. But it is in our doubting and searching hearts where Jesus breaks in and reveals himself to us. God knows our need for a first-hand encounter. That is why God comes to us in the person of Jesus—took on flesh so that we could see him, touch him, hear him, and be touched by him. And he died for us—died on the cross, raised up for all to see. We have been given a vision of God's sacrificial love in the person of Jesus. And we are touched by God's Holy Spirit, who breaks through and breathes life into our faithless and doubting hearts, causing us to cry like Thomas, “My Lord and my God.”

The end of the text we read this morning declares, “These things 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.” After the Lord breaks into our hearts and we have declared, “My Lord and my God,” there is a new life that proceeds from that point on. God calls us out of our locked rooms into the world. When we declare our faith, we can no longer sequester ourselves in the safety of silence and detachment. We are called to show our faith for the sake of others. So, when others hear our testimony, may they not simply hear words, but may they see Jesus Christ alive in our hearts and lives. The ways we love each other; the ways we respond to those in need; the ways we are responsible with all God has entrusted to us will be visible evidence of Jesus' presence in our lives. Others will come to faith, not by what we say, but by the way we live God's love. Be a vision of Christ

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for someone today. Let's help someone have a first-hand encounter with the living Christ in the way we open our hearts to others.

To God be the glory! Amen.

Reference: "Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: A treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers," P. L. Tan, Garland TX, Bible Communications; "All the Parables of the Bible," H. Lockyer; "John," A. E. Garvie, "Matthew," J.N. Davies, "Mark," J.N. Davies, "Luke," J.A. Findlay, The Abingdon Bible Commentary; "The Gospel of Luke," W. Barclay; "The Gospel of Luke," N. Gelderhuys, "The Gospel According to Mark," W.L. Lane, The New International Commentary on the New Testament; "The Faithful Thomas," W.M. Pittendreigh; "Resurrection Brings New Peace" F. Avila; "A Bout With the Doubts," W. Nickles; "Show Me," T. Zukas; "Famous and Not So Famous Quotes," D. Barry; "Clarke's Bible Commentary," Adam Clarke; Merriam-Webster's American English Dictionary; 042711.