

## **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..

## **In Praise of Doubt** - April 19, 2020

*John 20:19-31*

I don't know about you, but I cannot think of another time in human history where so many people have been required by their governments to stay home and not work. There have certainly been many times when people who wanted to work could not because of economic conditions (as well as discrimination because of race, gender, and nationality, among other reasons). However, until a few weeks ago, just about everyone who wanted work could find it — not that every job paid well or provided good benefits — but at least we were occupied. I think we would agree that human beings were meant to work and the consequences of not working when we are able to are bad for us physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Of course, for many of us this sudden appearance of free time can be a good thing — provided that everything else is stable at home. If you're worried about how you're going to make ends meet this week or the crush of having a house full of bored people is raising your stress levels, there is no way we can call this extra time we suddenly have a blessing.

We are frustrated. We are anxious. We are worried. Some authorities are now saying it will be more than a year before we can move about freely. Some say that this virus could rebound in the fall or winter. Just about all our leaders say that when our economy is “restarted” it will be a very gradual thing because we don't want to risk having the Coronavirus spike upwards with new infections. Some countries that have tried to restart have experienced an increase in infections, negating everything achieved by staying home.

With all this mess, it is perfectly natural to ask where God is in all this. Surely we've heard reports of Covid19 being spread among members of the same congregation, just for worshipping God together. There are always reports in the news of pastors vowing to hold in-person worship in spite of all the official warnings not to. A few pastors will say that the power of God will protect them and their congregations.

Jesus himself had an answer for that, one we discussed a few weeks ago. Remember that when the Evil One challenged Jesus to go to the top of a tall building and jump off asserting God would save him, Jesus told Satan, “You shall not put the Lord to the test.” In other words, God is in charge, we are not. We are the created, not the creator. Therefore while we are free and even encouraged to ask God for help, it is God and God alone who makes the final choice about how, when, and whether we are to receive help the way we want it.

For a church to stay open to in-person worship when people all around are getting sick is the height of arrogance and irresponsibility. Talk about putting God to the test! It is devastating that some pastors would twist the Word of God in such shameful and sinful ways!

Nonetheless, these pastors are not very different from those who are asking congregants to stay home. We all agree that we must Trust in God. If you're hearing these words, you are doing so because at some level you have a belief in God which goes beyond your everyday experiences of life. You believe, or hope, or want to think that in the midst of this Covid storm, like all the other storms of our lives, there is a God who is there with us and is showing us a path forward that will strengthen and build our relationship with God and that is why we worship, whether in person or online.

Where is God in this crisis? Where is the proof that we need to know that we are not alone? These are reasonable questions and they have been asked by the people of God for thousands of years. We've all told ourselves — not just you who are listening, but every human being who has some kind of faith — we've all told ourselves that we have tried to do good and what is right and are disappointed when God does not seem to be honoring God's part of the bargain. Most of us think on some level that when we do the right thing, God rewards us. When we do the wrong thing, God punishes us. In our humble opinion, there is nothing, nothing that we have done in our lives that warrants this Covid illness befalling the nation or the world.

Good thought. Reasonable thought. But perhaps this is why it is good to take a biblical perspective on how life is treating us in the 21st century.

Now while we are suffering a terrible pandemic right now, this is hardly the first time in the history of the human race that we have encountered widespread suffering from a variety of sources. I mean right at the beginning of the Bible, God's people experienced a terrible drought and had to move to Egypt. God's people kept worshipping God. Once in Egypt, God's people were turned into slaves — perhaps for as long as 400 years. God's people kept worshipping God. When they returned to Egypt, the people had to fight terrible wars to capture the land God promised them. God's people kept worshipping God. The Bible records that some 2500 years ago, God's people were invaded by armies from outside nations and forced into exile. God's people kept worshipping God. They returned eventually to their land, at least some of them, but faced new challenges at the hands of new generals, pharaohs, and emperors. God's people kept worshipping God. Even when their city was destroyed, even when hundreds and thousands were killed for calling Jesus their Lord and Savior, God's people kept worshipping God.

Along the way, the Bible has stories of individuals such as Ruth, Job, and Esther — all of whom experienced extreme personal hardships, illnesses, loss of loved ones, intense suffering. Yet even these people kept worshipping God.

There is no question that when times became hard for the people of Israel both individually and collectively, the people doubted. Some people think the Bible has only stories of all the wonderful things God has done. Yes, there are many wonderful stories that tell of God's goodness and love toward humanity. But we can't ignore the fact that the Bible also contains stories of people complaining to God

— and complaining with good reason. The Psalms, an essential part of the Bible, contain scriptures like in Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” If these words sound familiar, they are. They are the same words Jesus spoke during his crucifixion. Yes, even Jesus cried to God, seeking an answer on why things were so bad for him. Still Jesus allowed himself to be crucified. Still the author of Psalm 22 concluded by writing, “Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

That friends, is why I praise Thomas, the subject of our scripture today.

We remember the story. After Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to his disciples. He even entered a room where they were gathered which was locked. For some reason, Thomas, one of the twelve, was not there and he did not believe the reports of his brothers and sisters in Christ that Jesus was alive. We learn that Jesus appeared at another time when Thomas was present. Thomas saw the risen Christ for himself, felt the holes in his wrist and in his side, and believed, exclaiming, “My Lord and My God.” Jesus blesses Thomas for believing and then goes on to bless all who came after Thomas, the people like us who believe without seeing.

But Thomas was right to doubt. In fact, doubts persisted about Jesus. In Matthew’s gospel at the conclusion of his early ministry, when Jesus was taken into heaven, he was surrounded by his disciples yet Matthew reports that even then some still doubted.

All this is to say that doubt is hardly rare in our faith. It is very common and the Bible is not afraid to show many, many examples of individual people and even whole nations who had good reason to doubt the love and presence of God. I’ll go further. I would say that to doubt God is a sign of having faith in God.

No one, no one, no one, should ever listen to my words or the words of any pastor or teacher and simply accept them. Whether we are in worship, or having a Bible Study, or just out in the world, it is good to ask questions. It is good to wonder about God. It is good to ask where God is in the middle of all the struggles we face in life.

This Covid19 virus is just the latest in a long, long series of hardships and struggles all of us have faced in our lives. Obviously every person’s experience is unique to them. We never have the right to say, “my struggles and my suffering is worse than yours.” We don’t know each other well enough to judge who has had it easy and who has had it hard.

I would say that rather than being condemned or criticized for his doubting, Thomas should be praised!

Whatever we do as followers of Jesus Christ, whether it is in worship, like now, or Bible study, or in the everyday experiences of life, in whatever we do, we should, we must ask where God is.

The doubting Thomas expressed was genuine. The doubting that Thomas expressed was natural. The doubting Thomas expressed has been spoken by every human being on this planet if we are to be honest with ourselves.

We are not being faithful to God or to ourselves unless we question, unless we doubt, unless we voice our frustration and complaints. That, friends, is what brings our faith to life!

How can we have faith in God unless we have personally experienced what it means to have no faith or even just a bit of faith in God? The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Having faith means that we are aware of our doubts and fears, that we have wrestled with them, we have been kicked and punched, and pummeled by them. And, after all that struggle, we emerge victorious, having realized that our God is the "God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all," as Paul wrote the Ephesians. This will happen not just once, but over and over again in our lives.

Without doubt, we would simply blindly accept what is going on and what is told to us. But when we questions, when we ask, when we say, "This doesn't sound right, explain more," we are being faithful to God and we are following in the footsteps of Thomas.

Why? Because unless we doubt and question we may well discover that when the challenges of life become too hard for us, our faith will crumble. It will collapse. Doubt is the cement that holds the bricks of our faith together because doubting forces us to do the hard work of thinking and praying and studying and learning who God is, what God is about and how God is leading us through the storm.

Thomas the doubter had his faith strengthened so much by his doubting that he is said to have travelled to India and proclaimed the Good News there!

As we inwardly struggle with our own questions, thoughts, and doubts during the Covid crises, we too can emerge not with a worse, but a better understanding of God's love and purpose.

All around us, things are changing. All around us, amazing stories of faith, love, and dedication are emerging. All around us, new potentials and opportunities are emerging. When we sit down and face ourselves and face our God and explore our doubts and fears, amazing things will happen to us. We will be transformed in ways we cannot foresee. We will do things we have never done before. We will find ways to spread the Good News we have never considered before.

Go ahead, friends, go ahead and doubt, just like Thomas. You have absolutely, totally nothing to be ashamed of.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.