



Believing Is Seeing

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 20:24-31

April 30, 2017

Faith Ignorance

I need to come clean with you about something. I am a believer who wrestles with doubt. One question that badgers me is *where is God in suffering?* I wrestle with

this question often when called upon as pastor to respond to people in crisis and calamity. Other questions baffle me. Why do some prayers go unanswered? Why do the good die young and evil people prosper?

Maybe you find it disconcerting to learn that I, as a seasoned pastor, struggle with nagging doubt. Everybody doubts. I identify with something Frederick Buechner writes, “If you do not doubt you are either kidding yourself or asleep.”

Today’s Scripture is about a man whose name has become synonymous with doubt. We call him Doubting Thomas. I vote to drop the “doubt” tag. Calling Thomas a doubter implies that doubt is the enemy of faith. To be fair about it, we do not pin on Peter the label Denying Peter, despite his threefold denial of Jesus. Why does Thomas take the rap for honest doubt?

Two Sundays ago, Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene has a dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus outside the empty tomb. She tells the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” (20:18). Circle this word “seen.” Seeing is what provokes Mary to believe.

That same evening of Easter Sunday, the disciples huddle behind locked doors. This is the story of last week’s sermon. Jesus suddenly appears to validate his resurrection. Every-

body is there, except Thomas. When Thomas shows up, the disciples tell him, “We have seen the Lord” (20:25).

Thomas wants visible proof: “Unless I see the marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (20:25).

There is nothing exceptional about Thomas’ request for first-hand empirical evidence for Jesus’ resurrection. Mary needs it, so do his twelve disciples. Thomas is asking for the same thing everybody else is asking for.

It is now a week later, the following Sunday (20:26). This may explain why the early Christians settled on Sunday worship. Jesus was raised up on a Sunday, and his first two resurrection appearances occur on Sunday.

The disciples are back in the house, meeting behind locked doors again. This time Thomas is present and accounted for.



Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop unbelieving and believe. 20.27

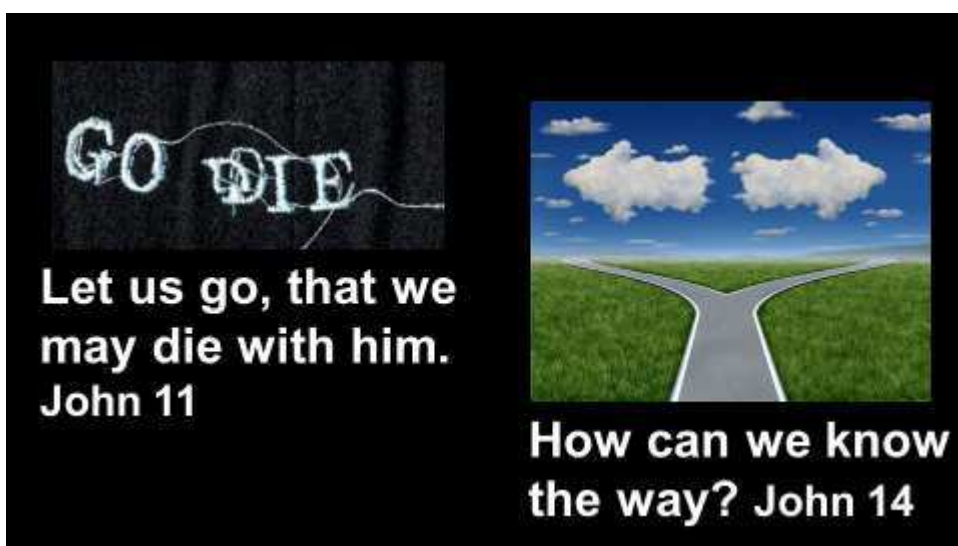
Jesus appears to address Thomas’ concerns. He says, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (20:27).

John does not tell us whether Thomas touches Jesus’ hands and side, although most every artist pictures the scene this way. Seeing may have been enough for Thomas. He concludes, “My Lord and my God” (20:28). Thomas joins the ranks of the other disciples newly convinced of Jesus divinity.

“Stop doubting and believe” is a misleading translation of verse 27. Doubt does not appear in this verse. Translators supply the word “doubt” so it reads well. Literally, the Greek to English translation is “Be not unbelieving and believe.”

This is not mere semantics. Belief and unbelief are polar opposites here. Doubt is not synonymous with unbelief. Doubt is somewhere in the middle, suspended midway between belief and unbelief. Doubt can go either way.

Jesus declares in the concluding verse, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (20:29). While Jesus may seem to be chastising Thomas here, actually something else is on Jesus’ mind. Seeing does not always result in believing to Jesus’ way of thinking. John’s gospel is replete with examples of people who see Jesus’ miracles up close and personal, yet refuse to believe. Seeing does not always lead to believing. More often, believing results in seeing. I am reminded of something George MacDonald writes in his 1872 novel *The Princess and the Goblin*, “Seeing is not believing. It is only seeing.”



John mentions Thomas two other places in his gospel, and doubt does not factor in either story. In the first narrative, Jesus announces his impending

return to Judea to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. Thomas recognizes the dangers of returning to a place where Jesus has received an unfavorable welcome. Just the same, Thomas tells his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we

may die with him” (11:16). These are not the words of a doubter but the confession of a courageous disciple.

In John 14, Jesus has just announced his imminent departure to a place where his disciples cannot come right at the moment. Thomas asks a question that Jesus’ disciples must have been thinking but are afraid to ask: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (14:5). I do not detect any doubt in this story either.

Why am I on a soapbox to clear Thomas’ name? Calling Thomas a doubter implies that doubt is the enemy of faith. Doubt is not the only quality to characterize Thomas’ life. He is a believer who has his doubts, the same as all of us do.



There are two kinds of doubt. There is the bad kind that refuses to believe under any circumstances. Bad doubt conceals an obstinate heart. Some people use doubt as a smokescreen to resist God. Answer one objection and there are many more to substitute in its place. Some people have made doubt a convenient camouflage for a resistant will.

Yet, there is also in Scripture a positive role for doubt to play in a believer’s life. Honest questions can drive us to seek after God.

People in the Bible ask God lots of questions. Jeremiah asks, “Why do the wicked prosper and the faithless live at ease?” (12.). The writer of Habakkuk queries God, “How

long must I cry for help but you do not listen?” (1:2). David probes God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1). The whole story of Job begs the question, why do bad things happen to good people?

My favorite story of doubt concerns a father who appeals to Jesus for help in healing his desperately ill son: “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us” (Mark 9:22). Jesus responds, “What do you mean, ‘If you can?’ Everything is possible for the one who believes.” The father’s response is classic, “I believe; help my unbelief” (9:24). Jesus responds favorably to this father’s honest confession by healing his son.

So what difference does this sermon have to do with my life? Three things come to mind.



First, don’t stuff your doubts. Address them head-on. Can we in church verbalize our doubts and questions? Evidently, some churches think not.

Its considered a sign of weakness. Nonsense!

Earlier, I mentioned a Christian novelist, Frederick Buechner. His characters often grapple with questions of faith in his novels. He describes doubt this way in one of his books: “Doubts are ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” I like that! Doubt can keep us alert and growing in matters of faith.

Second, don't face your doubts alone. This is crucial. Do not keep your doubts to yourself. Share them with believers who wrestle with the same or similar issues.



I want to become the kind of church willing to ask honest questions and face doubt directly. I want to create an environment where it is safe to voice doubts and ask hard questions. This is critical in relationship to children and youth. Questions are a natural part of the spiritual process that leads to genuine faith. If we ignore their questions or do a poor job of answering them, we are doing the next generation no favors. If they feel as though they suppress their questions, they are likely to resurface later in ways that are more destructive and lethal to mature faith.

Last Sunday, we launched our Ignite Initiative. We showed a video of this campaign in worship to highlight our three key priorities: eliminate debt, refurbish our buildings for future ministry and launch a major outreach effort in our community. Our goal in this Ignite Initiative, pure and simple, is to reach more people for Jesus Christ.

One reason why people stay away from church is the mistaken belief that the only thing we care about is certainty. If certainty happens to be the only thing we care about, there would be no room for faith. If people outside the church knew how much we struggle with doubt, they might be more receptive to joining us. I meet people who have left the church because we failed to take their questions seriously. It make me wonder whether God has more tolerance of doubt

than most churches do. The writer of Jude implores us to “have mercy on some who are doubting” (Jude 22).



GOSPEL OF JOHN
So That You May Believe.

3. Doubt your doubts
and believe your beliefs.

Third, doubt your doubts and believe your beliefs. Ask the same questions of doubt that you ask of faith. Be skeptical of your

skepticism. Someone has said, “Feed your faith and your doubts will starve to death.”

We have invested six months’ worth of sermons into John’s gospel this year. Let me give you an overall impression of John’s gospel. The central word in John’s gospel is *believe*. It appears in verbal form no fewer than 98 times in a span of 21 chapters. Verbs express action. *Believe* is something we do. *Believe* equates to trust in John’s gospel. We trust God with our doubts and questions.

The last two verses of John 20 fascinate me. It represents the first time John steps out of the story to give us his editorial opinion. “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). John writes his gospel so we will believe and enter into the life God intends for us.

I believe; help my unbelief. Faith is not dependent on certainty. Faith equates to trust. We walk by faith and not by sight.