

**Sermon:** *“Did Thomas Get a Bad Rap?”* with a subtitle *“Does Doubt Get a Bad Rap?”*

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John 20:19-31  
New International Version  
Focus text: John 20:24-29

Good morning. The first thing I need to do is make a confession to you. The title in the bulletin is not the title of my message. The title is “Did Thomas Get a Bad Rap?” with the subtitle “Does Doubt Get a Bad Rap?” I confess that I did something I have been told not to do, which is title your message before it is written.

As most of you know, I am enrolled in classes for ministry. I thought I knew exactly what my message was going to be about when I told Cindy the title for the bulletin. In my course readings there are clear explanations of why we shouldn’t title a sermon before it is written and the importance of choosing a title carefully.

But in my reading, pondering, and seeking deeper understanding of these passages, I came to a different way of seeing Thomas and his questions and doubting. I came to understand doubt as a pathway to belief and deeper faith. I came to realize that both Thomas and doubt get a bad rap. Many Christians have been told that if we have doubts, we do not have faith. Many of us have been told that questioning and doubting mean we are bad Christians, and we should just accept, believe, and trust.

A while back we watched an interview with Rachel Held-Evans. In the interview, Held-Evans talked about how she was persecuted at her college and by her denomination when she voiced doubts and questions. She said people told her things like “The devil is making you doubt.” “You just need to accept and believe.” “You will go to hell for thinking like that.” She was made to feel like a bad Christian.

I don’t know about you, but as a human I have lots of questions and doubts—about everything! I think my first words were “why” and “how,” and I have never stopped asking questions, sometimes to the great dismay of the people around me. I think like Held-Evans we all have questions and doubts. We may have been told things similar to what was said to her or feel like if we have questions or doubts about God and Jesus, we are bad Christians. In the scripture for today we are shown that Thomas had doubts about Jesus. He said he was seeking evidence of Jesus’ return. He needed his doubts answered, and then he believed.

Thomas has been called “Doubting Thomas” throughout much of history. If you have ever been called a “Doubting Thomas,” you know it is not meant as a good thing. What if we saw Thomas’s doubts as a part of faith? Would that change the way we think and feel about

questioning and having doubts about God? Might we use them as ways of coming to believe more fully, and of deepening our faith?

Let's look more closely at what Jesus did and said when Thomas had doubts. In our looking, let's consider the possibility that God *wants* us to ask questions. Let's consider the possibility that Jesus used Thomas's questions and doubts with a deeper purpose in mind.

First let's take a minute and think about our faith walk over the last few months. We have traveled through the somberness of Lent. We began Holy Week by celebrating Jesus's entry into Jerusalem with singing and waving palms. On Maundy Thursday we recounted the Last Supper, and on Good Friday we traveled with Jesus through the betrayal and denial of him by his friends and followers and his violent and agonizing death on the cross. Finally, we visited the tomb with Mary Magdalene and celebrated Christ's resurrection and triumph over death.

By the end of Easter last week, I had little energy for anyone who was in my physical presence, let alone the intangible that is Jesus and God. All these events take a toll on us with their demands on our physical and mental energy and time. Even after the celebration and victory we can be left feeling tired, flat, and wondering if it was all real.

During Holy Week, we may feel closer in faith and belief in the life and works of Jesus. But what happens when we are no longer face-to-face with the reminders of these events? Maybe we struggle to carry on with belief. Maybe we doubt that it really happened the way it is presented to us. It has been over 2000 years, after all, and there is no real proof that Jesus did all those things we are told he did. We have stories, traditions, faith practices, personal ideas, and something intangible called "belief," but no tangible evidence.

Let's return to Thomas and see what we can figure out about his doubting, our doubting, what Jesus does with it, and where we go from here. This week's scriptures deal with doubt and belief, faith, and fear—things that all of us can relate to as human beings. In Thomas, we see ourselves, and maybe, just maybe, we can come to a place where we can see that our doubting and questioning is part of the process of faith and that we are not bad, wrong, or condemned because of it. Maybe our salvation even rests on having doubts and questions.

Thomas is told by the other disciples that Jesus has come back. He was not there when Jesus appeared in the locked room where the disciples were, so he did not see and said he would not believe it until he had seen and touched the scars in Jesus's hands and put his own hand on the spear wound in his side. Thomas is asking questions and making observations that the other disciples *have* to be asking themselves but never voice. There is evidence of their own doubt and fear, though, because when Jesus does come to them, they are locked inside a room because they are afraid.

These are fearful times for all the followers of Jesus. He is dead and gone. They have no leader anymore. They are grieving and confused, fearful for their own safety and unsure what to do.

Doubt and lack of faith can be present in the best of times, but can you imagine the levels that must have been present during this time?

We encounter Thomas three times in the book of John, and in each one, he is doubting, asking a question, or reacting in a way that many see as lacking in faith. Why might all our encounters with Thomas be ones where he is doubting or asking questions? Is there a purpose for us seeing him voice his doubts over and over? He has seen Jesus heal people and raise people from the dead, and listened to him talk about what will happen and what he wants his followers to do, teaching and “showing” us his power, and preparing us for what is to come. Despite all this and following Jesus around for three years, Thomas still has doubts.

Other people who follow Jesus have doubts as well. We are confronted repeatedly by people living in fear and doubt about Jesus’ ability to keep them safe, to do what he says he can do, and to show up—all despite the “evidence” Jesus shows them. When the angel appears to Mary and tells her she will conceive and give birth to the Messiah that will save all humanity, despite her being a virgin, she does not immediately fall on her knees and praise God. Her first words are “How can this be?” Abraham and Sarah doubt God when told that Sarah will conceive a child. Again, that question, “How? We are too old.” Moses questions God and whines multiple times as he is leading the people of Israel around the wilderness, and Noah has doubts about being able to complete the ark and do what God is telling him to do.

Maybe the Bible has so many examples of questions and doubts for a reason. What if Jesus uses our doubts and questions to deepen our faith and move us closer to God? What if doubt is a part of faith, and seeking answers deepens our faith? What if we consider doubt as evidence of our growth? What if doubts are normal and we stop condemning ourselves and others for having them? What if a closer and more intimate relationship with the Holy is on the other side of our questions and doubts?

Maybe our doubting and questioning are the ways that Creation calls us to awareness and a deeper understanding and faith. Jesus uses Recognition and Calling multiple times as he appears to people who don’t recognize him at first. He calls out to them by name or in some other action, and then they recognize him and believe. Jesus appears repeatedly to his followers, only to have them not recognize him at first. He calls them to that recognition by naming them, like he does at the tomb with Mary Magdalene when she initially mistakes him for the gardener. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to people who do not know him at first, then come to recognize him when he calls them by name or breaks bread with them.

We do not have Jesus in our midst in the ways his followers did before his resurrection and just afterward. He is not here to physically call us by name or share a meal with us. But perhaps he uses our doubts and questions to help us see and hear him and continue to enter the mystery that is faith and believing.

Remember Thomas asking his question in John 14? Jesus certainly used Thomas’s questions to his advantage. In verses 5-7 we have Thomas’s question and Jesus’s answer: Thomas said to

him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you know him and see him." Thomas's questioning gives Jesus the opportunity to teach and instill further understanding and faith.

With Jesus no longer physically with us we need ways to continue to hear and know Him as well as God and the Holy Spirit. Belief and faith are the result of hearing the voice of the Holy, and doubts and questions are the ways in which we seek understanding and recognition and deepen our faith and belief. There may be times when Jesus will show us what we need to keep walking the road of faith, when the seeing and hearing and understanding are clear to us. But there will be times when nothing seems clear and times when Jesus expects us to take steps of faith when there is no evidence for belief.

Jesus wants us to believe even if we cannot see God or may be walking through desolate places in our lives. He wants us to believe when we struggle to feel connected or wonder if any of it is real. Jesus's final words in today's scripture tell us of the blessedness of those who can believe without seeing. This is the climax of the story. The greatest lesson is a statement about faith. How are we to know if we haven't seen? Without Thomas asking questions, we wouldn't have Jesus' answer: "Blessed are those who believe but have not seen."

Jesus tells us we are blessed when we can believe without seeing. Even when it feels like our doubt and darkness will never end, we can have faith. Jesus shows us that doubts and questions are okay and to be expected. Even after everything Thomas saw he still doubts, and yet Jesus does not condemn him. Jesus is willing to show Thomas what he needs to see for Thomas to overcome his doubt.

God gives us grace even when we doubt. Jesus shows us how to give grace when he does not rebuke Thomas for doubting but offers him the "proof" he needs. Jesus still shows love and compassion for Thomas even in his doubting. Jesus knows that Thomas (and the rest of us) will have doubts and crises of faith, and that this is part of the human condition. When he was alive, Jesus showed us how to have faith with his examples of teaching, miracles, and healing. After his death he shows us again by calling Mary Magdalene's name even as she doubts, showing his wounds to his disciples so they will know him, and offering to let Thomas put his hands into the wound on his side.

Jesus answers Thomas with compassion, not condemnation, when he says he needs to have proof that Jesus has been resurrected. "Go ahead," Jesus says. "Put your fingers here. See my wounds. Reach out and put your hand in my side. Stop doubting and believe." When Jesus offers reassurance and acceptance of what Thomas is asking for, he also tells Thomas he needs to believe. Notice that Thomas doesn't touch Jesus's wounds. He no longer needs that physical evidence. After Jesus's accepting and compassionate response, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord, you are my God!" Thomas, the man who asked questions to deepen his faith, found that faith and believed.

This story of Thomas can teach us that it is okay to doubt, and that Jesus will point us to the way of faith and rejoice when we can let go of the need for evidence. When we come to have faith and belief, we are transformed. Remember the story of Rachel Held-Evans? She talked of having a crisis of faith and of her desperate questions and seeking. Despite the condemnation of other people for having those questions, she persisted in asking, doubting, and seeking answers. Held-Evans told us her questioning and doubts transformed and deepened her faith and belief in a loving, generous God who is for everyone.

Doubt is common to us all, and Thomas shows us there is nothing wrong with doubt: Doubting leads to questions. Questions lead to answers. Answers lead to a deepening of faith. Faith leads to the Holy rejoicing that we seek and recognize and answer when called.

A final note on poor old Thomas. I think, and I hope you do as well, that Thomas has gotten a bad rap. He could have been called many things other than Doubting Thomas. Earl C. Davis writes on the Ministry Matters website, We could have labeled him Thomas the Loyal (for being willing to die with Jesus) or Thomas the Committed (as in these weeks after Easter when he declared to Jesus “My Lord and my God” after not taking Jesus up on the offer to poke and prod at his wounds).

I think “Thomas the Theologian” would also be an appropriate honorific. One definition I read said, “Theology considers whether the divine exists in some form and what evidence there is for and about it may be found via personal, spiritual experiences or historical records as documented by others.” That is exactly what Thomas did in his doubting and questioning. So, the next time someone calls you a doubter or a Doubting Thomas, claim it, exclaim it, and own it. Jesus would rejoice.