

“Doubting Thomas?” based on John 20:19-31

Delivered by Rev. Carol Ann Hoard on April 7, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, with our scripture I would like to invite you to come along with me to a room the disciples have locked themselves into after the death of Jesus. This event and the events of the last few days have been very shocking. This has been a roller coaster of emotions. So, because this is the week after Easter, we're going to do a recap.

First the trial – Pilate asked the crowd, “Who do you want to release? Jesus or the hardened criminal Barabbas. The crowd chose Barabbas. Even Pilate was shocked - and Jesus was handed over to be crucified.

Following the crucifixion, the dead were usually buried in a potter's field. Now, can I be honest with you for a minute. Until I was reading and researching this week, I thought a Potter's field was like Mr. Potter having donated his field. I was telling someone this and they thought the same, but in truth it is the place where castoff shards of pottery were thrown. Over time this land would not be fit for anything - so it became a place of burial for the poor people and those who had been crucified.

Then a shocking turn of events happened – a wealthy Jewish Pharisee – Joseph of Arimathea came forward and offered his tomb – a nice burial cave fit for a king. Then Nicodemus, who became a follower of Christ, brought pounds of oil for anointing and embalming herbs. So, His body was cared for and wrapped in linens.

Then there was the big stone in front and the Roman guard. Then the day passed and Sunday came, and on that morning the Marys went back to the tomb. They were greeted by the angels saying, “Do not be afraid!” They saw the empty tomb and the stone rolled away. They were shocked. The linen strips had been shaken off and dropped. The shroud over his face had been nicely folded like a napkin and put up somewhere else.

Take it for what you want, but when we finish dinner and put our napkin on the table, it lets our server know we are done. If we fold it, then it signals to the server that after we go to the bathroom we are coming back. My friend Jim, who is a professor, said maybe I was stretching it a bit here, but just roll with me. It was folded, which means, “I'm coming back.” Just like he said he would, he came back.

Mary Magdalene then ran to tell the disciples and shortly after they showed up. By this point the Marys had already seen the risen Jesus. Peter and John ran there and were so moved. Then the disciples gathered together to comfort one another in this room, but Thomas was not there. He was off by himself. Maybe he was heartbroken and grieving, doubting if he had a reason to live.

The disciples needed a place to regroup. They were afraid of the Jewish leaders who did not like that radical the Romans called, “The King of the Jews.” They were afraid of the mob that did all the angry yelling and the Romans who carried out the crucifixion. Maybe they felt a little guilty since they had abandoned their friend.

Then Jesus enters the room with no knock. He's just there. Here's another one of my little funnies, but maybe this is because he is the door, since in John's gospel he is referred to as the door/gate.

He gets there and says, "Peace be with you." He shows them his hands and side – they welcomed him and were relieved. He says again – "Peace be with you. "

Christ told the disciples he would not always be with them, but the Holy Spirit would be. The Holy Spirit then gives them the authority to forgive sins and so are we. We are called to forgive sins. We say it every week in our Confession.

Well, we know Thomas wasn't there when Jesus was in the room. When the disciples told him of their experience with the risen Lord, he doubted what they were saying. You can imagine how they told him, "We saw Jesus and you didn't." Well, Thomas doubted what they were saying. He refused to believe his friends. I don't know if he doubted if Jesus was alive, but he doubted his friends.

If you think about it, I would too. These friends denied him and turned their back on Jesus. Thomas says I won't believe it, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side." Thomas wanted to touch Jesus, embrace Jesus. Thomas was daring enough to ask tough questions. He was refusing to settle for secondhand faith. He wanted to see it for himself. Thomas was driven to know truth – to mingle with it, wrestle with it, become intimate with it.

A week later Jesus did return back to the same room. This time, Thomas was there. I wonder if the disciples ever even left the room, but a week later he comes back. Notice, Jesus does not criticize Thomas. Jesus does not condemn Thomas. Jesus does not lose patience, asking, "Why would you doubt this?" Instead, he honors Thomas's curiosity.

Jesus validates Thomas' holy, daring, bold questions. Jesus grants Thomas a special appearance. Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." It seems that Jesus valued his honest doubt. Whether or not Thomas actually touched the wounds we don't know but what we do know is that he responded with a confession of faith, "My Lord and my God." This is a story of hope and promise, not of judgment and reprimand. I think we shouldn't call him Doubting Thomas, but "Courageous Thomas," because he was not afraid to ask the tough questions.

Well, growing up I was not afraid to ask the hard questions either. Our children our not afraid to ask the hard questions, and trust me, they ask some hard questions – Where are the dinosaurs in the Bible? How did God create in 6 days, really? This one was asked by a mom recently, "Who did Adam and Eve's children marry?"

I sought answer to every question. I remember in a Sunday school class – 5th grade – with a teacher I won't mention. But I was "shamed" because I was questioning and doubting what she said the Bible said. There was one answer to every question asked of me because there was only one answer to every question. And if we didn't agree with that one answer, we were going to "hell in a handbasket wide open."

So, I quit asking questions and I quit growing in my faith and believed it was either black or white – so let's draw a line in sand that we will never cross. That was how I saw it until I went off to college. It was there that I met Bud Fisher. He was the campus minister for the BSU. He's struggling with cancer so pray for him. Bud challenged me. He saw potential for me and thus I began to evolve

in my thinking. The more I learned, the less I seemed certain about anything and I entered into a struggle asking, "What do I actually believe? What is God saying to me?"

Bud was bold enough to challenge me and If you say you don't doubt, maybe you need to. He showed me that it is okay for me to sit with my doubt and face it. He encouraged me to identify with the doubts of other people and not to hide from them.

I took his advice seriously and began to sit with my own doubt as a spiritual practice. Everyone's doubt is a little different. Imagine walking a labyrinth, like the workshop we did a few weeks ago. In our spiritual journeys, some of us are just stepping onto the path, filled with questions and uncertainties. Others have been walking for a while, and we are finding ourselves in the midst of deepening questions, perhaps even feeling like they've lost their way.

And there are those of us who find themselves in the center of the labyrinth, in a close encounter, wrestling with God much like Jacob did in the wilderness. This is where I was. This wrestling, this encounter, is deeply personal and unique.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith; rather, it's such an important part of our faith journey. It's a sign that we are engaging deeply with our spirituality, asking tough questions, and seeking the truth that resonates with our soul. It isn't about rushing to find all the answers or adhering to what is absolutely certain. When we draw that line in the sand and say this is absolutely certain, we can be putting a barrier between us and God, and with our neighbors. It claims that what we know is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. It leaves no room for the experiences and beliefs of others. This kind of certainty can isolate us, creating divisions where there should be unity.

When we acknowledge our doubts and the complexities of our faith, we are reminded that God's reality is far beyond our understanding. We also make room for others to share their journey with us. Just as the labyrinth has room for all to walk its path, our church should be wide enough to include all those who seek, question, and yearn for a deeper understanding of the mystery of God.

I always encourage students to forge their own relationship with Christ. Their faith cannot be their parent's faith. So when youth have doubts, I welcome those doubts because it is a sign they are growing. But I was told one time that youth should not be allowed to doubt. We need to draw the lines and connect them. We put the youth in this box and we say this is what you have to believe, bottom line – this is it.

But I asked, do you think this is going to stop their doubt? It's only going to stop their questioning of us. It's not going to make them stop doubting. I'd rather have them on the playground in the game, asking questions, than to be locked in and not be able to think. If we could explain everything perfectly, there would be no mystery to God. If we were no mystery we would be on the same plane as God.

So, as I took some time to reflect on my struggle. I took the time to struggle with why a loving and all-powerful God allows human suffering. I took time to doubt some of the doctrines of the church that I found difficult to hold onto. Each denomination has its own doctrines, and as some denominations say women cannot lead, I struggled with that. I'm thankful I don't have to struggle with that now.

During that space of doubt, I felt uncomfortable at times, maybe even depressed, but it also felt freeing to admit my doubt to God. I asked Jesus to be my guide and walk with me. I found it helpful to ask Jesus to help because I was being honest with him. I realized that Jesus could actually identify with some of my doubts, since he suffered, experienced torture, and cried out that he was forsaken on the cross.

What I learned and am still learning about doubt is that it is an essential part of faith. You can only be truly intimate in your relationships if you can be honest. Jesus really likes our honesty. I feel that doubt is not so much a problem to be solved as an opportunity to be honest, to be authentic before God. God can handle it.

The beauty of doubt is that it can lead us to an authentic quest for the living God. In this space of longing and wanting to know, we are ready to experience God's grace and love deeply. In doubt, we are open to experience God.

One of the great Christian leaders of the 20th century was Mother Teresa. The founder of Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa dedicated her life to caring for the dying in Calcutta, India, and around the world. About 20 years ago, the letters of Mother Teresa to her spiritual director were published and it became known that she struggled to have faith in God for many years of her ministry. She experienced what some call a dark night of the soul, often serving Christ by working with the poor even when she had little sense of God's presence in her life.

Now, if Mother Teresa learned to be honest with her doubt, so can we. I would argue that Mother Teresa's faith actually grew stronger in her life as she showed compassion to those who were hurting even as she struggled with doubt. If we step in the hard places, we just might experience God too!

In a few weeks, I turn 55 on my birthday and I find that hard to believe since I still feel like I'm 30. You would think that by now I would know things more than I do, but truthfully, I think I am knowing less and less. But let me also say that I have more peace than I have ever had in my life. I am more secure even though I'm filled with lots of questions. I'm more at ease in my relationship with God. And I will tell you something else, I am not "ashamed" and I am not afraid. What a blessing that is. A gift!

Not even Jesus claimed that he had God's plan all figured out. He told stories that raised questions and gave examples. I'm still asking questions and have my doubts, but I do know that I am grateful to be a part of a church that honors the journey and not just the destination. I'm in a faith community that loves the questions – a congregation that looks up to "Doubting Thomas" as a hero, rather than looking down at him as a failure.

Doubt can be a crushing reality when we lack community. The beauty of the Church is that we can face our questions and struggles together and look to one another and to Jesus for love, compassion, and hope. And we can encourage each other – that is the Holy spirit working in us and through us as the body of Christ. I sense the Holy Spirit working. I sense that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in Shelby Presbyterian. The beauty of this place is that you can come as you are and not be judged for what you believe or don't believe. I have sensed that grace from you in so many ways. Treated as minister not just a woman on staff.

Emily and I were talking the other day and Drew came in and at some point asked if we have adjusted. I thought it's been three years. If we haven't adjusted by now, we'd be in trouble. But I have experienced so much grace here and love here. It's just been amazing, and I am so thankful. Emily and I are so thankful.

Jesus wants us to bring our faith and doubt before him in this Easter season and to honestly look for and seek God's love. There is no shame in our doubt. Let me say that again: There is no shame in our doubt. It makes sense in this world of pain to have questions. Yet, Jesus wants us to cry out for help. Jesus ultimately wishes to enter the beauty of our doubt and to reveal himself as God, as friend, as Savior, as teacher, as the source of light and life.

We all are on the same journey. We all have questions. We are all human and we all need God to show up. In this Easter season, let us commit to journey together where faith and doubt are woven together and to follow the risen Christ. Let it be so with us. Amen.