

“What Things?” based on Luke 24:13-49

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 14, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Last week, in reading the Doubting Thomas story from John’s gospel, Carol Ann reminded us that doubt is not the enemy of our faith. We can actually grow in faith through our doubts, when we are given the space, we need to work through them without judgement and with an assurance of love.

I assure you that I have had my doubts over the years and faced challenges in my faith. But I have emerged stronger in my faith, not because I have all the answers or because everything is lined up perfectly, so that I understand it. No, it’s because of the relationship cultivated with God through my doubt and my pursuit of God, as I recognize that God also pursues me.

You see, I believe God is present in every question I ask. God is there in every sin I commit and in every mistake that I repeat, time and time again. God is there in every moment my pride wants to push God away. God is there when I engage in these mistakes. That’s what it means to think “God with us” is the gospel. The good news is that Jesus is “Emmanuel,” yes, he is God with us. God is not just with us in the happy moments, but in our mistakes and our sadness. In every moment of our lives, God is with us.\

Perhaps on hearing this, you doubt me now – and you might say, “Of course he has to say this, it’s his job. He’s invested.” Or, “How can he be certain that God is with him and would never leave him? What if he were to commit murder? What about some other awful sin?” Maybe you’re thinking, “Surely, God may have set in place a system, but he thinks God is with him? How could God be concerned with him or any of us individually? This must be some kind of self-deluded fantasy.” Perhaps, you wonder, “I mean, how can he be certain of anything? Where’s the proof? How can you know?”

Well, let me tell you the truth: I can’t know. There is no unassailable proof. I can’t be certain. But I do not run from doubt. The reason being that doubt is not a hindrance to my faith. The greatest danger to my faith is certainty. What’s more: Certainty, is the greatest danger to this world around us. I say this because no matter the religious convictions or the lack thereof, it is certainty and an unwillingness to doubt that brings out the worst in us.

I awoke this morning very early and turned on the NPR headlines on my Alexa, as I ate breakfast. The lead story was that Iran had launched more than 200 drones and missiles at Israel. This was in retaliation for Israel allegedly striking the Iranian consulate in Syria. That was in retaliation for an Iranian drone attack against Israel’s navy. That was retaliation for Israel’s war against Hamas and invasion of Gaza. That was in in retaliation for Hamas’s attack on an Israeli nightclub. That was retaliation for Israel’s occupation of Gaza, and so it goes, ad infinitum, over and over again. People who are certain they are right take vengeance against people they are certain are wrong.

In truth, Israel is certain they are the good guys. Iran is also certain that they are the good guys. The Palestinians, whether the innocent victims or the Hamas militants, are also certain that they are the good guys, even as they themselves don’t support each other. And as we watch, or urge political action from the United States, whatever side we’re on, we’re the good guys. We think we know the answer. And to the degree we are certain, we take action, we speak out, and accuse those not speaking one way or the other, of being de-facto supporters of the other side. In our certainty, it’s us versus them.

What happens often though often when it's us versus them, we demand perfect and complete unity on every single level and issue, this and that, so "us" eventually becomes just you, or just me, and the whole world is our opposition. The more we expect ideological purity aligned with our own certainty at every level, we become fewer and fewer, as we reject more and more "them."

Now I am not saying there is no right answer in the Middle East conflict or anything else. I am not saying we should not have convictions and believe, so we try to work for that which we think is the best. But a little bit of doubt is ok. A little bit of doubt allows us to see the person on the other side of the table and say, "I disagree with them, but maybe they're right. I don't think they are, but as long as I think there's a chance they might be right, and I'm not certain, then I can't see them as evil and needing to be destroyed."

The expansion of conflict in the Middle East is frightening on many levels, but certainty and our need for proof to show we are right and things are as we think they are, actually blinds us to the viewpoints of others, and blinds us to the proof right in front of us.

This is what we see with Cleopas – he is blind to Jesus there right in front of him. He laments that it's the third day and there is only word of an empty tomb to him. But there's no proof of anything, at least not the proof he really desires. Perhaps he wonders, maybe someone stole the body. After all, where are the armies of angels retaliating? Where is the destruction that must befall Rome for killing Jesus!

The empty tomb is not proof. Women said one thing, so they sent men to verify, but at this point no one actually saw Jesus yet. Cleopas wants the proof that he wants, and he will not accept the proof he's received, so he is leaving town with a friend. They are not in the upper room with the disciples waiting for more. They have abandoned the project, and, that's it, they're headed to Emmaus. It's not that they doubt, it's that they will only accept their certainty. There is a difference.

I think too often in the church we trade in certainty. No matter where you are on any spectrum, you probably have that belief where if someone doesn't agree with you then they are "Christians in name only." Or you might think, "They're not real Christians over at that church over there."

There's this guy who founded an Ark theme park in Kentucky, and I won't say his name because he makes a whole lot of money off of trading in the notion that if you do not believe his interpretation of Genesis exactly, then you are headed straight for hell when you die. Be afraid. His certainty is so ingrained, that if you doubt his view of scripture, be careful because the whole thing will come crashing down on you. If that certainty gets crumbled by doubt, you know what happens? People move on to look for another certainty in the opposite direction, rejecting faith altogether.

I find it interesting that there are some who have no faith in God who are more evangelical than anyone in this building today, trying to spread their good news of God not existing. They do it with more fervor and vitriol than most. This is not all atheists, but you know who I'm talking about. Just like not all Christians are one way, we all know the examples. We see the effect of the stress on certainty in one scholar on the other side of this state who has made a lot of money rejecting the faith of his childhood because he's gone from certainty for to certainty against Jesus.

We all have litmus tests of our favorite beliefs and we're tempted to judge others as in or out. But in reality, the core of our faith, is absurd – God became human. God in our humanity died on a cross.

That human died and rose again. We know people die and they stay dead. How did he rise? There's no proof for this.

The apostles were in disbelief, or without faith, AFTER they saw and possibly touched his hands and feet – because of their joy and amazement, they were still in their disbelief. I often think that if Jesus came back as a 200-foot-tall human walking the streets of Shelby, there'd be someone who goes, "That's just a hologram. Oh, a multinational corporation made that." It wouldn't matter how Jesus came back, there would be those who reject him.

The disciples still think this may be just a ghost, so Jesus gives more proof. Ghosts don't eat. So, Jesus asks for food to eat, and do you know what it doesn't do? It doesn't drop to the floor. It goes into his belly. He's given them another level of proof and only then do they decide to listen to him. Jesus walks them through the scriptures, revealing to them in all the Old Testament – the books of Moses, or Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms, a shorthand for all the other writings – and he shows they all point to him. They point to him even in this moment in which they doubt.

There is no proof of the resurrection, of God as the creator, but faith is believing or trusting that which we cannot see, as the writer of Hebrews tell us. We do this not because we do so without doubt, but because we are humble enough to recognize, that in this story of Jesus, we can see God loves each of us and empowers us to join in God's work to transform this world.

For the Jewish believers, it was a scandal to think that God might become human, and for a human hanged on a tree to be anything but cursed by God, as it says in Deuteronomy. For the Gentiles, the Greeks and Romans, it was foolish to think of a god enduring shame of any kind, let alone the ultimate shame of the cross. What's more, no god would act on behalf of the people, without the people first earning the right to have that God act on their behalf. That was the Roman religious system.

But that is the amazing thing about the gospel – We trust that not just a god, but the One True God, did share in our humanity and did die on a cross for us. Our God overcame the shame of it, by defeating sin and death, then rising again for us.

Beloved, the good news is that God loves us and is with us, in and among us through the Holy Spirit right now. Being part of the church and a believer does not mean you understand everything perfectly and certainly doesn't mean you do everything perfectly. It does not mean that we will not have doubts. It doesn't mean there aren't teachings you question. It also does not mean that every teaching should be held as certain in order to be a true Christian.

It means that at the end of the day, we decide that even if our brain cannot comprehend it all, we are going to trust in the historic faith of the church and be a part of God's work in this world. We are going to trust that we are loved by God and we are going to love others. We are going to trust that we are going to cultivate wisdom in this effort. We don't do this by saying things are relative, that it's only right or wrong if I think it is. No, we seek wisdom, knowing that we want to be right, but if we are not, God's grace will carry us through. If we do this, with doubt, then the person who disagrees with us isn't our enemy. We walk with them, and we seek to understand along with them.

Beloved, for Cleopas and his companion, it was in the sacramental mystery – breaking of bread – that they recognize Jesus for who he is. It was not in the proof he gave in scripture, but in the

outward physical sign of the inward grace of Jesus. For the disciples in the upper room, it was not the touching of his wounds, or the proof of fish, but eventually they come to understand through the explaining of the scripture.

We live in a Christianized world, and we don't realize that all the time. The world is drastically different today, 2,000 years since that cross and resurrection. In the ancient world, the things we find horrible were just another Tuesday. Violence, dangers we face, and things we know are wrong and have very great laws against, were normal. A father no longer has the right to set their child on the floor to be put outside and killed just because he doesn't want it. We don't have the right to use people in whatever way, shape, or form we want, or own people and do a lot of terrible things the ancient world would have considered acceptable.

And so, I want to end with something from a book called, "How (Not) to Read the Bible," by Dan Kimball. I want to give you this as a piece of advice, because if I was to go back to any point in Scripture, today's reading is where I would want to go. It's the day I want to be there. I want to be there when Jesus opens the scriptures and explains everything. I have my theories and ideas, but how amazing that would have been?

So, here we have this big book and in our Christianized world view we look at some parts and wonder if we really want a God who did that? We do this forgetting that the reason we look at it that way is because of what God has done. Kimball in his book gives four rules for reading scripture.

The first is, "Never read a bible verse." By this, I do not mean, "Never read the bible." No, it means to never read a bible verse on its own out of context. One verse can be taken out of context to say anything you want it to say. In Psalm 139, as the writer is lamenting the destruction that has happened to them, and states, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." This is not God endorsing babies being dashed on the rocks, but the writer emotionally saying that since that's what happened to me, I want the same to happen to them. It's the anger and frustration of the moment. If you read that verse out of context, it sounds awful.

Remember also rule two, "The bible was not written to us. It was written for us." Each of these texts was written to a different audience. We're reading other people's mail. We're reading stories about other people, but it's all written for us.

And so, third, "The bible is not a book. It's a library." All different genres are in the bible from laws to poetry and stories to prophecy. There is a law in Arizona, the author writes about, which states, "You cannot store a donkey in a bathtub." Why? Apparently, some guy kept his donkey in a bathtub and there was a flood, so the donkey went floating down the river in the bathtub and people were trying to save this guy's donkey. So, "No more donkeys in bathtubs." If you read that out of context, you'll be really confused, and yet we do that with Old Testament laws in Leviticus all the time. We think people are crazy when we have no idea what's going on around them. The bible is a library of all different styles of books written in three different languages in all different scenarios.

Lastly, "All of the bible points to Jesus." This is what Jesus points out to the disciples, first on the road to Emmaus and then in the upper room. All of it is a unified story to Jesus.

Use those rules when you are reading your bibles. We need to make sure our kids know this too so that when they run into all those snarky little comments that are out there taking the bible out of

context and violating rules of historians and these too. It's a mess and our kids need to be able to understand that the bible is bigger than just a few words taken out of context. Here in this beautiful moment, Jesus didn't reject them because of their doubt and their fear, but gave them what they needed. Christ will do the same for you.

The word faith is a complicated word. It can mean trust or allegiance or belief. Sometimes we stress too much that belief as certainty, ignoring the trust and allegiance aspect. The Apostle Paul said for us in Ephesians, not to be "blown to and fro by every wind of doctrine." We are instead to grow in the faith and trust in the one who ascended that is the one who descended. This means God in Christ who lived in our flesh and died for us and rose for us.

At the end of the day it is ok to be not sure about everything, but even in our uncertainty we can trust and have faith and trust in the one who loves us and calls us to spread that love in the world all around us. Amen.