

The Certainty of Doubt **John 20:24-31** (April 24, 2022)

Opening Prayer

John 20:24-31

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Let's just say what we all know to be true—when it comes to things of faith, everyone carries some level of doubt, and it happens to the best of us.

Think about John the Baptizer. One day he is pointing at Jesus and declaring, "Behold, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Then, after a few months where things aren't working out like John expected he sends disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who was to come or should we expect another?" (Luke 7:20)

John doubted.

The disciples are another group where we would expect to find unshakable certainty. But Luke reveals how even after the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples, showed them His hands and His feet and invited them to touch Him, they still don't believe it. So Jesus asked for something to eat so that they would have more evidence that He was not just an apparition or vision (Luke 24:41)

Later while on a mountain in Galilee, Matthew tells us that "When they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted." (Mt 28:17)

In their defense, the disciples were wrestling with a reality that was so way outside of what they had expected that it really was hard to grasp and embrace. We know that each one of them eventually did believe and believe so firmly that they were willing to sacrifice their lives to get this news to the world. But where does faith begin and doubt start?

Romans 10 tells us that faith comes from hearing God's word. So, our faith begins with a statement from God that we are asked to believe. For me it all began with the faith-statement, "God is real and He loves you more than you can imagine." Would I ever believe this? Up to that point I had doubted it, but I reached a place that I felt like I had enough evidence to go all-in. And once you go all-in, it changes your next options.

Once I believed that God is real and He loves me more than I can imagine, then I had the next faith step to take—God wants me to know Him and is lovingly engaged in my life even when things aren't going well.

If I say He is real and loves me, will I pursue and trust Him in all circumstances, even the hard ones? Early on I might find doubt entering in when I get a bad grade on a test. Years later I may be challenged to believe God's love when I or a family member must endure a season of trial.

Our faith is given the chance to grow when we reach different points of uncertainty. Like John in prison, we find ourselves wondering, "Was I wrong? Is it possible that what I thought was true is still true even within *these* circumstances?"

We can fully understand the man who said to Jesus, "Lord, I do believe; help my unbelief." I want to take the next step of deeper faith but I'm having a little trouble lifting the load right now.

Faith is like a muscle; the more we use it the stronger it gets. Each trial is an opportunity for faith to grow but eventually we find ourselves standing in front of something that appears too big for us to lift or too seemingly contrary to what we believe and so doubt enters in.

Okay, so we've leveled the playing field. Thomas was not an anomaly among the disciples either then or today.¹ He wasn't the only one needing more evidence for Jesus' physical resurrection. They all needed to be convinced and Jesus was quick to prove His physicality by having them touch and feed Him.

These disciples already believed that the God revealed in their scriptures was the only true God. They believed that God had appeared in physical form to Abraham, Jacob, Samuel and others. What they needed now was for their faith to grow to the point where it could embrace that truth that Jesus is God come in human form, Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of Man who offered Himself as the once-for-all perfect sacrifice.

If the disciples aren't able to be full-in on this one point then the New Covenant won't get very far because, as Paul told the Roman Christians, the resurrection is the powerful declaration that Jesus is the Son of God, God's anointed Messiah, our Lord and God come in the flesh (Rom 1:2-4).

The resurrection validates everything else Jesus said and did as being true and trustworthy. If Jesus only rose spiritually or returned as a vision, if He did not physically rise from the dead, then, as Paul puts it, "among all the people in the world, we are the ones to be most pitied" because our hope is in vain (1 Cor 15:19, 20).

The disciples needed to be all-in for this one belief and Jesus was giving them what they needed to take that leap into a new way of living.

It reminds me of my young 20's when I went to a swimming hole just outside of Robbins, Tennessee. This was one of those cold, deep, spring-fed ponds that didn't let you see more than about six feet below the surface. The locals said no one knew how deep it was but that criminals had used this hole to hide evidence, like cars and safes and firearms because it was too deep to retrieve.

On one side of this small pond was a tall cliff, so tall that only a few brave souls were willing to jump from it into the water. For some reason the idea of doing a swan dive off that thing was appealing to me...until I got to the top and looked over the edge. The jump looked a whole lot different from that angle.

I stood up there for a long while just trying to think it through. I don't know any of these people who say the water is deep everywhere. I could jump and be the only one to land on a tree stump or the bumper of a 62 Chevy Impala! At the same time those who are jumping are doing just fine. All the evidence points to a safe experience.

I had faith that this was going to work out, but I had some pretty strong doubts too. In the end I reasoned that the risk was worth it and that if I didn't do it, I would always wonder what I had missed. So I tightened the draw string on my swim trunks, made sure there were no people in my landing zone, and went all-in, launching myself into the great unknown.

Once we take that first step and believe that God exists, then we need to wrestle with what kind of God He is. The Scripture says He is all-powerful, good and loving. People and circumstances might suggest that He is good but impotent or distant and uncaring, or absent and not concerned. At some point in life every one of us needs to make a choice and go all-in for what we believe. The choice we make impacts how we will live.

As human beings we get to choose. We cannot choose the level of our certainty, but we do get to choose the convictions to which we will commit. And so the leap is our free choice to make a full commitment to something based on the evidence we see.

They saw the scars, touched His body, watched Him eat and chose to take the leap. They would believe that Jesus rose bodily from the grave. They didn't fully know what this commitment meant, but they had received enough to make it and go all-in.

Thomas went all-in when he declared that Jesus was his Lord and Godⁱⁱ. By not correcting him, Jesus affirmed Thomas' conclusion and then expressed what will be needed

for the future. "You believe because you have seen. But blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."ⁱⁱⁱ

Thomas was able to believe from what he saw but there would soon come a time when people will need to believe based on the Apostolic witness alone because Jesus is not going to give a physical visit to every person.

We need to notice that Thomas had some questions that he wanted answered and Jesus replied within one week. When it comes to our own doubts, Thomas gives us a path we can follow, but we need to remember that the answer does not always come that quickly.

Go ahead, ask the Lord for evidence and ask your questions. Don't be afraid of your doubt or try to hide it from Him. Rather than bury it, sit quietly with it for a while and bring it up with others in conversation. Examine it. Try to find its source and the roots that feed it. Work it out with the Lord and with those you trust. We need to do this because doubt that is denied and buried only resurfaces later in a much more damaging way.

Both faith and doubt are needed, but faith is more fundamental, more important, more foundational. John Ortberg puts it this way:

I must believe something before I can doubt anything. Doubt is to belief what darkness is to light, what sickness is to health. It is an absence. Sickness may be the absence of health, but health is more than the absence of sickness. So it is with doubt and faith. Doubt is a good servant but a poor master.^{iv}

Theologian Leslie Newbigin has said that we live in an age that favors doubt over faith. But he adds, "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation." If doubt is our starting point—if it is the master we listen to first—we are immobilized and cannot grow.

I need to believe something before I can doubt it. Belief or faith is first.

True faith always requires some level of uncertainty. For instance, right now in my hand I am holding a 1923 U.S. Silver Peace Dollar. Do you believe me? Some are thinking, "Rob's pretty trustworthy but this is a sermon illustration so he may be making it up to make a point." Others may say, "Well, that's oddly specific information so it is likely true, but then again people don't normally have one of those sitting in a drawer that they can bring to worship."

Everyone in this room is faced with a choice. Will you believe me based solely on my testimony alone? Does anyone here have faith in what I just declared is in my hand? (Go to one whose hand was up). What I do next will completely destroy your faith in what I said. (Show the coin and have the person identify and confirm that I am holding a 1923 U.S. Silver Peace Dollar.)

When faith becomes certainty based on knowledge then faith is no longer needed. It is destroyed. You don't need to believe my word anymore because the verifiable evidence is in front of your eyes.

But there is a problem here. Hebrews 11:6 says that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." Action based on faith about what God said, pleases God. He wants us to take Him at His word alone.

1 Corinthians 13. Right now we only know in part. We are looking at all God is doing as if we are looking at its reflection in a piece of metal but a day is coming when we will know it fully because we will see face to face. When that day comes, faith won't be needed because we will have the certainty of knowledge.

Revelation 20 and 21. When God has made His dwelling among us and it is His hand that wipes away every tear from every eye, and death, and sorrow and crying and pain are gone forever, when that day comes our faith won't be needed anymore because we will see Him as He is.

But for now, we need faith and faith carries with it the certainty of doubt.

It is almost like our life is spent in that Saturday between Good Friday and Easter morning. The time when the pain seems unrelenting, and the circumstances seem to only highlight our doubts. That Saturday that never seems to end is the Saturday we live in. But scripture assures us, Sunday is coming.

We put our hope in a Day of Resurrection Day God, but we live in a Saturday of weeping world.

Our current lack of certainty is a necessary part of our preparation for what is to come. How can a good God allow so much evil to exist? If He does care about me, why doesn't He use some of that power to help me out a little? How can I be so precious to Him if I feel so horrible about myself?

We need to live with and work through our doubt and questions with the Lord and with our trusted friends. Our lack of certainty teaches us to trust, pushes us to seek and causes us to grow. As we practice responding to life circumstances in ways that align with what Jesus taught rather than in ways the world might expect,^v the Father is pleased and the way is opened for His Spirit to do His transforming work, making us more like Jesus and preparing us for the day when we will see Him face to face for eternity.

And all this leads us to become more faithful to the One who made us and more faithful to the ones around us; more faithful to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul mind and strength, more faithful to love our neighbor as ourselves and more faithful to pour out God's love onto the world. And in our current day it seems like God considers faithfulness as more important for us than certainty.

Though I have not seen Him or touched Him, I can't deny the fact of His bodily resurrection from the grave. I believe it to the core of my being and this belief opens the way to a life I could never know otherwise.

The resurrection validated as true all that Jesus said and did. There is a heavenly Father who loves me more than I can know and He will never leave me or forsake me, no matter what circumstances may suggest. I don't have complete certainty on every aspect of this life of faith. Such is the way of faith, but that certainty will come...one day. Even so, I have more than enough to tighten the drawstring of my swimsuit and take the leap.

And how about you? What step of faith is before you today? Perhaps you have yet to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in His name. That is why this gospel was written. We've spent 8 months going over almost every word and story. I wonder, what more do you need to believe and have life in His name?

Or maybe you are further down the path of faith and are faced with an obstacle that seems too heavy to lift. What more do you need to overcome the current challenge of faith you are in, to make the choice and be all-in? No matter where you are, go ahead, ask your Lord to provide what you need. Talk it out with your trusted friends and examine the reasons behind your doubt. And as you do, be ready for the day when you will have to leave that doubt behind, go all-in, take the leap, and enter a new section of your path of faith.

Prayer

Lord, in the end our faith and hope is not in a doctrine we believe in, and it is not in a promise we wait for. It is in a person. Our faith and our hope are in you alone. We trust you to fulfill all you said. We trust you to make it true and to bring all we hope for to reality. We trust you for what is and we trust you for what will be.

And so, in this moment, we express our trust by continuing this prayer of surrender to you alone.

ⁱ There is so much we can say about Thomas but let me share just this one thought. Every time John mentions Thomas he includes that other name, Didymus. Why? Thomas is both Aramaic and Hebrew for twin and Didymus is Greek for twin. From our western mind we all want to know where his sibling was but I wonder if there is something else here.

Jesus gave Simon the nickname, Cephas or Peter, which means Rock. James and John were called the Sons of Thunder. Nicknames had a reason behind them and while twin can mean twin, it can also mean one who doubts, like one who has two minds or is double minded. "I can see this as true and this as true but I don't have enough information to make a decision." Is it possible that his name reveals more about his personality than we may first realize?

ⁱⁱ This phrase was used in the Old Testament as another way to speak of God Almighty.

ⁱⁱⁱ This word, "blessed," does not just mean happy or fortunate. Those who are blessed have been made acceptable to God.

^{iv} Ortberg, J. (2014). *Know doubt: embracing uncertainty in your faith*. Zondervan

^v So someone strikes your right cheek and you offer him your left. Someone forces you to walk one mile and you go with him for two. You choose to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer. In spite of your current conditions or circumstances you speak and act in love. Your faith in Jesus' word guides you to do what He said more than what your emotions may want.