



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **I Doubt That**

John 20:19-31

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April 24, 2022

The Disciple Thomas has gotten such a bad rep. Doubter, this is his label. Doubting Thomas, Thomas the doubting disciple. But Judas didn't become known as Betrayer Judas or Peter, Denier Peter; it seems unfair to me, but I digress.

The Scripture tells us that Jesus greeted the disciples with peace and then, unprompted, showed them his crucifixion wounds so that they would believe it was him. I mean, have you met the disciples? They are often and easily confused, confounded, and full of doubt. So, had Jesus not offered immediate proof of who he was, they totally would have doubted it was him.

It just so happened that Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the disciples, so he missed this initial opportunity to see Jesus for himself and see and touch his wounds. Well, of course, this landed him with the label of Doubter for all eternity.

In Quest, we do a lot of readings from this book, *Words for the Journey*, which is a series of letters written by pastors to their teenage kids about a myriad of important topics. Some of the letters we read include...Listen as I read excerpts from the chapter on Doubt...

*We sometimes speak as if there are two kinds of people: those who believe in God and those who do not. But such clear distinctions are only rarely reflected in the lives of real people. I have known many people of deep faith and yet doubt still visits them on occasion. I have also known people who have rejected the very idea that there is a God, and yet they also have moments when they doubt their doubts.*

*I have concluded that doubt is not always the enemy of faith, and sometimes can actually help our relationship with God grow. Doubt can be unsettling, even painful in its own way, but then, those things that prompt us to grow are often like that, aren't they?*

*Doubt can help us grow in our faith when it causes us to move beyond inadequate ideas of God. For instance, I wonder what would have happened if I never doubted the beliefs of my childhood. I would still think of my parents as all-powerful and myself as immortal. Somewhere along the line I had to doubt certain ideas to make room for other beliefs.*

*When we are children, usually we accept, without question, the religious beliefs of our parents. It is a secondhand faith. There is nothing wrong with that, of course. Such inherited faith is a way to grow in one's own faith by trying on the beliefs and practices of those who are older. But when a child becomes a young adult, something can happen: those same beliefs can be rejected, which is not a bad thing either. It is often necessary to disengage from our inherited beliefs so that, at a later stage, we may come to believe again, but with a big difference. The beliefs are now our own. They are not someone else's hand-me-downs. A time of doubt can allow you to shift from a secondhand faith to a firsthand faith.*

*I don't mean that doubt is something we will simply grow out of. In fact, I have been struck by how some of the towering figures in Christian history have confessed their doubts even as they testified to their faith.*

*Sometimes we speak of doubt and faith as opposites, but perhaps it is more accurate to think of doubt as the shadow cast by faith. Where there is little faith, there is less potential for doubt. Where faith is towering, the shadow of doubt can be that much greater.*

*It seems to me that a God who is worthy of belief will always be subject to doubt. After all, the only things we do not doubt are things like  $2+2=4$ , but who would want to worship a  $2+2=4$  kind of God? A God who could so easily be understood would lack depth and mystery. Such a God would be predictable and easy to understand, and if that were the case, yes, we might eliminate doubt, but we would also eliminate the grandeur and majesty of God.*

*In other words, the only way to eliminate all doubt is to reduce God to something that is unworthy of our devotion. Only a God we can doubt is worthy of believing in.*

I think the story of Doubting Thomas is a perfect text for a confirmation Sunday. I think Thomas is exactly the kind of disciple I am or would like to be. Sure, he had doubts, but if it was a very long, large shadow of doubt, that was cast by a tower of faith, then he is someone we should look up to, someone we should see as wearing the label of "Doubter" as a badge of honor, because to have doubts means having something worth believing in.

If I had to pick a slogan or tag line for confirmation it would probably be something like...

"Quest: THE place for Questions & Doubts. Let's explore them together!"

Because confirmation is an important time in one's life for the exact reasons the book said, it is when we are trying to make that shift from a secondhand faith to a firsthand faith, and the only way to do that is to ask questions! To voice and explore your doubts! This is how we figure out what we believe; this is an important step on our journey of faith.

And faith is a lifelong journey, full of peaks and valleys, winding roads, seasons of doubt and belief. And, this struggle to keep our faith even with the shadows of doubt it casts, is exactly why we are called into community, so we don't have to do it all alone.

Listen to another excerpt from the chapter "Doubt."

*So, I am not concerned if you have doubts about God, in fact you surely will, but when you do, these are the hopes I have for you...*

*First, that you will feel free to express your doubts. They are nothing to be ashamed of, and because they are also like mushrooms—they grow best in the dark. Expressing doubts has a way of diminishing their power.*

*Second, I hope that you will not conclude that any doubts you might have would disqualify you from a life of faith. Any of us could spend our lives focused on our doubts, but more than likely we each have enough belief to keep us busy for a lifetime.*

*Finally, I hope you will be patient with those things you cannot understand or accept yet. I once heard about a famous preacher who had three file drawers. One was labeled "Accepted," and in it he put slips of paper on which he had written those things that he firmly believed. Another file was labeled "Rejected." That was for all the things he simply could not accept. But the third file was the largest. It was labeled "Awaiting Further Light." I hope you will have such a file in your own heart and mind, which signifies an openness to new understanding. Such a file says that you don't have all the answers yet and don't need to.*

*In all of this, my prayer is not that your life will be free from doubt, for that may not be possible. Rather, my prayer is that any doubt in your life will be like the shadow that reflects the height and depth of your faith.*

Thomas is one of the people in the Bible we should be most able to relate to because of his doubts. And he is someone we can admire for expressing his doubts, but also for his love of Jesus and the way doubts can lead to greater faith.

I, too, pray, not that your faith journey will be without doubts, but that you will always know you are not alone in the doubts you struggle with or the questions you have, and that these point to the faith you do have, as well as the potential for your faith to grow.

Thanks be to God!