

Doubting like a Disciple
A Sermon for April 23, 2017
John 20:18-31
Lansdowne UMC

[Listen to Doubting Thomas by Nickel Creek](#)

Wasn't that song that Greg sang powerful? It's not surprisingly called "Doubting Thomas," and it was written by Chris Thile, the mandolin player for the bluegrass group Nickel Creek. I've listened to the album version of the song quite a few times in the past week, and found it to be a moving reflection on a season of life that many of us spend a lot of time in, having serious doubts about what we believe-- even about what we've publically professed to believe.

There's something refreshing for me about witnessing the brave honesty of a song like that. But I wonder if the amount of doubt expressed in the song made anyone feel uncomfortable. Because that much doubt doesn't seem like something we should express in church. Listen again to the first lines of the song:

"What will be left when I've drawn my last breath
Besides the folks I've met and the folks who know me?
Will I discover a soul saving love or
Just the dirt above and below me?"

The journey of faith is rarely one of constant forward progress. And Christianity isn't about "do's" and "don'ts," it's about God revealed in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity

today, I'd like to experiment by sharing today my recommended list of "Do's" and "Don'ts" when it comes to doubt.

My number one most important "Do" of doubt-- the one that I hope you'll remember if you forget everything else I say today-- is to **be honest** about your doubt.

Remember how the gospel reading went? Jesus appears to the disciples who are shut up in a locked room on the evening of Easter Sunday. He just shows up. He gives them his peace, commissions them, and breathes the life-giving breath of God on them-- the Holy Spirit.

But Thomas wasn't there. Talk about missing out! He wasn't there to experience with his senses the reality that Jesus was alive. He didn't see his crucified but raised body. He didn't *hear* Jesus speak peace. He didn't feel the breath of Jesus.

And so what is Thomas' reaction? It's to say, "Look. I know we've been following Jesus for a long time, but you all realize that you sound nuts, right?" (I might be paraphrasing the Bible a little bit, but I just imagine him being totally matter-of-fact about it.) I imagine him saying, "I want to believe you guys, but realize what you're saying! Jesus just popped into the room? Did you see a ghost? Did you have a different spiritual experience? I respect you all and stuff, and I know the rest of you are on the same page about this, but as for me, unless I see him with my own eyes and touch his wounds with my own hands, I won't be able to believe."

Thomas so often gets made fun of for not believing. But we get it, don't we? I can imagine myself responding to Thomas, saying, "Look, brother. I hear you. If I were you I probably wouldn't believe either. But given what I've experienced, how can I not believe?"

Let's be honest together-- I hope we're always honest but let's be really honest. Christianity makes a completely outlandish claim-- that Jesus was raised from the dead. This isn't a claim that lives on the margins of Christian belief, accepted by some, rejected by others. It's the *only* reason that there is such a thing called Christianity to begin with. If you have a Messiah who's dead, you better find yourself a new Messiah. It doesn't matter what he taught and how he made you feel. He's failed. But if God raises him from the dead, just as he himself predicted-- well that's something to reorient your worldview around.

The claim that Jesus was raised from the dead is a claim that's so crazy that it would be completely insane to make it up, even 2000 years ago. I know people in our time like to hate on people 2000 years ago because they didn't have science, but it's not like they didn't know that dead people don't come back to life. They weren't talking about a ghost. They weren't talking about a trippy spiritual experience-- there are just way too many witnesses for that. They were talking about something very, very specific. Jesus died. He was dead. They put him in the ground. But he rose and appeared to the disciples.

Here I go getting excited about the resurrection. Let's stick to the point. Thomas' doubts were completely understandable. And so I actually quite admire Thomas. He was honest.

Which leads me to my next “Do” of doubt. If you do doubt, **doubt in the presence of God**. What do I mean by that? Every once in awhile, Katie and I will be talking on the phone and her side of the conversation will drop out. She’ll just be gone, and I can’t hear her. My phone still tells me there is a connection, but other than the dubious testimony of my phone, I have no evidence of her actually being on the other side of the call. Usually what I do, after I figure out that I can’t hear her, is to say something like, “I can’t hear you anymore, I’m going to call you back.” I don’t know that she’s there to hear it, but frequently she is.

I think it’s the same way with doubting God. We can still talk to God, we can still pray, hoping that God is there to hear us. There is integrity in that. We can be honest about the reality that we’ve lost the connection, or maybe that we’re not sure that there ever was a connection. We can doubt in the presence of God. Doubting the presence of God isn’t irrational and disingenuous. Given the testimony of those who have come to truly believe, it’s a reasonable, authentic way to pursue faith. It’s saying, “Hey, these people that I respect say that they believe. I’m willing to act out of their confidence rather than my lack of confidence.”

My first “Don’t” however is **don’t fake faith**. Faking faith is just a hair’s-breadth away from doubting in the presence of God. The difference between faking faith and doubting in the presence of God is simply honesty. Faking faith is when you say to yourself, “well, I guess this is what I’m supposed to believe. I guess I’ll just tell myself that I believe it.” Faking faith is one of the most effective ways to keep God from working in your heart. It’s saying “I got this” when really we need to be saying, “Lord, I need you.” It’s excelling at twisting yourself into

knots with mental gymnastics. Faking faith brushes the hard facts of life under the rug, as opposed to doubting in the presence of God, which brings all those things into the conversation.

Faking faith says everything is ok when it's really not. Maybe you've experienced some real heartbreak in your life. Something that's happened to you, or maybe you've just come face to face with the evil and injustice of the world. It's completely understandable for that to cause us to doubt God. But if that stuff doesn't get brought into God's presence, it just numbs us to God's activity. There's doubting in the presence of God and then there's faking faith. It's a small difference, but it's all the difference in the world.

Onto next "Do" of doubt. If you doubt, **doubt in the** presence of other believers. This is exactly what Thomas does. He doesn't say, "well, I guess I'm not in the club anymore. Have a good life, church-- I guess I'll try Buddhism." No! He sticks around. He's not afraid to be the only person among the remaining of the Twelve who hasn't seen Jesus.

So what does sticking around other believes buy him? At a minimum, it says to the people that he cares about, "Even though I don't have what you have, I hope I might have it some day." The disciples stick together. They've gone through everything together. They'd shared holidays. They'd gone on fishing trips. They'd laughed at Jesus' jokes about straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel. They'd prayed together, done mission work together, and sung psalms together.

Just because Thomas isn't where the others are in terms of faith doesn't mean they don't want him around. So this is probably the point where I

just need to say it explicitly. If you're a doubter, we want you here. We love you here. And there's no place that we'd prefer that you be. Don't worry about dragging us down. My experience is that the presence of honest doubters in a community of faith always strengthens the witness of the community. You expose the empty sentiments and the platitudes that believers can sometimes fall into. You'll make our community's faith stronger and we'll be thankful for you.

But the second benefit of doubting in the presence of other believers is that you're much more likely to be around when Jesus pops in on the disciples again. Jesus didn't appear to Thomas alone. He appeared to him when he was with the disciples. When you hang around the church-- when you're faithful in coming to worship, and open to other opportunities as they arise-- you might just find yourself in the same room as Jesus at some point.

Ok, since we're being honest, what do I mean by that? We don't get to see Jesus like Thomas ultimately did. Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." So how do we come to believe? How do we encounter Jesus now that Jesus has ascended into heaven and that's where he's staying until he comes again to bring in the fullness of God's kingdom?

The end of John chapter 20 provides one answer. It says, "Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name."

One of the most important ways that we come to encounter Jesus is through seeking God by reading the Bible.

It's probably useful to take a step back. We Methodists share with many Christians a concept called "means of grace." That phrase, "means of grace," isn't implying that we could ever do anything to earn or merit God's grace. It's always a gift from God. But we do understand that there are places and activities where Christ says to us, "I'll meet you there." Reading, meditating on, and studying the scriptures is one area where that is the case. But there are also other personal spiritual disciplines, like prayer, fasting, and worshipping, where God meets us. Then there are the sacraments: Baptism, which you only get one of, where we share in Christ's death and resurrection. And Holy Communion, where in a most visible, tangible way, Christ is present in the bread and the wine. Then there are those things that Jesus tells us about in Matthew 25-- those times when by serving others we are actually serving Jesus: visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and so on.

When we do these things with the hope and the expectation that God will meet us there, frequently we find that that is exactly what happens. So that's my second-to last "Do." Whether you're doubting or not, **Do make use of all of the means of grace that God has provided for us--** those ordinary, unglamorous but real ways in which God says, "I'll meet you there."

I want to go on with many more. Don't stop learning. I want to answer that question the Nickel Creek song asks: "Can I be used to help others find truth, When I'm scared that I'll find proof that it's a lie?"

But because of time, I just want to talk about one final pair of “Do’s” and “Don’ts” for doubting. **Don’t give up on God.** You’re not the first person to have doubts-- Thomas wasn’t even the first person to have doubts! You’re in good company.

And here’s the corresponding “Do.” **Do pursue more of God.** This applies to all of us, wherever we are. Whether we’re doubting everything we’ve ever known or we have what Hebrews chapter 10 calls “the full assurance of faith.” There is more to God than you know. And there is more to experience than you have experienced.

Doubt is not the final destination on the journey of faith. It’s a place on the journey that many of us travel to, and that hopefully many of us will travel *through*. We don’t rest in our doubts. We take them to God and wrestle with them. We lean in and say, “I don’t want to stay here, God, and so I’m going to keep seeking you and pursuing you with everything I’ve got until you come and reveal yourself to me.”

How will this happen? A disciple asked Jesus this exact question back in John chapter 14. He said “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son come and make their home in the hearts of all Christians through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is the same breath of God that gave life to Jesus. The same breath of God that Jesus shared with his disciples. The Holy Spirit is not the fruit of mental gymnastics.

The Holy Spirit is not us faking it. The Holy Spirit is God, undeniably close and present.

Scripture says that there were over 500 human witnesses who saw Jesus raised from the dead. One time, recording in Acts chapter 5, Peter was powerfully testifying to Jesus raised from the dead, he said, “We are witnesses of such things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

There are lots of intellectual arguments to think that the resurrection makes the most sense of the best history that we have access to. There are lots of stories of people whose lives have been completely transformed by hearing the good news, as it says in 1 Corinthians 15, that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to hundred of disciples. But there is only one Holy Spirit, who witnesses to the truth of the Scriptures, and to the reality of God.

Perhaps that opens up more questions than it answers. But that, my brothers and sisters, is all the more reason for us to journey on together.

So when you doubt, may you be honest about it before God. May you seek God with your whole heart in all of the ways that God has provided. May you experience more and more of God’s goodness and grace every day. And most of all, may you be filled with the Holy Spirit, who drives the dark of doubt away, until at last, you attain the full assurance of faith, and know that God more vast, gracious, and loving than you could possibly fully comprehend.

