

“Jesus & The Doubter”  
July 16, 2023

Good Morning. I’m Michael, a pastor at our Lexington Church. It's an honor to get to be with you today. Shout out to all the Kidtown squad with us this morning. Many years ago, I used to lead Kidtown with our DT church. So, you guys have a special place in my heart.



The last time I was here, I told you that my wife, Lauren, and I just had our third baby. But, I forgot to bring a picture. So I wanted to rectify that situation this morning and start today by giving you your **daily dose of cuteness**.

This is Josie, or JoJo, as we call her. And as you can see, she brings the party... much like her daddy.

I wanted to start with **something cute because today, we’re going to be talking about something that can be hard** to talk about in the church. It’s something that - at least in my experience - doesn’t get a ton of air time but is important to deal with in our discipleship to Jesus.

Today, we’re going to talk about **doubt**. The struggle we can often have to believe God, or believe in God, or simply trust what He says...

Generally speaking, it seems like there are two equal and opposite extremes Christians tend to fall into when it comes to doubt.

- On the one hand, **we can be too soft on doubt**...we can, like the Anglican author Os Guinness says, “lionize notions of ambiguity and uncertainty” - We can treat doubt and cynicism like they are some sort of marker of sophistication or maturity...which generally just becomes a slipway to disbelief altogether.
  - This is often the **cultural air** we breathe in the West, right?...skepticism, questioning, doubt, deconstruction...these are often held up as virtues...but rarely ones that, despite their promises, lead us to any real sort of peace.
- But, on the other side of the coin, **we can be too hard on doubt**...we can demonize it and make those who struggle with it feel so guilty about it that they don’t want to acknowledge it...to others and maybe even to themselves.

I can remember I felt a lot of this in church when I was younger. That if I had questions or doubts, well then I better keep those to myself. Struggles with faith were seen as some sort of weakness, or even sin...so I should keep them real quiet unless somebody thinks I’m falling away.

And that sort of had two impacts on me... 1.) it made me feel like something was **wrong with me** for having doubts and 2.) that something was **wrong with God** if he was so afraid of me asking questions.

- Like he was a bit like the Wizard of Oz... afraid that I'd figure out this whole Christianity thing was just a man behind a curtain pulling a lever...

But the **problem with both of these responses** is 1.) neither actually helps us deal with our doubt. Neither moves us to a place of peace, or confidence, or faith. But 2.) neither are at all how Jesus deals with doubt either.

And the good news for us is the Bible hasn't left us on our own here. If you have ever struggled with doubt... you're in good company. The Scriptures are filled with people who have struggled to believe.

And today, we're going to look at how Jesus responds to one of them. Arguably the most famous doubter in Christian history. A guy named Thomas. You've probably heard him by his nickname... "Doubting Thomas."

Today, we're talking about Jesus and the Doubter. **And all I want to do is answer the question, how does Jesus respond to those who struggle to believe?**

Grab a Bible, and let's look there together at John 20.

**So, some quick setup:** on the heels of the crucifixion, all of Jesus' disciples were obviously crushed. The person they believed was Israel's promised Messiah, the man they had given up everything to follow and that had become their dear friend, had been brutally killed by religious leaders for claiming to be God.

At this point in the story, Jesus has resurrected but only revealed himself to Mary Magdalene and a few other of the women disciples. The rest of them thought Jesus was still dead and that death was probably coming for them, too.

But then something amazing happens. While the disciples are locked away in a room trying to hide, Jesus shows up.

And it's miraculous, which initially freaks them out because, of course it would... but he shows them his hands and his side, so they can see this is for real. He's really alive.

And it's a huge moment. It takes these men and women who were afraid for their lives and turns their world upside down... literally changing the course of human history... it

was a big moment for all of them...all of them but one...Thomas...because Thomas wasn't there.

**John 20:24-28** [24] Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin - which was apparently his nickname before he got the one we know and love - was not with them when Jesus came.

Now we don't know why he wasn't there - maybe he was out grabbing **Chick-Fil-A** for the squad, maybe he just needed some alone time to process, who knows...the point is he missed it. Everyone else got to have this experience with Jesus...but he missed out.

And I think it's worth saying that maybe in your wrestle with doubt, you've felt like that a time or two, as well.

- Maybe during worship or at LifeGroup, you have this perception like everyone else has gotten some glimpse of God, or got to have some sort of experience with Him that you just haven't...Everyone else seems to connect with God so easily - prayer seems easy, studying Scripture seems natural for them, and you wonder, "Why do I feel so different?" Or alone? Or struggle?

I don't think it's unfair to think that might be some of Thomas' experience, too

[25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

The Greek used there for "told" is a word that actually means "to keep on telling." Basically, the other disciples are going on and on to Thomas about the resurrection.

- "Thomas, listen, Jesus is alive. He was here. Thomas, we're telling you, he really came to us. We really saw him. It's amazing! Thomas, listen; all hope isn't lost. Everything is going to be different now! He's alive. He's alive. He's alive.

Over and over again to the point where Thomas responds, "Guys, pics or it didn't happen. Stop this. You've been in this room too long and need some fresh air! I don't care what you say... I'm not gonna believe it until I see it.

And with those few words, Thomas' reputation for the rest of Christian history was sealed. It's at this point that no one calls him "the Twin" anymore, but now he's Doubting Thomas.

Which, let me say, I think is really unfair.

Here's what I mean: this is one difficult moment in this man's life, and he gets defined by it for the rest of history. Like how would you like it if someone took one of your most difficult moments and made that your name for forever?

Like, you show up to Lifegroup after a particularly hard week of work and gripe about your job, and for the rest of time, it's all... "Oh, look, it's Wendy the Whiner! I wonder what she's gonna whine about today?!" That'd be totally unfair.

You and I get to struggle or say something dumb and be embarrassed for like 5 minutes because people forget about it. Thomas had one moment of doubt, but it gets recorded in the Bible, and now it's what he's most known for. This is why I don't post on Twitter.

But part of the reason I bring that up is lest we jump on the bandwagon against him here...we should consider a couple of things.

First, that **Thomas is being reasonable.**

While first-century Jewish people tended to have more of an enchanted worldview than we do - by that, I mean they had an easier time believing in things like God, spirits, including the soul and the afterlife - than we do as a culture. **They weren't stupid.**

1st-century people knew - like we do - that dead people don't come back to life. That's an outlandish idea. Thomas' doubt, in many respects, isn't rooted in some hard-hearted desire to be skeptical or disbelieve, but in a sincere desire for the truth.

He doesn't want to be fooled, or naive...or just live by wishful thinking. He wants to live in light of what is real. A desire we should all have...and for what it's worth, if your doubt is more intellectual in nature...I think this, in some respects, should encourage you...people in Scripture did, too.

But secondly, also consider that even if Thomas wasn't being reasonable, **how hard of a thing this would have been for him to do.**

Remember, Thomas, like the other disciples, was severely wounded by what happened with Jesus. He had left house and home and livelihood, and very likely family, to follow Jesus. He had become dear friends with Jesus - shared his life with him...had believed Jesus was the Messiah - the Savior from God to usher in God's Kingdom to the world.

And instead of that happening, instead of his hopes and dreams for this endeavor with Jesus being fulfilled, he had just witnessed him be violently killed.

For a second, just imagine the toll that would take on a person in his shoes. To feel the sting of a person you loved dearly and followed being ripped from you. To watch your hopes and dreams for not just your life, but for your community and for the world, appear to crumble down around you.

What might that do to you? What kind of place might that put you in? What kind of doubt or questions or struggles with belief might you have if you were there?

### **Some of you know that spot really well, right?**

Like, for some of us, to be sure, our doubt can be very intellectual in nature, but the truth is doubt comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. For others of us, if not even the majority of us, our doubt creeps in due to things like disappointment, pain, or failed expectations...

In fact, according to a recent survey, **the Barna research group** found that suffering was often the leader in the clubhouse among reasons for doubt amongst those in the West...

Point being, for many, the struggle to believe isn't because we find belief in God or the things of Jesus to be intellectually incomprehensible...but **rather incompatible with our experience and pain.**

- I can't tell you how many stories I know go something like, "I just can't believe in God or this whole Christianity thing because x, y or z happened...because something bad happened or is happening in the world, or to me, or to someone I know.

And we'll talk more about Jesus and the hurting next week, but the point is **grief can affect belief.**

As **George Carlin** is famous for saying, "Scratch the surface of any cynic, and you will find a disappointed idealist."

- So we can look out and see **oppression, or corruption, or hypocrisy** in the world and even the church...and leads us to think, "How could God exist if this does, too? Or how can I believe he's good and loving or all-powerful when things like this happen?"
- Or it can be our **own circumstances**...The hopes and dreams we thought He'd deliver and didn't..."I thought I'd be married by now. I thought my kid would get well. I thought my parent's marriage would make it. I thought *my* marriage would make it."

Our lives get shaken - in one way or another - and produce doubt. And while it has nothing to do with whether or not the claims of Christianity are true, it can be powerful nonetheless...

And this is Thomas, too. Not only does he want what's true, but he's also wounded...and his skepticism pops up as a defense to avoid being let down again.

And it's at this moment in the story where I'd contend that if we were honest, we'd admit **there is a little Doubting Thomas in all of us, too.**

- Maybe for you, it looks like a **quest for truth...** you're trying to figure out if this whole thing is for real? If Jesus and His resurrection are true...and if it is, what does that mean for you...
- Maybe for others of us, it's not that you're questioning whether or not he's real, but maybe it's **whether or not you can trust him...** Can you trust him with your relationships? With your career, with your money?... Can you trust him with your sexuality?
- Maybe it's **doubts about your spiritual growth...** will he actually come through on the things He says He'll do in Scripture to finish His work in you? To free you from sin...to reconcile that relationship...to heal what's broken...or if He'll give you the strength to do what's necessary.
- **Maybe there are ways that our lives haven't turned out how we hoped.** Places of failed expectations and wounds that we project onto God. Areas that we want to guard and protect - where we don't let our hopes get too high - for fear of being let down. Areas that we struggle mightily to both believe *in* and *believe* God.

Thomas might be Doubting Thomas...but he's also a picture of **Doubting Us...** of Doubting Michael, of Doubting Catherine, of Doubting Jamaal, and Courtney, and Sara, and Kyle...and Doubting You.

**So, how does Jesus respond to the doubter like us?** Let's keep moving...

**26** Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them.

Sounds better already, right? I guess he called DoorDash this time. Nonetheless, it's been 8 more days of sitting in his uncertainty and doubt.

**26** Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

I love this because this is exactly like what happened earlier. **Jesus essentially recreates the moment Thomas missed.** Same scenario, same supernatural power, same words of peace.

**27** Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Again, I don't think it's an accident that **Jesus not only recreates the scene, but uses the exact words of Thomas' doubt.**

He knows what Thomas said about putting his fingers through his wounds, and so he holds them out and says, “Thomas, you wanted to see? Come and See. Put your finger here. See my hand. See my side. Put your hand there and **do the thing you said you would never be able to do and believe.**”

It's almost as if Jesus saw Thomas the entire time, isn't it? That he was aware of everything Thomas was struggling through. That he knew his doubt down to the very words he used to express it.

And I think that's worth pointing out because what it should show us is that **Jesus never abandoned Thomas.**

Even though Thomas may have believed otherwise, even though Thomas felt like he missed out, even though Thomas thought it was all outlandish and couldn't see a possibility for it to be true...Jesus never let that get in the way. He never forgot about him...and, more importantly, never let him go.

**Which is kind of Jesus' M.O., isn't it? Always has a heart for the one sheep out of the 99.** He's never unconcerned for the one left behind. He goes straight to his wounded, cynical disciple and says, “Go ahead. **See and Believe. It's me. It's really me.**”

**You see, Jesus moves towards the doubter despite his doubt.**

He moves towards Thomas in the depths of his doubt. Thomas' doubt did not prompt Jesus' scorn, but rather his amazing compassion. He comes to him with incredible thoughtfulness and pursuit...Thomas' doubt isn't met with rejection...but, rather it's met with redemption.

Thomas is invited to put his hands in Jesus' wounds, and as he does, his own wounds are healed. His doubt, his skepticism, and distrust are destroyed. He believes.

**28** Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

What an amazing moment. All of his doubt, all of his distrust, all of his struggle in that moment gives way to worship.

**And all I want you to see today is this is how Jesus responds to the doubter...**

**And for you and I, in our own seasons of doubt, whatever shape they may take... the encouragement is: this is how he responds to us, too...**

**Jesus moves towards you in your doubt.**

This is the problem when we demonize doubt. We make it seem like it's something that either frustrates Jesus or scares him...or both, so we should hide it.

Listen...Jesus' interaction with Thomas should tell you that **Jesus is not afraid of your doubt...**

He is not in Heaven all **frustrated** with you because you struggle...wishing you could just get over it and move on. Nor is He all that worried that, "Uh-oh, Suzy might just find the thing that is gonna confirm I'm a joke." Not at all. He knows exactly who He is...and just wants you to see that, too!

**He wasn't afraid of Thomas' doubt, and he isn't afraid of yours...** In fact, he says to Thomas, "You wanted to see? Come and see!" And that same invitation is open to you...

- Bring Him questions. Bring Him struggles. Bring Him doubts. And find their answers in Jesus.

**One of the first things that ought to tell us is that when it comes to Jesus, you can be honest about your doubts...**

When we know that this is Jesus' posture towards us, we can be honest about where we struggle...with Him, with ourselves, and with each other.

I can't help but think that it might've even been **tempting for Thomas** to just go along with it and bury his concerns somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind...to just go with the flow and not create a problem while his struggle ate away at him...

But that's not what Thomas does. In fact, his honesty is partly what opens up the door for his doubt to be answered. And the same is true for you.

**Your doubt can never be dealt with if you aren't honest about it.**

So please just hear me here...it's **far too easy to just do the church thing**; you know what I'm saying? To show up, sing some songs about Jesus, maybe get a little bit of encouragement from a preacher, and go out to brunch with friends afterward and just pretend like everything is fine...when in reality it isn't...



And, don't misunderstand, **I'm not suggesting we make the opposite error** and lionize doubt like it's an end in and of itself...no, the point of being honest about our doubts is so that we can move through them and come out on the other end on solid ground...but none of that can happen if we aren't first honest with where we are.

And on that note, I think it's worth noticing the fact that **Thomas was still with the disciples 8 days later**. That's a little detail, but it sticks out to me.

Thomas was honest about his doubt - he was open with them about his struggle to believe the experience they all had - but he doesn't let that cause him to run away. You see that?

- **He didn't run**. He didn't hide. He didn't isolate himself from Jesus' people, but pressed further in.

And the reason I bring that up is because **the easiest thing to do with doubt** is to isolate yourself from people you think don't have it...to pull back from God's people to be alone, or to surround yourself with voices who will encourage your doubt...which like I said before is the air we breathe in America.

But that only ends one way. And I just think it's worth seeing here that part of what sets the table for Thomas' doubts being answered is that he put himself in a **position and around people** where that was possible.

- If in your doubts, you isolate yourself from anyone who is willing to continue to tell you the truth...if you only surround yourself with an echo chamber for your doubts...you shouldn't be surprised when your faith ends up malnourished and feeble.

**The healthiest thing you can do in a season of doubt isn't isolate, but be honest and press further in.**

- And if you do...I don't know when...it might be 8 days...or 8 months...or 8 years, but if you do, you're in the most likely place to have Jesus show up and minister to you in the midst of your doubts.

So when we know Jesus moves towards us in doubt, we can be honest about it. But, Jesus' interaction with Thomas also tells us that when it comes to doubt, **we can trust Jesus with it**.

So, you and I, we have a **privileged vantage point**. We know how Thomas' story ends. We know that Jesus had risen. We know that He was moving towards him the whole time. We know that Jesus wasn't done with Him - that He hadn't abandoned him. We know that Thomas' doubt wasn't going to be the end...

**And while you may not always be able to see it...the same is true for you...**

- No matter what your doubt may be. No matter the struggle. No matter how hard, or difficult, or how dark of a night your soul may be going through here...Jesus is not done. He is moving towards you.

I don't know what your doubt, your struggle, or your pain may be...but what I do know is there is one with the strength to carry you through it: **Jesus**.

I think of that story from the gospels of Peter walking on the water with Jesus. He walks on it when his eyes are on Jesus, but when he looks at the wind and waves he starts to sink. And the encouragement is to keep our eyes on Jesus...it's not denying the fact that there is a storm...but keeping our eyes on the one who can get us through it.

The invitation of Jesus **isn't come** to me when you've got it all figured out.

- When you've figured out your struggle on your own...
- When you've found your own answers to all your questions...
- When you've got your faith all cleaned up and pretty...

No, rather, he says, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden..." Come to me with all your hurt and hardship...Come to me with all your struggle and all your fight...come to me and find rest.

You see, for the Christian, **success is not the absence of doubt... It's trust.**

- It's trusting and clinging to Jesus even when the doubt is overwhelming and we don't think we can cling to Him anymore...only to find out, like Thomas, He's been holding onto us the whole time!

One of my favorite definitions of faith I've heard → **faith is accepting what I can't understand on the basis of what I can understand.**

And what we *can* understand in our seasons of doubt...is **that Jesus is alive. We can know what Thomas had to be shown.**

- Listen, I'm not a Christian because every question of faith I've ever asked has been answered; I'm a Christian because I believe Jesus rose from the dead. And I know if Jesus rose from the dead, I can trust him with all the other questions I don't have answers for yet.
  - I can trust him when my life doesn't go how I thought it would...
  - I can trust him when it seems like the world around me is falling apart...
  - I can trust him when I feel like I'm missing out on what everyone else around me gets to experience...

Because, ultimately, what holds me are not those things. Ultimately, what holds me are the same risen, nail-scarred hands that held Thomas. And what those hands tell me is that I am loved, that He's got me, and if death didn't beat Jesus and I am his...then sin, death, and even doubt won't beat me either...

**Conclusion:**

But maybe some of you are like, "**But, that's precisely my question! How can I know that Jesus really rose from the dead?!**"

While I don't have time to go into a full-scale unpacking of why you can reliably believe that the resurrection is true - that's just not the point of today's sermon - what I can tell you is there is enough evidence out there to reasonably make that conclusion.

- And we've got a lot of resources we've put out over the years that deal with those sorts of specific doubts. And if you struggle there, I highly encourage you to check them out on our website.

But at least the one I'd leave you with this morning is to consider Thomas.

So, I said earlier that I think Thomas gets a bad rap because this is just one doubtful moment in his life. And I still think that is true...**because of how Thomas' story actually ends.** It doesn't end here.

After all of this is said and done, not only does Thomas cry out in worship, but he will go on to give his life for the Kingdom of God. To share far and wide this message of the resurrected Messiah.

According to church tradition, Thomas is the one who first brought the message of the **Gospel to India**, where he was eventually martyred because of his proclamation that Jesus was alive and was Lord.

This is a man who goes from being unable to believe that Jesus was alive to a man willing to die for it. It seems to me, at least, like that's a **man who is convinced it's true.**

But the thing for all of us to see: all of that happens on the other *side* of His doubt. His date with doubt was the ticket to get there. And the same may be true for you.

And in our doubt, the only question is, "**Will we be open to receive him?**"

I want to say Thomas needs a **new nickname**...not just for his sake, but for ours, too. I even tried to think of one, but, honestly, I couldn't come up with anything good...and then it hit me.

Maybe Thomas doesn't need a nickname at all...maybe he's just *Thomas* - a disciple like the rest of us...who is a mix of belief and struggle with belief, like you and me...

and maybe he's just a disciple whom Jesus loves and will meet in the midst of doubt... and maybe that's exactly who you are, too.

## **Pray**

*Heavenly Father,*

*Thank you that you are a God who meets us in our doubt.*

- *I wanna pray for those of us who struggle with belief.*
  - *Help us to be honest and press in.*
  - *Help us to trust you.*

*Thank you for Jesus. Thank you that it is not the strength of our faith that saves us, but the strength of the one our faith is in.*

*Amen.*

## **Communion**

*After we hear the Word of God each Sunday, we typically carve out time to respond. We do so in 3 ways: we sing, we pray, and we eat.*

*The worship team is gonna continue to lead us in songs to and about Jesus - the hope and peace He brings.*

*If you need prayer this morning, members of our church family will be off to the sides of the stage...they'd love to pray for anything you need this morning.*

*And we eat. This is a meal we call Communion, or the Lord's Supper...a meal given to us by Jesus to remind us of his sacrifice to save us. It's bread that represents His body broken for us. And wine for His blood given for us...to cleanse us from sin, to give us hope for the future, and bring us home to God who fills our hearts full.*

*It's a meal that reminds us of who Jesus really and truly is.*

*If you're a believer in Jesus, you're invited to take a moment - confess to God whatever sin you may need to - and come to the table and eat in remembrance of Him.*

*So, let's stand and sing, pray, and eat.*