“We Doubt as Well”
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Matthew 28:11-20
John 20:19-29

Here’s what I need: When I have problems, I want to know that other people and other Christians have the same problems, and that I’m not alone. I remember the day I discovered Romans 7. I don’t remember the occasion or the situation, but I remember what I felt before I read Romans 7. I felt like the Apostle Paul was perfect and could do no wrong. I felt like his obedience to God had come to a point that conformed to God’s will in every situation and every moment of his life. Then I found Romans 7, and I have been grateful ever since. Look at it with me.

Romans 7:15-20
15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

I find these verses very comforting. Often what I want to do, I can’t. And the every things I don’t want to do, I do them. I have the same feeling about doubt. I want to believe all of the time, but I can’t. Doubt creeps in. It sneaks in the back door, and when it does, I’m embarrassed, even ashamed.

We should approach today’s passage with honesty because I know doubting Thomas is not the only one who doubts. We doubt as well.

On every Sunday when Rev. Tom Are preaches at Village Presbyterian, he concludes every sermon with the same prayer: “O God, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.” That’s a truthful way to approach all discussion about the scriptures.

It’s one of the reasons why I selected the Matthew 28 passage to be read. There’s a little footnote by Matthew that helps prepare us for our resurrection passage in John’s Gospel about the doubting Thomas. Sometimes because the Great Commission is so dominant in Matthew 28, this little footnote gets missed. Look at it again.

Matthew 28:17
17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.
There is a little disagreement about the translation of this verse. It might sound like trivia, but I think it is quite important. Most translations have the word structure like you see it. The Eleven saw and worship the Risen Jesus, but some doubted despite the resurrection and the presence of Jesus right in front of them. However, a few translators remove the word “some” and replace it with “also.” The little Greek word is “oi” that can be translated with many English words: “who,” “which,” “also,” and “that,” but rarely “some,” The most common translation of “oi” is “who.” Using that word, the sentence feels awkward, but maybe accurate. Dale Bruner uses this translation.

Matthew 28:17 Bruner
17 And when they saw him they worshipped him, though they also doubted.

Do you realize what this means? It means the Eleven saw and worshipped, but also had doubts in their minds.

Some have tried to explain this interpretation away by saying the Eleven were not alone, and thus the other followers around the apostles doubted, but surely not the Eleven! Others say the verse tense for the word “doubted” is in past tense so that implies the doubt is in the past, but not in the present tense of actually seeing the Risen Jesus!

I think we should have the words worship and doubt next to each other. Maybe the truthful structure of the Christian faith is bipolar, and maybe the disciples of Jesus Christ actually live their lives between worship and doubt. Maybe this verse demonstrates the truth that Christians are both believers and doubters – adoring and wondering, trusting and questioning, believing and doubting. I think all disciples of Jesus experience this bipolar behavior, and it’s not healthy to deny it. The good news of the Great Commission then is this: Jesus called these believing and doubting disciples to go and make disciples. He does not stop and correct them, but commissions them to be responsible. He sends these worshipping and doubting disciples to baptize and teach - with the promise that he will be with them.

With that in mind, I think we are ready for the story of the doubting Thomas.

John 20:19
19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”

This is the evening of the resurrection. Mary has already seen the Lord and reported her discovery to the Eleven. Luke tells us the disciples who didn’t believe her because the words seemed like nonsense to them (Luke 24:11). They gathered together, probably in the Upper Room, and were afraid. Soldiers were on high alert because the tomb had been sealed. Guards
were placed to protect the integrity of Pilate’s orders, and when the tomb was suddenly empty, the religious leaders bribed the guards to report that the disciples stole the body late at night.

Suddenly the resurrected Jesus came through the locked doors. We can’t explain how his body was transformed. We need to respect that the body of Jesus was both the resurrected body and the actual body of Jesus at the same time. After all, the disciples could see the marks in his side and hands.

Jesus stood among them, in the middle of them, and said, “Shalom.” The first word of Jesus for his disciples is not a command, but a gift. He does not remind them of their denials or their waywardness. He does not call for their repentance. His offer of peace is pure grace.

**John 20:20**

_20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord._

After being the Lord of shalom, Jesus has them look at his wounds from the cross. He is not a figment of their imagination. He is the Lord who was crucified. Jesus provided an historical document for them, namely his body with wounds. The disciples could see for themselves with the real, empirical, and physical evidence about the resurrection.

They responded with joy. He showed them grace and then proof of his existence, and they reacted with ecstasy. Dr. Martin Marty once quoted a friend at Yale Divinity School: “If the resurrection of Jesus actually happened, then nothing else really matters. If the resurrection of Jesus did not actually happen, then nothing else really matters.”

**John 20:21-22**

_21 Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” _

_22 And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” _

Jesus offers them peace again, and provides another version of the Great Commission: “I am sending you.” Then Jesus breathed on the disciples. I like that picture. Jesus opened his mouth and blessed them with his breath.

Some translators change the word “receive” to “welcome” because the reception of the Holy Spirit doesn’t come until Pentecost. Jesus wants his disciples to be open to the power of the Spirit of God.

So far, Jesus has given his disciples his presence, his peace, his body as evidence, his mission to be sent, and the future gift of the Holy Spirit that will provide the power they need. The spiritual song proclaims: “My Lord, what an evening!” What else will Jesus provide?
**John 20:23**

23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Only God can forgive sins. It’s not hard to object to this verse. I wish I could spend more time on this theological dilemma, but I can’t. Because Roman Catholics use this verse to justify their position on the confessional booth, we must be careful about our interpretation. As Protestants we believe in the priesthood of all believers which means all of us can go to God on our own, confess our sins, and receive forgiveness without the intervention of a priest.

I think the disciples learned that forgiveness of sins is the unmerited gift that Jesus grants to those who place their trust in him. We cannot muster up this gift, but we can pass it on. We can proclaim forgiveness to others. We can pronounce it and explain it and tell of the consequences if people choose to not confess their sins.

**John 20:24-25**

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.”

We have no information why Thomas was not with the others. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was depressed like the two disciples who left Jerusalem for their home in Emmaus. Maybe he had some personal or family business to address. All we know is his absence.

Only ten disciples saw Jesus on the first evening of the resurrection. When they told Thomas what happened, he refused to believe them. He wanted the opportunity to see the nail marks, place his finger in the holes, and put his hand into the side of Jesus. For himself!

Thomas has a legitimate point. We too like to see for ourselves. We don’t believe in the testimony of others unless we experience for ourselves. Thanks be to God, Thomas had another opportunity.

**John 20:26**

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!”

One week later means the very next Sunday! Again the doors are locked. Although the ten disciples saw the Risen Christ, they still lacked courage and strength. They were still afraid.

Jesus came and stood in the middle of the disciples. “Shalom be with you!” It’s a wonderful blessing. Jesus needs to say it again and again to us as well.
John 20:27

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.”

The Lord directly spoke to Thomas. He knew what had happened. He asked Thomas to do what Thomas said he wanted to do. He focused directly on Thomas. “Put your finger here and place your hand into my side.”

Would the physical touching by Thomas change his mind about the reality of the resurrection? It sounds like the sight of Jesus does the trick for Thomas.

Look at the front cover of the worship bulletin with me. Tina and I were careful about the picture. When she looked up this passage for a potential bulletin cover, 95% of the pictures showed Thomas actually touching the Lord’s side or the Lord’s hand. I told Tina to read the passage again and see for herself about what it exactly says. We discovered that Jesus provided the opportunity to touch, but it doesn’t say anything about Thomas actually touching. So instead, we went with the bulletin cover that has Thomas responding to the invitation by Jesus to touch.

John 20:28-29

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.”

“My Lord and my God.” The sight of Jesus, alive and standing in front of him, was good enough for Thomas. The front cover of the bulletin matches the moment when Thomas speaks his belief.

Jesus then responds with history.

“You believe because you have seen me, but blessed are the future followers of me who will not see me and my wounds, but will believe.” Jesus is talking about us. Jesus is talking about the decades and centuries of Christians who have not had the opportunity to see the Risen Jesus in the Upper Room, and yet also believe.

Now, what can we say about this very familiar scripture passage?

First, my sermon title is true: We doubt as well!

We can’t ever think we will become perfect and believe all of the time. Thomas’ story is our story. We can’t deny the reality of doubts that exist.
When the disciples met Jesus for the Great Commission, they worshipped and doubted. They had questions. They had the feeling of uncertainty. They were unsure. Yet at the same time, they worshipped the living Lord.

**Second, we need to be careful about doubt and our prayer life.**

Doubt can cause problems with spiritual disciplines like prayer.

**James 1:5-8**

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

This reminds me of a golfer I played with on Tuesday. During the first nine holes, he said before he putted: “I’m going to miss this putt,” and he did. On the tenth green, I suggested a more positive thought in his mind. He started to say, “I can make this putt,” and he made some putts.

When you pray, have a positive attitude in your mind about the power of God to transform your life, and that God can answer your prayer.

**Third, we need to resolve the conflictual issue about belief and unbelief through an understanding about the promise of God’s presence.**

God does not leave us when we doubt. Look at these two passages.

**Psalm 23:4 KJV**

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.

**Matthew 28:20b NIV**

20b And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

We are not alone. We don’t have to feel guilty. We don’t have to feel like God leaves us when we doubt. We need to face doubt in the presence of God and discover God’s grace and kindness and welcome, especially God’s unfailing love.