



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Knowledge, Doubt, and Faith

Text: John 20:19-29

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Ever have that moment when you had it all figured out and someone or something came along and your conclusions turned out to be all wrong?

Thomas missed Jesus' appearance and didn't believe it. The world of Thomas changed too quickly, too many times.

He was an apostle, a follower of the most popular man in Jerusalem. He was one of the people in the parade that people thought was wonderful.

Then Jesus was arrested. Thomas demonstrated his commitment to Jesus, his love for Jesus, and his courage by running away. Then when Jesus appeared to the others, Thomas was still away.

As I was reading this story three words kept coming to mind. Knowledge, doubt, and faith. These words and the problem with certainty were the things I kept wrestling with.

Knowledge is that which we can see, hear, taste, touch, or smell and know that it is real. It is not speculation, it is not argument, it is not even discussion. It is not even faith. Faith, by definition, cannot be knowledge.

Then there is doubt and faith. The story of Thomas is both a story of doubt and faith. Both. In theories of faith development people cannot really grow in faith until they experience doubt. And doubt can hit hard and painfully.

Several years ago I had the opportunity at the National Pastor's Conference in Nashville to hear Rev. Ed Dobson speak.

Dobson was the Pastor of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was a pastor who built a mega-church, was a widely sought after speaker and author, as well as the editor of Leadership magazine. Dobson was a been a mover and a shaker in the Evangelical world and an early leader in the Moral Majority. To be quite honest, he was not a person I was particularly interested in hearing. His talk, however, the one night, had most of us in tears.

Dobson's talk to us clergy, however, was one of those 'bomb going off' kinds of tales.

There were probably about 1000 people in the room and you could have heard a pin drop----and the floor was carpeted.

Dobson recounted his struggle with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. The disease is a debilitating neuro-muscular disease and is terminal. The death process can be long and, frankly, brutal.

Dobson said, some years ago, he visited the Holy Land and the 'tomb of Lazarus.' He said that the Holy Land is noted to have a lot of ahem, lies, meaning that a lot of the places labeled to be this or that either are not, or may not be those places. (They weren't good about putting Jesus slept here signs around.)

His point was that when they were in Bethany there was this tomb, reputed to be the tomb of Lazarus and the experience in the tomb was, in a word, dreary. He had to crawl down a hole, down a ladder. They would then crawl on the ground, under a barrier and into a dark, smelly, cold room. He said that the dark, smelly, cold room was awful. The experience, shared Dobson, of being diagnosed with ALS was a lot like being in the tomb, and he wondered how he'd climb back out. His talk is a rather long one, recounting this, but a powerful one.

He found in the midst of doubt and despair he ultimately found himself with a greater faith.

Often people presume that doubt is the opposite of faith. It's not. The real opposite of doubt is certainty.

Little Jimmy's grandfather was something of a philosopher and never missed an opportunity to give out bits of sage advice to his grandson.

"Jimmy," he said one day, "remember, one thing in your life, something I have learned through experience, fools are certain, but wise people hesitate."

"Are you sure, Grandpa?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes, my boy," said the old man, laying his gnarled hand on the youth's head, "I'm absolutely certain."

Certainty is often a trap, one that the old grandfather had obviously fallen into himself.

In the January 1997 of *Money Magazine* there was a report in which a group of people were asked which is longer, the Panama Canal or the Suez Canal, and then asked how certain they were that their answer was correct. Among those who were 60% certain, 50% of them got the answer right—meaning that this group was 10% too sure. But among those who were 90% certain, only 65% got the answer right, meaning that this group was 25% too sure.

Apparently, according to this reported study, the more convinced we are of our

knowledge, the bigger the gap between what we actually know and what we think we know and it often lead us to make mistakes.

Oh, and just so you know, the Panama Canal is 48 miles and the Suez Canal is 101 miles long.

One of the hardest challenges for people is to accept just how little we really know. An example of overestimated knowledge took place a few years ago when a Spanish national lottery winner was asked how he selected the ticket number. He answered that he was positive his lucky number ended in 48—because, he said, “I dreamed of the number seven for seven straight nights. And seven times seven is 48.”

At least he won.

The problem with certainty in this scripture passage is that Thomas is certain that Jesus had not been raised from the dead. The issue with Thomas isn't his doubt; his doubt was actually a prelude to his faith. The issue with Thomas was that he was certain. No matter what he knew the truth, no matter what anyone told him.

And, to make matters worse, he was willing to tell the world that he was certain.

But his certainty was challenged. And then he began to doubt his certainty and it was that doubt that began to make him open, again, to having faith in Jesus.

The problem with certainty is that it's great in a two dimensional world. It is awesome when everything is black and white and when everything is easily defined as right and wrong. A two dimensional world is a comic book world where everything is apparent and easy to know and understand. When you read a comic book, you know that Superman and Batman are good and will always save the day. Always.

And it's great. There is no doubt and all is certain.

Except the world is not two dimensional. It is not easy to always define right and wrong. It is not always easy to understand or comprehend good, bad, or indifferent.

The problem with certainty is that it thrives on myths.

The first myth it thrives on is that there are two sides to every story. We've all heard that before. “There are two sides to every story.” This is one of the great all time lies in human history. Most issues have way more than two sides. In two dimensional worlds, in comic book reality, things have two sides, but lie is a lot more complicated than that.

The second myth is this. We understand God and God's will. Some state they do. Most of us wish we did. The reality is, however, when we say that we truly understand God and understand God's will, we are putting ourselves on God's level. The same level of the God of

the universe who created the vastness of this universe.

Sometimes we get asked the question, “Do you know the Lord?” It’s a tough question. I’ve heard people say that they did, but, here’s another question. “Do you really know the people you live with? I mean, do you really know them?” Or, maybe better you, “Do we really understand ourselves?” I may be dumb, but to be quite honest, I still find myself a mystery, I don’t totally get everyone I live with, and God remains a great mystery to me.

Which brings me back to Thomas. Thomas had a lapse to be sure. He had doubt that Jesus had been raised from the dead. For him, however, that doubt was the genesis of his faith. The biggest obstacle of his faith was not his doubt of Jesus’ resurrection, but his certainty that Jesus’ death was permanent. When the apostles spoke to him, and he doubted, that doubt opened a whole new door for him.

So here’s what I have to say in conclusion.

If you have doubt, do not be afraid because that doubt is what ultimately leads you to have a far greater faith than you have.

If you are filled with certainty, however, begin to doubt that certainty because that certainty is actually an obstacle to faith. You won’t be able to truly have faith, under you learn to doubt.