Doubts
John 20:19-31

If you are watching the March Madness 2016 NCAA Basketball Tournament on TV, you’ve seen the new round of Capital One credit card commercials featuring Charles Barkley, Samuel L Jackson, and Spike Lee riding in a car together heading to the Final Four basketball games. In one they sing the Pina Colatta song, in another Charles Barkley NBA basketball star can’t toss his coins into the toll booth basket. In another, as best friends do, they are dressed alike and finish each other’s sentences. In one Charles Barkley says that he wants a new nickname. His present nickname is “Sir Charles,” but he wants a new nickname, something “fresh.” They suggest “March Sadness,” or “Slam Chunk” or “Alley WHOOPS!” or “Full Court Mess” or “Number 34 with Fries.” He declines them all and when they ask what he’d suggest, he suggests “Chuck-a-liscious!” Samuel L. Jackson stares in disbelief… then dismisses Barkley, “Keep your eyes on the road, man!”

Nicknames have a way of focusing on one aspect of our appearance or character, or on one incident in our life, and stigmatizing us for life. Every Christmas my father received a present from a fellow doctor and the gift tag read, “To Bill from Glue Pot,” because as a child in school he loved to eat the glue, the paste, in their school room. A distinguished physician, he was still known as Glue Pot! Historical figures had nicknames like Eric the Red, Richard the Lion-hearted, Attila the Hun, and in church we sing the carol about Good King Wenceslas. We give nicknames to people all around us based on our perceptions of them: You drop something and break it or drop a ball in a heated baseball game and you are now “Butterfingers.” You’re the smallest kid in the neighborhood and you’re tagged “Pee-wee.” You’re no longer the biggest kid or roughest kid, you’re “Bruiser,” or “Moose” and people are afraid of you before they really get to know you.

You don’t get to choose your own nickname or insist that we call you that. Not everybody likes the nickname they are given. Some nicknames are fun and inviting; like those and accept them, but when the nickname is cruel or taunting or dismissive, we’re not happy being known in that way. Every once in awhile we’d like a “re-do.” Like Charles Barkley, we’d like something new and fresh, instead of our old tired, overdone, overused tile. Right, “Chuckaliscious?”

I feel sorry for the disciple Thomas, forever known as “Doubting Thomas.” He’d be upset knowing that’s all we remember about him, how we summarize him. Thomas showed great loyalty and bravery. When Jesus announced that he was going back to Judea, even though people there had previously tried to stone him, Thomas is the first to say, “Let us go with him.” He was ready to stand by Jesus in the face of danger. After encountering the risen Christ, Thomas resumed his witness to Jesus and carried Christianity eastward as far as India. And yet, we label him “the Doubting Disciple,” “Doubting Thomas,” much like we brand Judas “the Betrayer!”
Focusing on Thomas nickname, we miss some telling details of the story and the significance of Thomas’ doubts.

- Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared. The Gospel tells us that they were hiding behind locked doors. Jesus had been killed, their world had been shaken, and they were afraid for their own lives. Thomas isn’t the only one doubtful!
- Easter morning, while it is still dark Mary and the disciples approach the tomb, which ought to be closed, and yet the tomb is open. At the end of the day, in the dark, Jesus approaches the disciples when they are hiding inside a locked in a room, closed up like a tomb.
- Jesus mysteriously and miraculously emerged out of the tomb in the morning. In the evening he mysteriously and miraculously appears inside this locked room. The disciples are disturbed, but Jesus calms them, then commissions them for service and breathes God’s Spirit into them, giving them power to go back out. Don’t hide inside, Jesus says, go out into the world and proclaim God’s mercy and forgiveness. You have been given a second chance – make the most of it, and help others to do likewise!
- A week later, Thomas shows up and instead of being scolded by Jesus for his doubts, Thomas is given permission to do what he needs to do to reclaim his faith – to touch Jesus. Jesus forgives his doubts and gives him a second chance. Today, a week after Easter, Jesus waits for us to come to grips with the truth now revealed to us, he empowers us by God’s Spirit, and he sends us out to share the news with others. As easy as that. As hard as that.

Sometimes I envy the disciples, because it’s easier to believe when you can see and touch - as they all did in one way or another. They had an advantage over us! But then I think about what Jesus said to Thomas -- words the other disciples obviously overheard because it is John who reports them: "Do you believe because you see me? Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

Why is that? Why is it blessed to believe without seeing, without touching, without hearing it straight from the Messiah's mouth? Most people say that seeing is believing, but that is far from true. In fact the opposite is more often the case - believing is seeing,
- believing something opens up to us the possibility of experiencing it,
- of seeing it come to pass in our lives,
- and of having that which we believe produce in us many kinds of blessings.

If you wait to see something before you will believe in it - you are going to miss some amazing happenings in life!

I envy the disciples their experience of being able to see Jesus after the resurrection, of being able to touch his wounds and put their hands in his side, and hear him say "Peace be with you." What an incredible experience that would be!

But while I envy them that particular experience, I do not require that experience and neither do any of you require that experience in order to have faith in Christ and his resurrection and to receive from him the blessings of the power that God has given him. All we need is a decision to believe the reports that we have heard and to commit our lives to Jesus as our Lord and our God; all the rest will come out of that.
For centuries now, millions of people have believed in Jesus without ever having seen him in the flesh. And people have witnessed to me and to you that in the years since they first believed, multiple times in their lives:
- they have felt Christ present in their lives,
- they have seen their prayers and the prayers of others answered,
- they have been helped through hard times because they believed in Jesus and trusted his promises.

**However, we’ve all had those times when it wasn't easy to believe in God's great promises and plans.** It's difficult to believe:
- when our life dreams are shattered or
- when goals we had set for ourselves get thwarted and our hopes are dashed, or
- when tragedy strikes and God seems so far away, even absent.

At such times we WANT TO believe in God, and we WANT TO trust God and yet our doubts and confusion torment us, tempt us to despair, and we wonder whether it's all true, why can't I believe this, what's happening in my life? God used to seem so real, what's happened to me?

**How do we handle our doubts, overcome our doubts; and what can we witness to others in their doubts?**

1. **Tell them that it is okay to doubt:** Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving” (Buchner, 20). As long as you keep asking, you're okay. God will honor your asking and see you through. You get in trouble when you give up and quit searching for the answers.

2. **Own up to our doubts.** Admit your doubts and try to think them through. But realize and remember: It is not just by thinking it through that light comes into your darkness. And you do not have to wait until you've thought it all through before you can go on. If that were the case, you'd be waiting forever!

You can go on with your work, your studies, your plans, your goals, because enough of Christ has been made plain to you that you can still trust him. Beyond what you cannot see or believe Christ says "Fear not, follow me." He will take care of you and handle your doubts. God knows our needs and our limitations, and so deals tenderly with us. He helps us through our doubts, our fears, our embarrassments, our failures, ourselves.

3. **Share your doubts with God:** Like it or not we all are like Thomas, and we’re like the father in Mark's gospel, chapter 9, who asked if Jesus could and would heal his son and was told by Jesus, "all things are possible to him who believes," and the father blurted out "Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief." As much as we believe, there are times and events that try our souls and raise doubts. We can learn from Thomas' example to be honest and share them with our Lord Jesus! For Jesus never ridiculed or rejected Thomas for his doubts; instead he reached out to Thomas and brought him back in.

Thomas expected Jesus to scold him, but Jesus did not, nor did he ridicule Thomas. He didn’t scold Thomas for doubting, or for making conditions, “If only I see this or do that …
then I will believe.”
He didn’t scold Thomas for not being there in the Upper Room with the other disciples when Jesus came back.
He didn’t scold Thomas, instead he invited him “reach out your hand and touch me…”
In that moment I think it was really Jesus who reached out his hand…and gave Thomas even more than his hand, he gave Thomas his peace… just as he extends both his hand and his peace to us.

That says to me that we can still follow Jesus even when in doubt, even when we do not understand, and we can still learn from him...and be loved by him...because he will still accept us and equip us to know and obey his will.

Thomas was not a coward, he was a pessimist, a realist. He refused to say he understood when he did not understand; or to say he believed when he did not fully believe. BUT THAT BECAME A VIRTUE FOR THOMAS, because once he was sure, he went all the way!

THOMAS DOUBTED IN ORDER TO BECOME SURE, and once he was, his surrender was complete! On his knees in complete commitment, Thomas declared his unwavering faith, "My Lord and My God!!"

Never again would doubt obstruct his soul.
Never again would he question the reality of the resurrection.
Never again would he doubt the Love of Christ or God’s power to do all things!

In the face of Jesus Christ's great gift of himself, all Thomas could say was, "My Lord and My God!" and Jesus considered that enough. He did not expect Thomas to explain it all, only to believe and to follow, to learn, and to love and to serve. He invites us likewise.

In John 20:31, John states I have recorded what I saw Jesus do and what I heard Jesus say “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his name.” so that we, John’s readers, may believe in Jesus, have life in his name and become his followers; so that we may have the power to accept even what cannot be explained, to trust that which defies logic; so that our faith and belief in Jesus bring us life and hope. John did not write to give information, but to give life!

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says to the disciples, and then “Receive the Holy Spirit,” whereupon he breathed the spirit, the life, the joy, the power into the disciples. He can breathe that into you, if you will let him. Don’t let life pass you by! Believe beyond your doubts and receive him, and you need never fear again! Amen!

Let us come and partake of the lord's supper. Amen.

Source
__________. “That You May Believe.” April 15, 2007. Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.
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