

## **Doubt and Unbelief Can't Lock Jesus Out**

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 2nd Sunday of Easter, April 18, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31; Psalm 16.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I've never been afraid to fly but, I must admit, one time I was a bit worried as we prepared to take off. I was on board a two engine Allegheny Airline commuter preparing to fly out of Pittsburgh. It was night and extremely windy. I could feel the wind rock our small plane as we sat at the end of the runway. I was sitting right behind the co-pilot, so close that I could reach out and flip his hat off. I could plainly hear the conversation between him and the pilot next to him. Just before taking off the co-pilot said something that I found extremely disturbing. As our small plane rocked in the wind, he said, "Well, do you think we can make it?" The pilot turned to the co-pilot with a smile and said, "Let's give it a try." I couldn't believe my ears. What do you mean, "Give it a try. If you have any doubt at all let's just stay put." I had this terrible feeling of misery and depression as we began to take off. Doubt can make a person feel that way: utterly afraid, depressed and miserable.

Now, some of our doubts are trivial. Will the Phillies win their division this year and go on to the World Series? I doubt it. Will the Eagles make it to the Super Bowl next season? Unless I see with my eyes, I will not believe.

But some doubts are more serious. Have you ever left on vacation; you're about an hour away from home and someone asks, "Did you turn off the stove?" "Well, I think so." "What you mean, you think so? Did you or didn't you?" And so your doubt gets the best of you and you turn back to check out the stove.

And there are still more serious doubts. I hear a man waken his anxious wife at one in the morning, "I really trust our son, and I really believe he knows what's right and

wrong, but it's one in the morning. I told him to be home by midnight. He's still out and I can't sleep. I'm angry <sup>with</sup> ~~at~~ him and frightened." Doubt can make us feel that way.

We have all kinds of doubts; some are trivial and some are more serious. But our most troubling doubts are often in the area of our religious beliefs. Can God forgive me for what I've done or for what I am? Does my life have any ultimate meaning? What will happen when I die? Will God send me to hell? On this Holocaust Remembrance Sunday many people will remember the millions of Jews who died in Nazi gas chambers and crematoria and wonder how a loving and powerful <sup>ful</sup> god could exist. Nobel prize winner, Elie Wiesel, lived through one of those death camps. He told the world about it in his autobiographical memoirs entitled, Night. He wrote,

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which rendered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

When these kinds of doubts come it's like falling into a black hole from which we may feel that there's no hope of escape. It's an empty, hollow, aching, hungry feeling to doubt God's mercy in Jesus Christ; to feel the power of God is not something that protects us but threatens us.

I'm glad the Bible addresses this feeling of doubt. Listen to our Gospel lesson. It's evening on the first Easter. The sun has set. The busy world is hushed. The followers of Jesus huddle, frightened, behind locked doors. Frightened because the tomb is empty. Frightened by the Jews who might accuse them of stealing the body of Jesus. They knew grave robbing was a capital offense. But there were other fears. Mary Magdalene

testified that she'd seen the Lord alive. They couldn't believe such nonsense. Then, all of a sudden, the Risen Christ stood there in the midst of them. Locked doors couldn't keep him out. Doubt, fear and unbelief couldn't keep him out. He didn't knock. He didn't wait for them to invite him in. He stood in their midst.

Some of you may want Christ in your life. You've heard him knocking at the door. You've heard him calling to you but you doubt that he's there. You can't believe. You want to open the door but you discover that it's locked on the inside. It's locked by doubt and unbelief. You can't open the door to let him in. You want to invite Christ *into your heart* but you feel paralyzed by doubt and unbelief. Don't despair. The Locked doors of doubt and unbelief can't shut out Christ.

The first words of the Risen Christ to the disciples is, "Peace". Jesus comes to doubting and unbelieving disciples with a message of peace. Peter had denied him. All of them forsook him and fled. None of them found faith easy. And yet the Risen Christ comes to them and says, "Peace be with you; you who are doubting, who are uncertain about God's love and mercy; Peace to you who have denied and forsaken me." The message of the gospel is peace to us. The good news that the Risen Christ brings to us is God's unconditional declaration of peace.

But one of the apostles wasn't present on that first Easter evening. The other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." "I will not believe!" Thomas claimed to be a non believer. Let's try to understand what's going on inside of people when they say they will not

believe. One form of unbelief is called atheism. Atheists feel certain that there's no god. Another form of unbelief is called agnosticism. Agnostics don't deny the existence of god, they simply feel it's impossible to know if God exists.

There are very few atheists or pure agnostics. Even atheists have their doubts every once in a while. I believe that both atheists and agnostics are fighting something deep inside of them that tells them that God exists, but, in the words of St. Paul they "suppress the truth". It may be that they don't want the Gospel to be true because God threatens their autonomy. I've known atheists and agnostics who've come to place their faith in the Risen Christ. This, in itself, testifies that unbelief and doubt can't lock out the Risen Christ. And these converted atheists, like C. S. Lewis, nearly always confess that there was always something within them that wanted to suppress the truth they later came to embrace.

But sometimes people don't believe, not because they reject God outright, but because of doubt. They're like Thomas. They have doubts that are so persistent, troubling and disturbing that they can't bring themselves to believe the mercy of God which comes to us through the Risen Christ.

If you're an unbeliever or doubter, you very well may be like Thomas. You're not hostile to the Christian faith. In fact, you may feel miserable about your doubt and unbelief. I imagine that no one in Jerusalem felt more miserable than Thomas when he heard the testimony of the Risen Christ but could not believe.

I think it's important for you to know that just about every Christian I know slips into doubt from time to time. I doubt sometimes. I sometimes wonder, "What if I die and appear before the judgment seat of God only to discover that God looks like the

Ayatollah Khomeini rather than Jesus?" Sometimes I fear that I'll go to hell when I die. If a believer told me that she never doubted I'd have my doubts about her. Sometimes these doubts last for a long time. Some Christians are chronic doubters who live miserable lives as a consequence.

Now notice how Jesus ministered to Thomas who was not a believer because of doubt. Jesus treats Thomas sympathetically. He announces to him the Gospel. "Peace be with you, Thomas." And then the Risen Christ invites Thomas to examine the evidence. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Then Thomas came to believe and confess, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus commended him for his belief but added, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." You and I belong to the vast majority of people who've never seen Jesus. I don't expect to see Jesus until I die. I've known people who've claimed to have seen Jesus in a dream or vision, or have sensed his presence in some other way. I don't know what to make of these claims. I do know that I've never seen the Risen Christ and yet I believe.

I long for all of you to trust the Risen Christ also. I'm a minister because I long for men and women to come to trust and serve this God who has come to us with the Good News of Peace. In fact, I believe all Christians have a longing within them for others to know and trust in the Risen Christ. I feel sad for people who do not or will not or cannot believe in Jesus. I want them to embrace the Risen Christ through faith. If you're an unbeliever or a doubter, it would make me happy to see you move in the direction of faith in Christ.

There are two ways suggested by our Scripture lesson as to how to do this. First,

take time to read the Bible. John tells us that the stories in his gospel "are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah." Begin reading the Gospel of John. Read it thoughtfully in a modern translation. Take notes. Write down your questions. Write down your feelings about Jesus as he talks with Nicodemus or the Woman at the well or the scribes and pharisees. Try to imagine what it would be like to be born blind and then to have Jesus open your eyes. Read the Gospel. Seek answers. Talk in prayer to the One of whom it speaks. "These things are written so that you may come to believe." None of us has such strong faith that it wouldn't be *strengthened from* reading the Gospel.

Secondly, follow the example of Thomas. Respond to the invitation of your brothers and sisters in Christ to be here every week. The week that you miss may just be that glorious Sunday when the Risen Christ comes and stands among us in power. Join us for our faith journey every Sunday. Don't let your doubt keep you away. If you have questions share them with me. I'm eager to take your questions seriously. I don't have all the answers but I'll enjoy trying to find the answers with you.

Above all remember this: Doubt and unbelief can't stop the Risen Christ from loving us and accepting us. Doubt and unbelief can't lock the Risen Christ out of our lives. This is the good news of the Gospel.

Let us pray: Thank you that the locked doors of doubt and unbelief can't keep the Risen Christ out of our lives. Thank you for how you came into the life of Thomas who said he would not believe. Like the disciples who invited the unbelieving Thomas to join them, never let us give up hope for those who do not believe in Christ. Give us a growing desire for our doubting and unbelieving friends and neighbors to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing have life in his name. And when it seems like our prayers for their conversion are not being heard, help us to continue to love and reach out to them. This we ask through Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

I am indebted to a sermon by Joel Nederhood entitled, Beyond Doubt, in The Radio Pulpit, Volume 35, Number 4, April 1989. I have used some of his sentences word for word and have borrowed and modified his outline.