

April 24, 2022

Sermon: “*Doubt Is Not the Destination—Believing Is*”

Scripture: John 20: 19-31

I am going to start today’s Sermon with Drama Ministry. I have asked members of our congregation from each of the services to help me with this three minute skit.

This scene is taken from the book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, written by John Irving, an American-Canadian novelist and screenwriter. The narrator John Wheelwright has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In this scene at the schoolyard, Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a gray granite statue of Mary Magdalen as twilight falls. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. Owen keeps pushing John, and John is getting frustrated to the point they both begin yelling at each other. This is where we pick up the scene:

OWEN : “YOU HAVE TO DOUBT SHE’S THERE?”

JOHN: “Of course I have no doubt!”

OWEN: “BUT YOU CAN’T SEE HER-YOU COULD BE WRONG.”

JOHN (Yelling): “No, I’m not wrong- she’s there. I know she’s there!”

OWEN: “YOU ABSOLOUTELY KNOW SHE’S THERE-EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN’T SEE HER?”

JOHN (Screamed): “Yes.”

OWEN: “WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD,”...”I CAN’T SEE HIM-BUT I ABSOUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE.”¹

¹ John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (New York; Ballantine Books, 1989), 451.

Pastor Nancy Pittman, describes the character Owen Meany in this way. *“Owen believes so fully and completely in God, he stakes his life on his conviction. He does not need to see; he does not need signs and wonders; he believes and orients his whole life around this belief.”* Owen’s belief is so strong he believes in God even if he cannot see Him. As Jesus said, (John 20:29), *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

Do we believe this way or do we all want to be from the Missouri. The “Show Me State?” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news, *“I have seen the Lord!”* (John 20:18) And if we turn to the (Luke 24:11-12), Luke said this, “But they (the disciples) did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and went away, wondering to himself what had happen.” Do you think there was doubt in Peter’s mind at this moment? I do. But the doubt would soon go away.

We know the story, Jesus appears to the disciples less one, in the locked room, where the disciples were meeting behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders. They thought the Jewish authorities and perhaps the Romans would come and arrest them. Now do you think the locked door would have kept the Jewish leaders and the Romans from getting the disciples? Perhaps it would have given the disciples an extra minute or two to find another way to escape but it wouldn’t have stopped them. What if the authorities would have surrounded the house, then what? The disciples felt safe because they were behind locked doors. But look who else the disciples locked out. Isn’t it interesting that those locked doors were also locked to Jesus. Sometimes when we are so afraid of other things, we end up shutting out Jesus as well, don’t we.

But we know those locked doors were no barrier for Jesus. He appears, I don’t know how, I am sure it was not, Star Trek, *“Beam me up, Scotty.”* No Jesus appears and in (John 20:19-20), it states “Jesus came and stood among them and said, *“Peace be with you!”* After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” Their doubt seem to vanish, what Mary Magdalene saw in the morning was true, and now they have seen and believe.

But one of the disciples is not there, Thomas is missing. The Scripture does not say where he was, perhaps he was grieving alone, or maybe he went for a walk. But the point is he wasn’t there. Yet, every year on the Second Sunday of Easter this chapter of John is read and Thomas is talked about and the name “Doubting Thomas” is mentioned.

Why are we so hard on Thomas when all he wanted was to see Jesus the same way that the others seen Jesus? In the morning Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalena in the evening Jesus appeared to the disciples “he showed then his hands and his side.” And yet we criticize Thomas for wanting the same thing.

But what cause Thomas’s disbelief, his frustration and reactionary spirit? Thomas had not been with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. Like so many today, he staunchly refused to believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. The disciples testified and bore witness to the to glorious truth. In the Greek Scripture states it this way, “they kept on telling him, but Thomas became stiff-necked and obstinate in his unbelief. Thomas was making doubt the destination.

Look what Thomas did by making doubt his destination. Thomas was so aggravated, he became critical of the body of believers. He rejected the reliable eyewitness testimony of the disciples. He rejected the what Peter, Andrew, James and John plus the other six disciples had seen and experienced. Guys he lived with for three years, guys he ate with, walked with and guys he trusted until now.

It was his own fault, but as human nature so often reacts, he blamed others through his aggravated spirit. He argued against their experience with the resurrected Lord. Having taken all he could bear, in utter frustration 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 it.”* (John 20: 25).

Eight days later Jesus appears again. The doors were again shut and locked. Suddenly, unexpectedly, without notice, Jesus stands again in the midst of the disciples. Again He eased their shock by giving the normal greeting: *“Peace be with you!”* But note Jesus immediately turns his attention to Thomas. He used the same words that Thomas had demanded: *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”* Thomas said to him, *“My Lord and my God.”* And I believe Thomas fell to his knees when he spoke these words to the Lord, because I believe Thomas knew that only a Risen Christ could have heard and known his exact words. Thomas went from doubting to believing because he had seen the Lord.

Is doubting in faith a bad thing? I don’t think so. There is nothing “bad” about struggling with our faith. ² “Every Christian needs to wrestle with doubt and disbelief. A faith unquestioned and untested is no faith at all. That’s why the great poet Lord Tennyson was able to write, *“There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”* As we have heard this morning the disciples had to find their way. Matthew wrote in (Matthew 28:17) when Jesus appeared to the disciples in Galilee, that “some doubted.” We are not alone when we doubt, in fact we are in good company.

Let me tell you a story about a thirteen year old kid who was doubting what he was learning in Catholic School. That thirteen year old kid was me. I hardly ever talk about myself in sermons, but this is my how my doubting was turned into believing in my faith. I was one of three brothers, born in the middle. I had attended Catholic School for eight years and I was sitting in our bedroom when my older brother who was eighteen came in and asked me what was wrong. I told him, *“I was doubting what they the nuns and priests were teaching in religion class.”* He asked me, *“What I meant.”*

I told him I couldn’t believe the nuns and the priests when they said, *“Anyone who didn’t believe as we do would go to hell.”* I continued, *“I could not believe that the Taylors who were Baptists (I married Beth Taylor), the Martins who were Lutherans, the Paulson’s who were Presbyterians, the Maynard’s who were United Methodist and final Judge Phillips who was an Episcopalian, were all going to hell along with their families because they don’t believe as we believed. Furthermore, I didn’t believe all the Africans in Africa, all the people in China and Russia who have not been introduced to Jesus Christ were going to go to hell when they died.”* I then said, *“I Believe God wouldn’t do this!”*

² Taken from: <http://www.focuson> the family.com/family-qa/wrestling-with-doubt-and- disbelief/

My older brother smiled and said, *“You are absolutely correct.”* You see he went on, *“I have dated girls from all those religions and have gone to church with each one of them and I can tell you each one of those religions you mentioned believes in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.”* My next question was, *“Then why don’t the nuns and priests tell us these things?”* He said, *“When you are born into a Catholic family you have no choice but to be a Catholic. You don’t know any better, you listen to mom and dad and that’s it. And as you grow up and learn the differences...very few people change.”* He continued, *“You are doubting your faith, you are questioning your faith and this is a good thing—because you will grow in your faith because you are Learning Who God Is.”*

At a young age I arrived at the doubt destination, but because I questioned and asked for help and kept digging, I moved to the believing destination. Being a Christian isn’t easy, we are challenged every day. When we arrive at the Doubt Destination, we need to move our believing closer to our Lord. We need to draw closer to worship, spend time reading Scripture and in prayer and call upon those friends and neighbors who are in faith with us

We need to remember what Owen said to John, *“WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD...”* *“I CAN’T SEE HIM-BUT I ABSOUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE.”*³

AMEN.

³ Ibid, p.451.