



"WHEN IN DOUBT..."

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 20: 19-31

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, April 24, 2022, Easter Two, Earth Sunday

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John 20:19-31

20:19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20:20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

20:21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

20:24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

20:25 So 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."

20:26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20:27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

20:28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

20:29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

20:31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

When in doubt...

How do you finish that sentence? Don't quote someone else. Really let yourself access your own answer.

When in doubt...

What do you do when you are in doubt?

For me it really depends on what the doubt is about. In our tradition, Thomas has become this icon of spiritual doubt—when really we have no idea about Thomas' spiritual condition. His doubt was really about whether he could trust what his friends were saying.

Maybe Thomas' doubt wasn't as much about the truth of Jesus' resurrection as it was about whether he could trust what anyone was saying in this chaotic post-crucifixion time.

Remember the territory his community had covered—the chaos and tumult of a crowded Jerusalem as people gathered for Passover, friends turning against—that's Thomas' friends turning against his other friends—high stakes betrayals—like Judas' kiss and Peter's denial, but also the sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And then a brutal public execution with public humiliation, torture, crowds cheering on the painful murder of an innocent human being, and then the turbulence and anguish of grief—the loss of a friend and leader who had been the organizing center of his community—and the disequilibrium that happens when a community is fractured by the loss of a leader and the trauma of violence and broken relationships.

And then these confusing reports of an empty tomb—some people believing, some people not believing. Some not knowing what to believe.

Thomas wasn't in that locked room when Jesus first appeared to the disciples for a reason I am sure. Maybe he was in his own locked room—somewhere alone trying to recalibrate, trying to recover.

When in doubt, Thomas didn't trust a bunch of people who had proven themselves untrustworthy when the going got tough.

I really relate to Thomas in this kind of situation. His doubt makes a lot of sense to me.

[It makes sense from a trauma-informed perspective](#), it makes sense from the perspective of any experience of broken trust and broken relationship with the people we thought we could trust, it makes sense from a power analysis in terms of the way oppression and abuse of power works—anyone who occupies identities that have to carry the weight of systemic disadvantage, who are pushed to the margins by whiteness, patriarchy, transphobia and homophobia, and biases against bodies that don't conform to white male heteronormativity knows that Thomas' doubt makes sense.

So in those kinds of conditions, when you are not sure you have a friend in the world you can trust, when you don't feel physically or emotionally safe, when you are not sure what your life is about anymore—there are lots of reasons to doubt—there are lots of things to doubt.

When in doubt...

How do you finish that sentence? What do you do with your doubt when things are unraveling?

I'll be honest, those kinds of conditions make me want to withdraw and try to convince myself that I don't really need other people. Those kinds of conditions make me not so much want to hide, as disappear—exit stage left and just take care of myself.

That may sound like when in doubt, I'm out! But I have come to learn it is really more about doubting God than I want to admit.

I have often thought I wasn't someone who doubted God's existence. I really feel God's presence in this world, I see God in the intricacy of nature and the vastness of the multiverse.

But I have had times when I have touched a kind of despair and thought—what if this whole God thing is just delusion.

Honestly it's life in the church that has made me get there a few times—all the ways institutional Christianity has distorted God, and distorted Jesus almost beyond recognition—[it is utterly nonsensical to think Jesus was white](#)—and yet Jesus' whiteness is so ingrained in Western culture and our colonized psyches that, even if we don't believe Jesus was white, the white Jesus is still lurking around impacting our access to the actual Jesus. Because the white Jesus isn't just an artistic rendering, he's an actual made up person, too.

White Jesus isn't just about Jesus' appearance, he is the deification of white maleness—and that has wreaked havoc on many who struggle to believe in God and who struggle to follow Jesus.

[The white Jesus is](#) the one who authorizes violence, the one who body-shames, the one who creates more rules about saying cuss words than he does around mass incarceration or how justice is administered.

The white Jesus is the one who says women in the pulpit are an abomination and that being queer is something that assures eternal damnation.

In fact, it's the white Jesus who got hell into such a prominent position in institutional Christianity—mostly with the help of early Christians who started to wonder why the end times hadn't come yet, so they needed another way to scare people into believing in God. Eternal punishment worked well as a tool for the institutional church to garner all kinds of power over people.

The black Jesus who walked and talked, healed and provoked, loved and lived—that Jesus said pretty much nothing about any of those things. He said ABSOLUTELY NOTHING about being queer or trans or gay—he said nothing about women speaking in church—he said nothing about white ways being the best ways.

And he actually said nothing about eternal damnation—that's something the church early on started teaching—and everyone assumes it was Jesus' idea. It wasn't.¹

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/31/824479587/heaven-and-hell-are-not-what-jesus-preached-religion-scholar-says>

So when it comes to doubt in terms of belief, I have had and still have doubt about the institutional church being a true expression of what it means to follow Jesus. And I know the institutional church itself has created a lot of doubt for many people about whether Jesus is someone they want to know in the first place.

When in doubt, walk out! Often the first step is to walk away from organized religion. I get it—I understand that move. It makes a lot of sense.

I was pretty close to doing that right before God called me here to GCPC. And yet, here I am—in a church as a pastor no less.

When in doubt, God's call sometimes gets louder.

[We sort our doubts—to make them acceptable.](#)

It's ok to be doubtful about the institutional church—a healthy skepticism around human systems and the inertia that can set in and the harm that can be done—the power of institutional idolatry.

But often we want to distinguish between that kind of doubt and doubt in the actual existence of God.

Like doubting God's existence puts us into a whole other category of doubt. Like needing to step into a different category than believer and check the “non-believer” box.

Honestly, I wonder what faith is without doubt? What is belief without doubt? Without doubt there is no belief—and the existence of doubt to me signals openness to the fact that none of us knows everything and that certainty is actually the enemy of the spiritual path—we don't grow if there's nothing left for us to learn.

Doubt is really more about us than about God. [It's kind of ridiculous when you think about it, that we humans think God needs us to believe in order for God to be God.](#) Like our decision to believe in God somehow makes God real. And our decision not to believe means God is not real. I find great comfort in the fact that God's existence really doesn't depend on what I believe about God's existence. My thoughts or your thoughts don't make God real or not.

God's existence is what it is, whether anyone believes it or not.

That creates a lot of space for us to wonder together—to explore, to be honest and to pay attention to the world around us with curiosity.

When in doubt, take comfort in the fact that God’s existence does not depend on you and me figuring it all out.

The more important question for us is what happens to the way we live when doubt takes us out of community, when doubt means we stop struggling with belief together, when doubt means we find some other framework to answer all of our questions about existence.

[When in doubt... are we able to stay engaged with the community?](#)

That was really Thomas’ real struggle—whether he could stay connected with a way of life that had let him down, that had made him feel more vulnerable, that had left him with more questions than answers.

My prayer is that Grace Covenant is a place where we don’t just allow for doubt, but where we really embrace how doubt is the condition of possibility for any kind of spiritual integrity. Doubt is why we are curious and why we wonder—it’s why we need each other and it’s why we need God.

The growth and transformation that can emerge from collective practices around doubt are a healing balm in this world—where certainty has been a weapon of mass destruction for a long, long time.

[Doubt is what allows us to interrogate our own cultures, our own systems, our own inner life with the sacred intention of finding our way to a better world together.](#)

Doubt is what creates the conditions for us to believe that the world does not have to be the way that it is. Doubt is nourishment for our well-being—and for our collective transformation.

This is a Resurrection story after all—a story about how resurrection elicited doubt and renewed connection. Thomas telling the truth about what he needed gave Jesus an opportunity for him to give Thomas what he needed.

When in doubt... ask for what you need.

Grace Covenant, I need you to have the same honesty that Thomas did. He told his friends the truth about what he needed. He didn’t say what they wanted to hear or tell them one

thing to their faces and then go whisper behind their backs about how he thinks they are crazy.

For us to be a healthy community that is building trust together, we need loving, strengthening ways to lean into to our doubts—whether they are about the existence of God or about whether we can trust a community after we’ve been hurt in the past or whether we are really ready to make the changes we need to make.

Thank you for being a place where I could preach this sermon, Grace Covenant. This community is a healing gift in my life, even though it is hard for me to trust it sometimes. Right when I was ready to walk away from the church, you came into my life. I am still amazed by it all.

When in doubt, God provides.

Thanks be to God.