

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 23, 2006

Sermon Text: John 20:19-31

Today the sermon is about doubt, and we all know something about doubt. Now, I don't play golf, but I'm going to begin with a story that I really do love, just a very short story. A golfer was saying to his caddy and complaining, he said, "Would you please stop checking your watch all the time! It is distracting!" The caddy said, "Sir, this is not a watch. It's a compass." I like that story.

Trust takes us in a particular direction. Doubt either stands us still by fear, the fear of being made a fool of, or it stands us still by deeming every direction just as good as the next, and so we go nowhere. The Latin word for doubt, "dubitare," comes from a root word meaning two or double. To doubt is to waver between two positions, to believe and to doubt at once, and so to be of two minds, to be a contradiction in and of yourself. To doubt is to have one leg on one side of the fence, and one leg on the other side of the fence. Now, try to picture that. If you've ever straddled a fence for very long, I don't need to tell you that's a very uncomfortable position to maintain for long. Of two minds, doubt.

We hear a man cry out to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, "Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief." Of two minds. Yes, faith can be mixed with doubt. Weak faith, yes, but still a baby faith in the making. Thomas was not there when the risen Christ came the first time so he said essentially, sorry fellows, I would like to believe this, but it is just too strange. I've got to see it for myself. I've got to feel the nail holes. I've got to put my hand in the wound in His side, and then okay.

Now, skeptics in our world today abound. Some doubt, and are proud of it. You've met them. You know it's a very convenient approach to life, the skeptical approach. It helps you avoid making any real commitments. You see, if you do only that of which you are certain, that boils down to the one thing of which you can be certain. What is that? Your own wandering desires. They may meander from this to that, but at least you know what you want. Skepticism in that way serves the skeptic. You simply do what you want. You follow no one. You trust no one. When someone says to me that they don't believe in God, I don't get mad and I don't get defensive. I ask what kind of God don't you believe in. Sometimes I can agree and say I don't believe in that kind of God either, but let me tell you what I do believe. You see, that's an opportunity to say let me tell you what I do believe. Listen to people before you get defensive. Remember when Thomas asked for proof, Jesus gave him proof. Skeptics are also prone to focus on others, and that's a sort of comparative doubt, mostly aimed at the church. They say, "Bunch of hypocrites over at Main Street, Greenwood. Bunch of hypocrites!" I say to them, there is always room for one more. Know this laughter.

In the church, we know people will sometimes let you down. I know I fail and I fall in spite of my best efforts. Missing the mark of Christ is a given, and that is why we need a Savior. In fact, missing the mark, you've probably heard in a Bible study or in Sunday school, missing the mark is the very literal definition of sin. Homartia is the word in

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Greek. It means missing the mark. Besides, the fact that we are hypocrites in the church is not news to people in the church. Skeptics outside think that they have discovered an amazing fact! There are hypocrites in the church. Folks in church sometimes sin! No!!!! Really!!! They even sin against each other in the church. The dickens you say! It happens. Some have alcohol and drug problems and marriage problems. Others struggle with anger and with lust or greed or take an awful long time to forgive and get over things. Scandalous! Finding fault in God's people is a kind of doubt, but doubting God's people, that is one thing, but doubting God is quite another.

A well-known evangelist was trying to find his way in a town he had never been in before, and finally he stopped to ask a young girl on her bicycle for directions, and he said, “How do I get to the high school?” The little girl gave him directions, and then she said, “Why do you want to go to the high school?” He said, “Well, I am going to give a sermon there. We're having a meeting there.” She said, “Well, what will the sermon be about?” He said, in a haughty manner, “My sermon title is “How to Get to Heaven.” The little girl sort of deflated him and said, “How to get to Heaven! You can't even find the high school!”

There are many who doubt preachers, and doubt a preacher's perfection or doubt a preacher's wisdom, and they are right to do so. I've heard stories about almost every former pastor hanging on your history room wall, which makes me wonder, what will you say when I'm gone? That's okay because I am not righteous. Christ is. Christ is our goal, but theology 101 is none of us are righteous, not one. Christ is my righteousness. We are sinners saved by faith, not by any work that we have done or even could do.

Philippians 3:9 says, “Be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own based on the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.” The righteousness from God that depends upon faith. When that sinks in, when that understanding sinks in, we will stop judging one another.

The second kind of doubt is sincere doubt, and it is lived out in people like Thomas, and I suspect sometimes in people like you and me. Doubt that really, really wants earnestly to believe. Praise God; give me something, someone to believe in. My faith is small. It's a little bitty seed almost pushing through. Lord, give me courage to break through the ground and grow out into the sunlight, and I'm almost persuaded. I just need a little push. I need a little something. Thomas had that sort of doubt. A desire to believe.

The Bible says we should have the faith of a little child, and some believe that childlike faith means never doubting and never questioning anything, but now parents, be real, and grandparents, be real. If my children are any models for childlike faith, they have questioned plenty, plenty. I think childlike faith means playful and hopeful and trusting. Playful in that a Christian must absolutely, must keep his or her sense of humor intact or life will be intolerable, and that's part of childlike. Playful in that no more what happens, with a smile, you can say where are we going now, God, where are we going now. Childlike doesn't mean you can't question, but it does mean ultimately that you do trust,

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trust that the future is an exciting place because if the future is certain death, God will be there, waiting, perhaps laughing. I think God will definitely be laughing that I have grown and I have grown past my doubts. Trusting a Heavenly Father so much larger than me that my doubts cannot hurt God, and I believe that the answers will come to me when I am big enough to understand them. We all want something and someone to believe in. Most of our relationships teach us doubt. They do. Most of our relationships teach us doubt. Fear is said to be our first emotion, and that is followed by the anger of betrayal, and then the determination not to ever trust again. Our relationships with our people teach us fear.

If you read Proverbs very carefully, you will find that Proverbs teach that we will let each other down, we will violate each other's trust, we will more often than not choose our wills when it is a battle of will against will, and if you want someone to believe then Solomon said that you can try all the stuff that money can buy and all the friends that you can attract and all the lovers and all the family you want, and eventually in your journey to get beyond doubt into true peace, you will find yourself at God's feet, despairing of everything else the world has to offer. Solomon, who had it all, came to that conclusion.

Thomas said, “I will believe in a risen Savior when I see Him.” I wonder if God ever points toward us, and says, “I will believe that you are my people when I see it, when I see not perfection, but some effort to follow the example of my son, to take advantage of the power and the guidance of the Spirit, and follow the example of my son.” Jesus even asks, why do you bother to call me Lord, and not do the things I say. We're not fooling God. We may give other people excuses not to come to church. We may give other people excuses not to consider the Christian faith because we as God's people do not try to love our enemies, do not try to judge not, do not try to serve and encourage each other, do not give of ourselves and our wealth, and do not forgive as we have been forgiven. Our lives could be the reason that some people doubt. I know our faith is not based upon church but on God in Christ, but as God's church we have two vital responsibilities. We need to work through our doubts to trust, to faith and trust, and we also need to live before others in a way that does not create doubts in others. I hope you hear me. Are you God's people away from this church? Are you your brother and sister's keeper even before you met that brother or sister, even in foreign lands? Does God really care how you act as long as you believe in Jesus and give money once in awhile? The answer is yes and yes and yes.

Speaking of doubt, I need to share something that happened to me a few years ago. I was the principal speaker; I don't even remember how this happened, at a two-day retreat for the Columbia District United Methodist Women's Retreat. I was the principal speaker. Right in the middle of my lecture, in the middle of my talk, I was publicly challenged. A woman just stood up, and challenged me. I was wearing my clergy shirt and everything! I mean, you're not supposed to do that. She stood up, and she said, “What do you mean God?” and she went on to say, “Don't you think there are other ways God is revealed that are just a legitimate as through Jesus Christ?” I thought, should I be philosophical, should I be politically correct, or should I overcome my fears and doubts and say what I

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have come to through my fear and my trembling, and I answered her, and I will tell you. Do I believe that there are other ways that God is revealed that are just as legitimate as through Jesus Christ? I said no, I do not; no, I do not. I have studied in depth in college and in seminary the four major monotheistic religions. There are four. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism, the one that everyone forgets, and also Buddhism and Hinduism. I've done personal study and attended different meetings and had interviews with different cult members and borderland groups, read Laotsu and Daoism, and in college Emmanuel Cont, and I found some things of value in all of these readings, but the truth is, all things considered, the new and even one of the newest that's out there in the news now that I've been studying for over 20 years, Scientology, it's not new. It's simply a rehash of the old, and all the so-called new Gospels such as the Gospel of Judas. They had a special on TV about it. It's not new. The fictional, fictional, fictional and cynical Da Vinci Code is not new. This is old, recycled stuff, and none of it as old as Matthew and Mark and Luke and John. All the new borderland religions are recycled. This New Age stuff is not new. It has all been done hundreds of times before. Only Jesus reveals a God who becomes flesh, a God who suffers out of love for humanity, for you and for me, a creator who says creation is good, but human sin has corrupted the whole thing. Only Jesus reveals a God who comes to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, what no sacrifice and no intricate ritual or detailed philosophical system could do. Some people want to be a little bit of this and a little bit of that and also a Christian tacked on the end, but if Jesus is who He says He is, that won't work. It isn't open-mindedness that I am against. I am simply saying that a point in every direction is the same as having no point at all. A compass with four needles leads nowhere in particular. At some point in your life, you must choose a goal, a direction, a path, a way and follow it all the way to the end.

Jesus said all paths, other than His, are dead ends, that He is the way, He is the truth, He is the life that God had in mind. Are we betting it all on Jesus? Truthfulness, yes we are. His death and resurrection are proof that He was more than a prophet, more than a man, He was God in flesh. When doubts stay doubts, you stand for nothing. At some point in your faith, you must make a stand, and grow from there and move beyond the doubts. If indeed Jesus Christ is the way, then let us travel a little further along that way, and see what God has in store for us. There may be times in our lives when we will go through seasons of doubt and seasons of despair and feelings of spiritual defeat. That happens. Anyone whose Christian faith is worth anything at all, has or will work through some fear and some trembling. That is just a given. Do not feel bad about that. Work through it.

In closing – the most wonderful words a congregation has ever heard – in closing, faith has nothing to do with whether or not you question. Faith has to do with whether or not you believe the answers. You can question God all you want. I believe that God can handle our questions. You can even doubt and then pray to the God whom you doubt about doubting Him if you want, but faith has to do with believing the answers you get to your questions and answers do come. They came for Thomas.

“I Doubt It”

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George McDonald said, “In the end, the only and greatest thing one is capable of is trust in God.” You see that’s where Solomon came down after he tried hundreds of wives and riches and power and philosophy. He came down to the greatest and only one thing, the greatest thing that we are capable of doing is trust in God, but to what end? To what end? Then what?

Henry Knowin, a great spiritual writer, after surviving life threatening surgery that he thought was going to kill him, he actually believed that he would not make it through the surgery, woke to realize afresh that the great spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God, that I can be free in the world, free to speak even when my words are not received, free to act even when my actions are criticized or ridiculed or considered useless. Free also to receive love from other people for if I am worthy of God’s love then I can certainly accept other people’s love, and to be grateful for all the signs of God’s presence in the world. Henry Knowin continues, he says, “When I awoke from my operation and realized that I was not yet in God’s house, I felt I was being sent, sent to make the all-embracing love of God known to people who hunger and thirst for love, but who often look for it within a world where it cannot be found.” I am saying that the love of God can be found most truly and most deeply and most concretely in the love that we know through Jesus Christ; and so let us dig deeper in God’s direction. Let us follow further after Jesus Christ, and when your faith grows, let it show. When your faith grows, let it show! That is when we will be the church. Amen.