

“Doubting and Believing”
John 20:19-31

I will endeavor this morning to meet the late George Burn’s definition of delivering a good sermon. That is, “the secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible”. Years ago while travelling on a family vacation in Maine, I recall stopping in a small gift shop and while browsing through the aisles, seeing a bumper sticker that had these words: “I fish, therefore I lie”. It struck me as particularly funny and reminded me of our need to be skeptical of the so called “big fish” story that some fishermen will engage in, embellishing their sporting accomplishments that certainly others, not ourselves would ever do!! Seriously, the notion of being skeptical or doubting of some things we hear from others is in reality, a very normal and healthy response to our environment. I’m sure you have all heard the term “healthy skepticism”, and it is that healthy skepticism that often protects us in the larger world we live in from the day to day advertisements, appeals, and just general noise that society produces. Actually, we live in a time in the year 2010 where the level of doubt and skepticism about almost everything has reached unprecedented levels. Not only do we not trust used car salesmen and politicians, but other so-called authority figures, such as teachers, police officers, doctors, and many others, are increasingly called into question. Of course, sometimes this is self-inflicted, as we witness scandal after scandal on Wall Street, in our political life, the sporting world, and even with the Catholic Church. I even noticed recently that television ads about the 2010 Census were aimed at trying to assure Hispanics that everything they answered on the Census would be confidential, trying to allay fears over possible immigration concerns. The Census, which goes back to our Constitution, is even being called into question in terms of the underlying motives behind gathering information about population trends in the United States. Of course, part of the reason for increasing skepticism and doubt is the influence of the media and the internet, where almost anyone with any idea, thought, position, either true or untrue, can broadcast their viewpoints around the world. With 24 hour cable news stations, there is no respite to the endless drone of news and views, which by the way are often mixed together in a dangerous stew, so it becomes increasingly difficult to separate out fact from fiction. So, when we hear about either “huge” car deals or reasons why we should or shouldn’t support health care reform, we are very quick to be doubting and skeptical based on our past experiences, political views, and increasing cynicism from being bombarded on all sides during this information age; which I might term to be the “too much information age”.

Notice that I just used the word cynicism instead of doubt. While doubt can be a “good thing”, cynicism is too much of a “good thing”. Cynicism implies that one looks at life almost entirely wearing a negative pair of glasses. People are inherently bad, they are always trying to use you, they can’t be trusted, etc. While a certain level of doubt and skepticism is healthy; it protects us from believing in something or doing something, or buying something that we don’t need, cynicism, on the other hand, can become a destructive way of thinking and living that can hurt not only us, but our loved ones. People can become cynical in any number of ways, but certain occupations tend to predispose people to become cynical. For example, in my earlier life I spent 10 years in law enforcement. Police officers, as a group, rate high on the cynicism scale. Why: because they are frequently encountering people under very negative circumstances. They have just broken the law, they just hurt someone, killed someone, abused alcohol and drugs, lost a loved one, had their home burglarized, the list goes on and on. Police don’t get

called to someone's house to deliver good news. Therefore, after time, many police officers will become cynical about human nature. It's very understandable. I can recall a humorous situation years ago when then Sheriff Call and I were working one evening on a DWI Checkpoint. A car coming up to the checkpoint tried to evade it by going around it and speeding away. Both the Sheriff and the late Deputy Dick Dietzman pursued and pulled over the vehicle. As the Sheriff told me later, as Deputy Dietzman was pulling the driver out of the car he was trying to explain that he hadn't been drinking. Deputy Dietzman said "you can lie to me later, get in the back seat of the patrol car". The deputy's comments were accurate, but also reflect the views of police who have "seen it all", so to speak, over the years. Unfortunately, prolonged cynicism can lead to the loss of relationships, alcoholism, other health issues, and certainly a loss of faith in God.

So what does all this say about today's scripture and its relevance to us in 2010? On the surface, it seems quite straight forward and simple. Thomas had to see Jesus wounds before he believed it was indeed the Lord. "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe". The message seems quite clear that those who believe without having to see the wounds are happy. In other words, believing without seeing, or really faith, is what this story is all about. The famous story of "the Doubting Thomas" is important for a couple of other reasons. First, as you read the passages from John, Thomas receives only a mild admonishment from Jesus. Jesus tells him to "stop your doubting and believe". One might forget that when Jesus initially appeared to the other disciples, Jesus took it upon himself to show them his hands and his side. Why would he do that? Wouldn't it occur to Jesus that there might initially be a level of doubt among the disciples regarding his resurrection? Further, should we really be either upset with Thomas or somehow question his motives because he wanted to be like that man from Missouri: you need to show me before I believe it. I think there is at least a little bit of Thomas in all of us and likely a lot of Thomas in some of us. Try to imagine, for a moment, what kind of a letdown there must have been for not just Thomas, but for all the other disciples, following the death of Jesus. Here they had given up their lives to participate in this 3 year ministry that ended up far differently then they must have imagined it would at one time. After all, Jesus was the Messiah and this new King of Kings would change the world they lived in, once and for all. However, as we found out, Jesus was anything but a typical King. Everything about Jesus life was counter-intuitive to what people at that time thought about what a Messiah would do and act like, and even to this day, many people have a hard time accepting. This "King" hung out with poor and downtrodden people, not other Emperor's or in today's world, CEO's of large companies. He wasn't into power, he was into servant hood. He didn't march into Jerusalem with a powerful army behind him, but on a donkey with little fanfare. And, he died on a cross along with two petty criminals on either side of him. One could only wonder if Thomas and perhaps many other disciples felt for a time following the crucifixion that they had just wasted three years of their lives. This was not supposed to be how it happened or how it ended. Now suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst. Disbelief or doubt would likely be the first human reaction to Jesus presence among the disciples. So Thomas is welcomed by Jesus to "put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side". There is no anger whatsoever in Jesus towards Thomas. Instead, there is understanding.

The second important aspect of this story is that doubt often gets a bad rap along with Thomas, and yet doubt is extremely important to faith. The great German-American Theologian Paul Tillich said "doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith".

And how true that is! There is nothing that scares me more than a person who is certain about everything and maintains they know all. Beware! I think if we are all honest with ourselves there are times in our lives when we have doubts about our faith, perhaps even today. It might be a time when we lost a loved one, during a difficult illness, a loss of a job, divorce, or perhaps just a feeling of loneliness. It wouldn't be human to never doubt and yet there often seems an unwillingness to be open about our doubts as if we might be judged harshly by others or looked down upon in some manner. Faith is more of a process than an event and a process is indicative of something that is always changing and growing, organic and alive. Faith is also NOT an anti-intellectual process that some skeptics might want us to believe. Listen to these words from the great theologian William Sloane Coffin from the book *Credo*. "There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us that much more to think about. Certainly Peter and Andrew and James and John, in deciding to follow Jesus, received more to think about than had they stayed at home. And so it is with all of us: if we give our lives to Christ, if we leave familiar territory and take the leap of faith, what we receive in return fills our minds altogether as much as it fills our hearts". While thinking may raise some doubts from time to time, we can still continue to trust without reservation.

Perhaps one of the greatest stories of doubting and believing comes from the life of Mother Teresa. Certainly Mother Teresa is perhaps the most compelling follower of Christ in the past 100 years. Her life in serving the poor and downtrodden in India led to her early consideration to be canonized as a Saint in the Catholic Church. And yet we learned since her death that Mother Teresa harbored serious doubts about her faith for decades. In an article that appeared in *Time Magazine* in August of 2007 entitled "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith". I quote from the article "That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta, and, except for a five week break in 1959, never abated. Although perpetually cheery in public, Teresa of the letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In more than 40 communications, many have which have never before been published, she bemoans the "dryness," "darkness", "loneliness" and "torture" she is undergoing. She compares the experience to Hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. She is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her inner state and her public demeanor. "The smile", she writes, "is a mask or cloak that covers everything". Similarly, she wonders whether she is engaged in verbal deception. "I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God; tender, personal love. If you were there, you would have said what hypocrisy." The Reverend James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit magazine *America*, says the following about Mother Teresa. "Everything she is experiencing is what average believers experience in their spiritual lives writ large. I have known scores of people who have felt abandoned by God and had doubts in God's existence. Who would have thought that the person who was considered the most faithful woman in the world struggled like that with her faith? And yet, her life shows her full of complete trust at the same time." "Now, Martin says, he will use her extraordinary faith in the face of overwhelming silence to illustrate how doubt is a natural part of everyone's life, be it an average believer's or a world famous saint's."

So if we come like Thomas today, with doubts, we are in good company. Questions will always be raised about our faith, and that faith will both be tested and ultimately strengthened by our doubts, just as steel is hardened by heat. In the book "Amish

Grace” by Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver-Zercher, a re-counting of the Nickel Mines elementary school shooting of 10 Amish school children in 2006, the Amish people received widespread attention from the news media because of their ability to offer forgiveness to the killer and the killer’s family almost immediately following the horrific tragedy. Towards the end of the book, the authors talk about the Amish view of Providence. “Despite searching for answers to the problem of evil, every Amish person with whom we spoke deferred in the end to divine mystery. With typical Amish humility, they all recognized that they did not know why this event happened or, with certainty, what good might come from it.” “Every religion has mystery, said an Amish craftsman. “I’d like to say a religion without mystery is like a wagon without wheels”.

I think it is fair to say that our wagon has wheels. Our faith has mysteries and our doubts look at and examine those mysteries. Today, we too, as God’s people are offered the opportunity, as Thomas was, to figuratively put our fingers in Jesus hands and to touch his side. While we won’t do that in the literal sense as Thomas did, his doubts have helped to pave the way for our faith and our beliefs without actually seeing. We thank God for letting us doubt from time to time as we continue to believe in his providence and grace and move ever closer towards a loving and faithful relationship built on trust without reservation. Amen