

# “Critical Faith: Looking for Answers”

## I. INTRODUCTION

- A. One week ago today, we were celebrating Jesus’ resurrection. That got me thinking about what happened one week after the very first Easter.
1. That’s the day when Doubting Thomas got *his* proof of the resurrection.
  2. Doubting Thomas ... is that really a fair name? Mention the Apostle Thomas and most everyone’s first thought is “Doubting Thomas.”
- B. This very subject was discussed in an episode of the TV show “Lost” last season. The overall context isn’t important—and would probably take the rest of the morning to explain anyway.
1. The crucial bit right before this is that Jack has been asked to do something very unusual. He’s just asked Ben all the typical questions you’d ask when you’re told to do something odd: Who is she? Why do I have to do this? How does she know all of this?
  2. This scene is Ben’s answer to Jack’s questions. {“Lost” clip, season 5, episode 6, “316”}
    - a) BEN: [Blows out his match. He looks up at the painting above the candles.] Thomas the Apostle. When Jesus wanted to return to Judea, knowing that he would probably be murdered there, Thomas said to the others, "Let us also go, that we might die with him." But Thomas was not remembered for this bravery. His claim to fame came later... when he refused to acknowledge the resurrection. He just couldn't wrap his mind

around it. The story goes... that he needed to touch Jesus' wounds to be convinced.

b) JACK: So was he?

c) BEN: Of course he was. We're all convinced sooner or later, Jack.

II. Other than in lists, Thomas is mentioned three times in the Bible, all three in the Gospel of John.

A. The first is the passage Ben talked about, **John 11:7-16**.

a) The one we refer to as “Doubting Thomas,” makes the bold statement,

**“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”**

2. Thomas was willing to put in all on the line. In his mind, there was a strong chance that he would be killed if he went to Judea. But he was willing to risk death to follow Jesus.

B. Thomas' next appearance is in **John 14:1-6**

1. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

You know the way to the place where I am going.’

a) “Thomas said to him, ‘**Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?**’

b) “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

2. Let's be honest, if this was the first time you heard all this you'd probably be confused too.
  - a) I can see the disciples sitting around nodding and pretending they understand what Jesus was talking about.
    - (1) I get that look now and then when I'm preaching. I'm not sure you're following, but you smile and nod anyway. Thanks for that.
  - b) Thomas speaks up. He's not doubting, but he *is* asking questions. He says, "Lord I don't get it. I'm confused. Help me understand."
3. Notice, Jesus didn't reprimand Thomas or make fun of him for his question.
  - a) One of the biggest misconceptions we've been taught is that questions are wrong.
  - b) Honest questions are not sin. To want better understanding of a situation is not a sin.
  - c) It's okay to ask questions, even to take them directly to God. He'll hear you. God wants us to tell him what's on our heart and mind.
4. We'll come back to this in a bit. But first, ...

C. We get to the week-after-Easter passage.

1. Let's start a little earlier, though. Specifically, the evening of the Resurrection Day. John 20:19-29.
  - a) "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, 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. ...

- b) “Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’
- c) “But 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.’
- d) “A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’
- e) “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

2. It is easy to see where we get the nickname Doubting Thomas.

- a) But we need to consider the whole story. Mary Magdalene was the first one to see Jesus, and then she told the other disciples. The first thing Peter and John did? Run to the tomb to have a look for themselves.
- b) And when we see the first appearance of Christ to the disciples they were locked in a room in fear for their lives. Why were they hiding? Their Lord

was risen from the dead! But maybe they weren't sure. Maybe they ... doubted.

c) Notice in the passage it says, "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." They were overjoyed *when they saw Him*. Not that different than Thomas, is it?

3. When the other disciples saw Jesus, their faith was restored. Their hope was renewed.

a) But Thomas still had to wait. And yet he held onto what he could. That's why he was there a week later.

b) The disciples told Thomas what they'd seen, but he wasn't ready to get over hurting that easily.

c) He simply couldn't accept the accounts of others without proof.

### III. **Doubts and Questions**

A. One of my friends is not a Christian. Part of her reason is statements like this one made by Jerry Falwell: "Christians, like slaves and soldiers, *ask no questions.*"

1. In reference to that statement, she says in her blog, "Guess I'll never be a Christian. One of my bosses once told me that my greatest strength and weakness was that I ask a lot of questions. It's true. And I'll never be a slave because of it. I question my daily existence, how things are, why things are, and I just wish more people did so rather than just doing as they're expected without ever asking why."

B. Non-Christians and Doubting/Questioning

1. People who are not Christians have a problem with being asked or expected to accept Christianity solely on the basis of “The Bible says so,” or “God said it and we just have to accept it.”
  - a) Non-Christians have doubts. And that’s OK.
2. **Healthy, sincere doubting is honest. It seeks the truth and is willing to reach a conclusion.** It is *not* used as an excuse not to believe.
  - a) This includes being willing to examine not just our beliefs, but our presuppositions as well.
    - (1) It goes beyond “*what* I believe”, to “*why* I believe what I believe”.
  - b) It also accepts that there *is* absolute truth. If there’s no such thing as “absolute truth”, if truth is simply whatever you believe to be true for you, then there’s no point in this.
3. Healthy doubt seeks truth *and* is willing to reach a conclusion. If you’re not a Christian, but you’re here this morning, this might be where you find yourself. Easter was a nice story and all, but you want to know if all of this “Jesus stuff” is true.
  - a) And like Thomas, you’re not willing to just take someone else’s word for it.
  - b) I believe that Thomas’ demand for proof, is to be admired, not ridiculed.
4. A common misconception is that those who believe in the God of the Bible and in Jesus are guided by “blind faith.”

- a) The faith spoken of in the Bible is a faith that's *preceded* by and dependent upon knowledge. As **Romans 10:17** says, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."
- b) **Romans 4:20-21** says of Abraham, "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being *fully persuaded* that God had power to do what he had promised."
- (1) The phrase "fully persuaded" can also be translated "fully convinced".
  - (2) His faith was seen in his trust and submission to what he knew to be the will and power of God. Biblical faith is realized only *after* an examination of the evidence, combined with sound reasoning *about* the evidence.
5. The notion of "blind faith" is foreign to the Bible. The Bible expects that the thinker be rational in gathering information, examining the evidence, and reasoning properly about the evidence, drawing only warranted conclusions.
- a) Paul voiced exactly this concept when he wrote: "Test everything; hold onto the good". John echoed the same thought when he said to "test the spirits".
6. As Proverbs 14:15 says, "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps."

- a) I don't want to be such a radical skeptic that I set standards of proof so high and so stringent they can never be met. But I also don't want to be so gullible that any sort of alleged proof will count as an actual one. But fair and reasonable standards ought to be imposed on every proof offered for any point of view.
  - b) Thomas didn't slam the door on the *possibility* of the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to all the other apostles, it was fair to expect that Jesus appear to him. If that would happen, Thomas would believe.
7. Jesus must not have been offended by Thomas' request, because did appear, and invited him to see the evidence he had requested. Jesus said, "Put your finger here; look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."
- a) Unfortunately, Jesus is most likely not going to appear to you and offer to let you touch His wounds so you can believe.
  - b) But that doesn't mean we're left without evidence.
8. The existence of God is one of the most basic of all questions. If there is no God, then the Bible is useless, and Jesus was a deceiver. But if there *is* a God, our hope is not in vain and we have a larger purpose upon this earth.
- a) Can we *prove* that God exists, or that the Bible is true? The short answer is "no."

- (1) History and the supernatural both can't be proven or disproven. You can only prove or disprove what is observable and repeatable.
- b) But we shouldn't believe anything without evidence. And there *is* evidence.
  - (1) So we ask, "what is the evidence," and we base our decision on that.
- c) Here again, we could spend all day on the evidence for the God of the Bible and for the Bible itself. Instead, I've provided some resources in your bulletins so you can investigate the evidence on your own.
  - (1) I've come across one more resource since putting this list together. Instead, it's up here on the screen. I strongly encourage you to copy the information down.
  - (2) Andy Stanley has a sermon series available on CD or DVD or as mp3's called, "**Verdict**". You can get it online by going to [resources.northpoint.org/store](http://resources.northpoint.org/store) and enter "Verdict" in the search box.
  - (3) This series examines the evidence that has led so many to accept the Bible as a credible record of actual events.
- d) Use these resources and others, just be sure they're reliable. Talk to people who are knowledgeable. Talk to people who have a testimony of a changed life and find out what their journey has been like. Ask Christians you know *why* they are Christians.

- e) You don't have to take my word for it.
- f) Do as much or as little investigation as *you* need to in order to be convinced that you've reached the truth, and to explain why.

### C. Questions for Christians

1. Our church needs to be a safe place to deal with doubts and questions for everyone, those who are Christians and those who are not. I think Lee Strobel was right when he said there are 3 kinds of people in the church.
  - a) Those who are struggling with doubt right now, those who have no doubts now but will struggle with them in the future. And those who have no doubts and never have will because they're basically brain dead.
  - b) If you're serious about your faith then there's going to come a time you've got unanswered questions about your circumstances, about the world situation or maybe why God no longer fits neatly into your man-made box.
  - c) Questioning doesn't mean you've lost your faith, it simply means you're trying to figure out how your faith works in this chaotic and sinful world. So instead of being afraid of the hard questions, let God use them as a means of making us stronger in our faith and drawing us closer to Himself?
2. How do most churches handle questions? Believe it or not, we normally do it with bumper sticker theology.

- a) Have you ever seen this one? “The Bible says it, I believe it and that settles it!” That may sound good to church people, but it frustrates doubters, both Christian and not.
  - b) It frustrates them because they know Christians just like you and me have some of the same questions and doubts they struggle with.
  - c) Honest doubters are looking for answers, so when they’re confronted with that “take or leave it” mentality from Christians, they’re usually turned off.
  - d) Unfortunately, that’s the best that some of us can come up with, because we’ve never asked the questions ourselves.
3. **Asking hard questions** about our faith not only helps us deal with our own doubts and questions, it also **equips us** to have confidence in our faith as being sound, and to, **“Always be ready to give a *logical defense* to anyone who asks you to account for the hope that is in you.”**
- a) Luke credited as noble those who were willing to search for and examine the evidence, rather than being content to simply take someone’s word for the truth.
4. I Pet. 3:15, Acts 17:11, and other verses stand in stark contrast to those who, when questioned about proof of God, or the credibility and comprehensibility of the Bible, triumphantly reply, “I don’t know—I accept it by faith!”
- a) Is there a time to just go on faith and stop asking questions? Sure, but that doesn’t mean we *never* ask questions, that we *never* struggle.

- b) Being honest about those questions and struggles not only allows me to grow spiritually but it makes it much easier to connect to those who are not Christians, for them to identify with me and it opens up conversations about God and faith that might never happen if I wasn't honest about my own questions and doubts.

#### IV. "Stop doubting and believe."

- A. But there comes a time when all the questions that *can* be answered *have* been answered. There's no way to have *every* question answered.
  - 1. The truth is, our capacity to understand God is limited because He's God. If we can understand everything there is about who He is and what He does, then He's not God.
    - a) As Psa. 147:4-5 says, "He determines and counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by their names. Great is our Lord and of great power; His understanding is inexhaustible and boundless."
  - 2. There comes a point when we must decide that what we know is enough to accept the rest. Where that line is for you may be different than where it is for me, or for the person sitting next to you.
  - 3. There also comes a time when we have to step out on faith. A faith based on reason and investigation, but faith nonetheless.
    - a) Notice, when Jesus appeared, what Thomas *didn't* do.
    - b) Look again at John 20:25-28. "But 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.'

- (1) “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’”
- (2) “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”
- c) Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds, and Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!”
  - (1) What it doesn’t say is that Thomas actually *touched Him*. Maybe he did, but nowhere does it say that Thomas reached out, touched Jesus’ wounds, and then proclaimed “My Lord and my God!”
  - (2) When Jesus showed up, that was enough for Thomas.
- d) Sometimes we still have doubts, we still want answers, we’re still unsure, and somehow Jesus “shows up” in our lives.
  - (1) Maybe it’s an answer to a desperate prayer. Maybe you’ve been coming to church for weeks, or even years, and suddenly one day it “clicks”. Maybe you’re looking back on your life and you can suddenly see where God has intervened in your life in ways you never expected.
- e) That happens, and you declare, “My Lord and my God!” This is God working in you by His grace.
- 4. At that moment, you *know* that God is real, that Jesus is real, that He loves you, and that He died and rose again, for *you*.

5. But the truth is, we don't stay that way. Life gets hard, and we question. Life gets easy and we forget. Troubles come, or someone raises an issue we didn't think of, and we wonder. We find ourselves having to make a difficult decision and wonder if we should *really* do what God says, when the other choice seems so much easier.
- B. At times, we go past good, healthy questions and doubts, even as Christians. We start wondering if God really even cares about us.
1. Once we've concluded that God does exist, the next most important question is if He cares. And the Bible makes it abundantly clear that He does.
    - a) Nahum 1:7 – “The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.”
    - b) John 10:11, 14-15 – “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”
    - c) I Pet. 5:7 – “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”
    - d) Even when we face difficulties, He still loves us. God cares far more about our character than our comfort, but that can be hard to recognize as love sometimes.
      - (1) Heb. 12:7 says, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?”
      - (2) Just as a good parent sometimes has to discipline his child, so God sometimes has to do the same with us.

- (3) Just as the parent who disciplines still loves her child, so too does God love us.
  - (4) Just as that discipline is evidence of the parent’s love—because it would be more harmful to the child to stay as he is than to be disciplined—so, too, when we face trials and hardships, that’s not a sign God doesn’t care.
  - (5) Not all trials and hardships are discipline, but some are. And no matter what, we can take comfort in God’s love for us.
- e) “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

C. The Bible says that God is all-knowing and all-powerful. He is merciful but also just. He is the Eternal Creator, not only of the entire universe, but of you and me. And He loves us. He knows everything about you and He loves you and wants the best for you.

- 1. Given all of that, why would I *not* trust and obey Him? Even when it doesn’t make complete sense, even when it’s scary, even when I don’t understand why.
- 2. There’s a time to ask questions, but there’s also a time to just trust Him and follow Him.

D. Sometimes we doubt what we know to be true, because it just doesn't *feel* true. At those times, we need to *choose* to believe.

1. "Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time."

E. If God can be trusted, then we don't have to worry about "How does that work? How *can* that work?"

1. If God is our *perfect* Father, it's OK to do what our Father says, even if we don't understand it.

a) I know you'll find this hard to believe but growing up I used to ask "why" a lot. All kids do, but I did I even more than normal kids.

(1) My parents always did their best to answer the why's, but one day my Mom told me, "Sometimes you just have to accept what we tell you and do it. If you're playing and I see a car coming I'll tell you to get out of the street. If you knowing why before you obey, you'll be hit by the car. Sometimes you just have to do what I tell you, and then I'll explain why later, if there's time."

b) Sometimes, we just have to trust God. It's not that we can never ask questions, it's that we have a Father who loves us, a God we can trust, who is much bigger than us. Who knows us and our circumstances far better than we do, and loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

(1) And so, at those times, we look to Him and simply accept. We take Him at His word. We take what we know about Him, and

allow it to overcome our desire to know why about everything  
and to be in control.

(2) It's hard, but Thomas did it, and so can we.

## V. CONCLUSION/INVITATION

### A. **Thomas, the Apostle of Certainty**

1. Speaking at Main Street United Methodist Church in Illinois, Pastor Bob Phillips shared this story: "When our youngest child was born at Bethesda Naval Hospital, we had a visitor.
2. "Father John was a Greek Orthodox priest, Navy chaplain and our neighbor. In the midst of the conversation, he asked what we had named our son.
3. "'Thomas,' I replied. He mulled my reply and then responded, 'Thomas, the apostle of certainty.' That threw me. I had heard of Doubting Thomas but never anything about an apostle of certainty. I asked what he meant and he said, 'In our tradition, Thomas is known as the apostle of certainty because, had he not so deeply doubted, he never would have so deeply believed.'"

### B. I encourage you this morning to learn from Thomas.

1. He doubted, looked for evidence, and was willing to make a decision based on that evidence.
2. He asked questions when he didn't understand.
3. And when he made his commitment to Christ, he was willing to stand firm in that commitment and faith.

### C. **If you aren't a Christian**, I encourage you to **examine the evidence** for Jesus. Be open to having your mind changed if the evidence warrants it.

1. Don't use "I have doubts" as an excuse to keep from having to make a choice or as permission to continue living however you want to.
  2. And as you begin to see that there *is* evidence that God exists, ask Him to guide you to the truth. He will.
- D. If you *are* a Christian and you're not struggling with doubts or questions right now, first, rejoice that you're in such a solid place right now.
1. But be kind to those who aren't where you are. Jude 22 reminds us to "Be merciful to those who doubt."
- E. If you're a Christian and you *are* struggling with doubts and questions, don't be afraid of them.
1. Take them to God. Be honest with Him. Talk to trusted Christian friends. Let them listen and help you.
  2. Go back to what you *know* to be true, to what you've been convinced of. That God is faithful, loving, and true. He is with you, even when it doesn't feel like it or you don't understand it.
  3. As a man said to Jesus when asking for help for his son, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!". If this is where you are now, you understand exactly what he means.
  4. Ask God to help you look past the struggles the fear, the uncertainty and to focus on the God who is bigger than all your problems, bigger than all your fears.