

"Doubt Your Doubts! Believe Your Beliefs!" (John 20:26-29) Easter 2, 4/19/09

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are on a camping trip. They set up their tent and fall asleep. But just a few hours later, Sherlock Holmes awakens his friend, saying, "Watson, look up! Does anything strike you as strange?" "No," Watson replies, "I just see lots of stars." "And what does that tell you?" asks Holmes. He answers, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it tells me that God is almighty and we are not. Meteorologically, it suggests that tomorrow will be a beautiful day. Why?" Watson asks, "What does it tell you?" Holmes answers, "Elementary, my dear Watson. It tells me someone has stolen our tent!"

Poor Watson! He kind of missed the obvious, didn't he? And I'm sure we all can sympathize. It's easy to do! But boy, can it cost us! Professionally, it can cost us our career to miss the obvious. Medically, it can mean life or death. Even relationally, think how many fights come up over what you should have noticed, should have thought of, should have taken care of! And spiritually? What can it cost us spiritually to miss the obvious? Well, that's what I'd like to talk about today. And for a good starting place, let's dive right into our text.

Over the years, I'm sure we've all heard a lot of sermons on "*Doubting Thomas*," and often the focus is on doubt – in fact, affirming the value of doubt. Listeners are assured that it's better to face your doubts than to suppress them; that it is no sin to ask questions; and that it's natural, even productive to examine your beliefs. All of which is true. But is that the point of this text? No. If we just look at what John wrote, it's obvious that doubt is only peripheral. The point is that there is *no reason to doubt Jesus' resurrection – or what it means – and there is every reason to have faith.*

True, Thomas doubted at first, but let's not miss the obvious: his doubts were proven false. And when Jesus stood before him alive, what did Thomas do? Again, let's not miss the obvious. Did he stubbornly insist that while it seemed he was wrong, the resurrection was still scientifically impossible, and he'd need a lot bigger, better proofs to be sure Jesus was alive? No. Or did he even stop part way, agreeing that, yeah, the others had been right about the resurrection, but so what? No. Jesus told him, "**Be not faithless but believing,**" and Thomas went the whole nine yards! He left his doubts behind and embraced the truth. He connected the dots and grasped what all this meant. Jesus had to be who He claimed to be, or He would not have been raised. So Thomas chose to believe 100%, exclaiming, "**My Lord and my God!**" And then, as he said that, how did Jesus respond? Yet again, let's not miss the obvious. Jesus could have said, "*No problem, Thomas! It was better to face your doubts than to suppress them. It was no sin to ask questions. It was natural, even productive to examine your beliefs.*" Yes, Jesus could have said that, but He didn't. Jesus chose to emphasize the value of faith: "**Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.**"

So...isn't it interesting what we find when we just look at this text? Nowhere do we find the patron saint of modern skeptics, "*Doubting Thomas*." This is the story of how he became "*Believing Thomas*." And nowhere do we find support for wallowing indefinitely in doubt. To the contrary, we hear, "**Be not faithless but believing,**" and even more, "**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.**" It's all pretty obvious when you just look at the text! And so is the point. When it comes to following Jesus, there are only two options: to be faithless or believing. And that begs the obvious question: Which will we be?

Now, for long-time Christians, it may seem that we have already answered this question. And in principle, we have. But of course, faith is not lived out just in principle. It's lived out in specific choices made over time, and that makes faith more complicated. Yes, we've decided to follow Jesus, but we can only follow Him step by step, one step at a time. And as we do that, we're bound to hit occasional rough spots – new challenges to our faith. So at such times we have to decide again: Which will we be? Faithless or believing? Along the way, we're also bound to hit slippery spots – new temptations or old ones rearing their ugly heads. So then, too, we have to decide again: Which will we be? Faithless or believing? And so it goes! Not just once in principle, but again and again throughout life we have to decide: Which will we be? Faithless or believing?

And all of this can really take a toll on us! The more challenges we're hit with, the more exhausted we get and the more vulnerable we become. So how do we hang in there? How do we maintain our faith over the long-haul? How do we fight back? We know some obvious answers: pray about it, get into the Word, seek support from fellow Christians. But here are two more answers I think are obvious yet are easily missed. When you find doubts slipping into your mind, don't let them get too comfortable! Put them to the test! Doubt your doubts! And when you feel your beliefs slipping away, don't let go of them too easily! Put them to the test, too! Believe your beliefs! I know, this probably sounds simple. Maybe even simplistic. But that doesn't mean it won't help! Give it a try! Doubt your doubts! Believe your beliefs! You'll see what a difference it makes!

It sure has for me. Way back when I started studying theology, I got hit with all kinds of challenges to my beliefs. Supposedly, this event never happened. Supposedly, this person never existed. Supposedly, this moral principle didn't apply anymore. And so it went. Now, at first I found this intoxicating! In fact, I remember going to my pastor and ticking off a whole list things that no modern person could believe anymore. I expected to shock him. Instead he just chuckled and said, "You know, the air gets awfully thin up there in the intellectual stratosphere. Think about this some more, and when you come back down to earth, let's talk again." I, of course, found this answer very offensive, not to mention unenlightened. No way would I ever go back and talk with him again!

But actually, I did. For you see, after a while, the novelty began to wear off, and this theological cynicism started getting to me. The effects on my faith were

pretty unsettling. So I did go back and talk with my pastor. Specifically, I talked to him about dealing with doubts. And as we talked, do you what I realized? That I *hadn't* been dealing with doubts. I hadn't even been trying. I had just accepted them without a whole lot of scrutiny – which wasn't very smart and needed to change. So it did. That's when I learned to doubt my doubts – that is, to shift the burden of proof onto *them* and really put to *them* to the test. What basis was there for claiming such and such never happened? What evidence was there that so and so never lived? What grounds were there for claiming this or that moral principle didn't apply anymore? I learned to be pretty hard on these doubts! And do you know what I found? They weren't so tough after all! In fact, it was quite a sight watching one doubt after another bite the dust!

So how does this work, doubting your doubts? As an example, let's take a look at doubts about Jesus' resurrection. There are plenty who say it never happened, but what evidence can they produce? If you shift the burden of proof onto the skeptics and question the assumption that the resurrection *didn't* happen because it *couldn't* happen, what is left of their claim? I mean, if Jesus' body was stolen, who could have done it? Not the disciples. They were hiding behind locked doors. That just leaves Mary Magdalene and a few other women. Did they overpower the Roman guards and make them run off squealing in terror, even though the guards knew they could be executed for abandoning their post? And that done, did the women roll back that huge stone by themselves? Then did they carefully strip off Jesus' burial shroud, fold it neatly, the face cloth, too, and casually carry off the body to who knows where? Frankly, that's kind of hard to believe! Or that such a deed could be kept a secret. Or that Pontius Pilate wouldn't have punished such an attack on Roman troops. And on top of that, how then do you explain the change in the disciples? Cowards before Easter; bold witnesses after Easter. Nothing could stop them from proclaiming, "the Lord is risen indeed!" Would that have happened if they knew the resurrection was a sham? Would they have spent their lives trudging all over the globe spreading the message if they hadn't seen the risen Lord? Would they have defied every threat, endured every torture, and died in unimaginably gruesome ways if they weren't absolutely sure Jesus was alive? All I can say is: I doubt it! In fact, I doubt it with every fiber of my being! And do you know what else I doubt? That I'd be able to say this so confidently if I *hadn't* challenged this challenge to my faith. So I tell you from personal experience: It helps to doubt your doubts! When you find them slipping into your mind, don't let them get too comfortable! Put them to the test! Make *them* bear the burden of proof! Doubt your doubts!

And while you're at it, believe your beliefs, too! That is, when they're challenged, don't back down. Exercise your beliefs! When your faith is hard pressed, don't slack off. Exercise your beliefs! Like muscles, beliefs need exercise to stay strong and get stronger. So put them to the test, too! Believe your beliefs!

I mean, going back to the first Easter again, think what would have happened to the disciples' faith if they'd just stayed in the room where they'd been hiding and

avoided any challenges to their faith. Yes, they would have been safe there, but the trade off would have been a pretty flabby faith that just atrophied over time. Small wonder Jesus sent them out to share the good news. Others needed to hear it, but they also needed to share it. Exercising their faith did them good! You see it in the book of Acts! What happened every time their beliefs were challenged? Standing their ground bolstered their assurance! What happened every time their faith was put to the test? Exercising it made it stronger! They found God's grace was sufficient for them! They found His power was made perfect in weakness! And how else could they have learned this for sure? Only by exercising their faith! Only by believing their beliefs!

And the same is true for us. These days, our beliefs are as likely to be tested by circumstances as by society, but the value of exercising them remains the same. Case in point: one of the strongest Christians I've ever known was Mary Robbio. But she didn't start out that way. She became that way when circumstances put her faith to the test and, instead of caving in, she chose to exercise it.

Here's what happened. One day, while Mary was checking out a nursing home for her dad, she slipped and hit her neck on a steel shelf, leaving her completely paralyzed. In a split second, this woman who had thrived on service and hospitality was robbed of the life she had known. It would have been so easy for her to wallow in doubt and self-pity! It would have been so easy to turn away from God. But her faith was made of sterner stuff. Mary turned to God all the more – especially as she questioned what she could still do with her life. There had to be something! And she would not give up that belief! Well, a few of you know what happened next. Mary had always been great pray-er, so one day when we were talking about what she might still do, it dawned on me: "Mary, how would you like to be my prayer partner?" Her face lit up! "What do you mean?" she asked. I told her, "There are some tough situations that really could use some saturation prayer. If you would be willing, I could fill you in on the details, and you could pray about them." "Well, I've certainly got the time!" she laughed, "And I'd love to spend it that way." So, that became her ministry. To the day she died, Mary was my prayer partner. And what a valuable ministry it was – for me, for others, and also for herself, because Mary grew stronger by exercising her faith! She not only survived but thrived by believing her beliefs!

Many of us here today could share our own examples of this – times when it made all the difference to doubt our doubts and believe our beliefs. We might be reluctant to talk about those times. Handling them that way may seem such an "obvious" thing to do. But...well, here again, let's not miss the obvious! Jesus' words to Thomas apply just as much to us today: "**Be not faithless but believing!**" So when you find doubts slipping into your mind, don't let them get too comfortable! Put them to the test! And when you feel your beliefs slipping away, don't let go of them too easily! Put them to the test, too! That's the encouragement we take home with us today. Doubt your doubts! Believe your beliefs! Amen.

