

Congregational Church of the Messiah
First Sunday after Easter
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Your Choice—Doubt or Belief

Luke 24:1-12

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Being a doubter is easy. Anyone can question everything in the world. People practice their doubting skills on us all the time. Have you ever been asked: “Are you *sure* you know what you’re doing? Do you really think you can do *that*? When was the last time you did that anyway? Don’t you think you ought to ask someone else before making a decision about it?” And the list goes on and on.

A doubter undermines the possible by questioning whether a good outcome will result from whatever action you are considering to take—even if the action is well-intentioned and beneficial to others.

Doubting comes in many forms, but usually is directed at whomever is trying to accomplish something, especially if it is something new that takes energy, money or time. We have all heard someone say, “Just to be the devil’s advocate,” and then the person proceeds to try to put forth the most negative outcomes imaginable to discourage whatever is being discussed. Doubting tends to discourage rather than encourage.

So to whom do you listen? How do you decide which is accurate? Which is more important?

When you see something with your own eyes and you know the experience does not fit with former happenings, how do you determine what is true? Can something be both accurate and yet not completely true?

I asked a wise, older minister how could the same Gospel claim that both the thieves railed at Jesus and then went on to claim that one of them reprimanded the other and asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom? It seemed like a direct contradiction as I read the scripture passage. Pastor Zikas just smiled and said one word, “Time.” Consider the passage of time. The three men hung there on their crosses for several hours as their life energy drained from them in the hot, midday sun. What they thought about each other at the beginning and near the end was not the same.

Jesus had obviously handled Himself in a vastly different way than the others. Jesus did not harbor anger and bitterness for the mockery of trials He was put through. He did not protest that He was innocent of any wrongdoing although there is no question that He was innocent.

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“But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.” (Luke 23:34a)

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household.”
(John 19:26-27)

Jesus experienced the anguish of being desperately alone in His dying, crying out at one point, “Father, Why have You forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46b) But then uttered, “It is finished.” (John 19:30b) And finally, came the words of total trust, “Father, into Your Hands I commit my spirit,” and He breathed his last breath. (Luke 23:46)

The disciples were there, saw, and perhaps heard those things or some of them, and they doubted that there was anything more beyond what they experienced on that fateful day. That was what they saw personally and experienced first hand.

Three days later, when the women came rushing in to tell the apostles that Jesus’ body was gone, that an angel had told them that Jesus had risen as He had told them would happen, the apostles could not believe it. They did not call the women liars. They were simply stunned into disbelief.

Only Thomas knew what he needed to have as proof. “Unless I stick my hand in His side and place my finger in the holes in His hands, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) Thomas was clear that personal, physical proof was the only way he would ever consider believing Christ had risen from the dead. What we have come to call a “scientific method” was not new to Thomas. I expect he doubted anything that could not be seen or touched and repeated. “Show me! Then I will believe” was his way of dealing with life and so he became known as “Doubting Thomas.”

I still am amazed that often when we ask for some sign from Jesus, we actually receive the assurance for which we asked. Jesus does not have to do this, and there are times when He chooses not to grant our challenge, but He did for Thomas.

The disciples had been meeting together behind a locked door in fear of the authorities and in desperate need of a faith that would empower them. Following the Crucifixion of Jesus, they had become really depressed. For a while, there was literally no good news of any kind. Everything they had come to believe about Jesus was in disarray. The time had been three days of misery.

Then Jesus came and stood in the disciples’ midst. His Presence brought them out of their fear. His words encouraged them, and before Jesus left, He gave each disciple the personal experience of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus broke the bread in front of the disciples and they recognized him, I can imagine the disciples had the same feelings

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in the room as they had on the road: “And they said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:32)

We were not there then and can only hypothesize about the effect Christ’s presence had upon the mind and heart of each disciple, but we see the incredible change. The discouraged and disillusioned disciples became so filled with passion, excitement, and conviction of the reality that Christ was alive that they simply could not contain the Good News. It spilled over into every area of their thinking and living. It gave them a new heart and a new mind—a new spirit of joy that no one could take away from them. The disciples became vibrantly alive spiritually with the incredible Good News, but Thomas was not there that time, and so he did not share the experience of the Risen Christ nor did he receive the Holy Spirit. Thomas only had his last experience of Christ on the cross to believe in and that with the body of His Lord nailed to a rough wooden cross—dead.

About a week later, Jesus again came into the room where the disciples were gathered. This time Thomas *was* there. Jesus turned and faced Thomas and spoke directly to him: “Thomas, Go ahead. Here are my hands. Put your finger where the nails were. Here is my side. Put your hand where the spear went in. Do not doubt. Believe.” (John 20:27) Suddenly what Thomas had seen with his physical eyes and what he wanted to believe in his heart came together for him. The visible evidence so important to him to verify that something was true now agreed with what he wanted to believe in his soul.

Jesus was the Messiah sent from God to save the world. God’s power for good had triumphed over evil’s power to destroy life. The temporary had yielded to the eternal. The visible events Thomas now saw were overcome by the Holy Spirit filling his soul with assurance of God’s power and love. He changed. His doubt became belief; despair became conviction. The other disciples saw Thomas fall on his knees before Jesus Christ and heard Thomas utter from deep within him the words: “You are my Lord and my God.” (John 20:28) The habitual doubter had been transformed into a passionate believer by a personal experience of the Risen Christ. Thomas had been changed for good, forever.

Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ changes lives one person at a time. That is what is unique about our understanding of God. How great are the majesty, power and love of Almighty Eternal God! We know God is far beyond being contained by our imagination, let alone our ability to analyze or figure out all about God. No human mind is capable; no computer calculations are big enough; no human inventions can ever rival our everlasting Heavenly Father, Who also cares about even the sparrow of the field and we humans who inhabit the earth God created and called it “good.”

The ever-present Holy Spirit, which is the indwelling of God’s Spirit within our spirit, is what makes the difference—not whatever physical proof or disproof may be offered to convince someone of God. People and prophets had been trying to prove what God was

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really like for ages before Christ came to literally show us—up front and personal—what living a life pleasing to God could be like on earth:

- ❖ how living with God’s spirit would change your own perspective and priorities,
- ❖ how such a life would turn so many cultural ideas and relationships inside out.

We no longer would measure success in worldly terms of money, power and prestige but rather in how faithful we are to using the gifts God has given to us to help others, to further the kingdom of right relationships between families, between friends and enemies, between people of all names and places.

We each choose how to use our minds, hearts and energy. We choose whether to seek new information and understanding or be content with the limited information we already have tested. We each choose how much truth and importance to assign to one person’s story versus another person’s story versus our own experience. We can choose to believe with a conviction that there is room for keen thinking, reasonable risk-taking, and continued growth in faith. We do not have to duplicate the experience of Thomas to share the faith and new life he received by believing in Christ.

The stories recorded in the Fourth Gospel are not just records of events witnessed by the women in the garden or the disciples in a locked room. Those were actions, which pointed to how their lives took a totally unexpected positive change as a direct result of experiencing the Risen Lord. They talked and wrote about their experience of Jesus for years—literally for the rest of their lives on earth. John writes, “These things have been written, so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. If you have faith in him, you will have true life.” (John 20:31)

Believing is a first step but not the only one. With our belief in Jesus as the Messiah comes the inner desire to share this Good News with others. Jesus told simple stories to illustrate fundamental truths of God. Here is a modern parable about a young boy who was well taught.

The boy knew where to cut the new growth so the thousands of small white pines in the nursery directed all their energy into the boughs and spires as would make each a splendid tree. But for all his pruning, weeding, and cultivating, there came a day when the young trees no longer responded to his efforts.

Turning to his father, the boy asked, “Why, in spite of everything I do, are the trees not growing?”

“It is time they are moved,” the father replied.

“Moved?” the boy asked, “but how can that help?”

The father put an arm around his son’s shoulders and said, “When the fingerling

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becomes a big fish, it must leave the creek for the river.”

So, the boy, while transplanting the thousands of young pines, grew also and became a man.

At last, when his work was done and the trees were all flourishing, he turned once more to his father. “And now,” he asked, “now that I have transplanted all the trees, and they are all growing, what more is there for me to do?”

The father smiled. His son had grown well.

“Now the trees can take care of themselves,” he said. “Now it is your time to find additional acres and be responsible for your own trees to help them grow also.”

(Mel Ellis, *Sermons in Stone*)

The story can be applied to the disciples after Jesus’ Resurrection and to us today. There may come a time in each of our lives, whether physically, intellectually or spiritually when we grow toward God, and go beyond the comfort of the already familiar and seek additional ways to grow closer to God “with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.”

The lesson is not new. It is an eternal one written in the very nature of creation. The disciples at first were skeptical. They wondered; some doubted; and all asked the question, “What do we do now?”

Jesus’ response was “Stay in the city until you have received power from on high.”

(Luke. 24:49b)

Several times, Jesus physically appeared and reassured them: in the Garden by the tomb, in two different rooms, on the beach in the morning after they had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Jesus was training his disciples to become confident believers in Him—believers who would become individual doers of the Word and not just hearers of the Word of God. (James 1:22) Believers spread the Good News, which Jesus brought:

- ❖ Almighty God is as compassionate as He is powerful.
- ❖ God cares for each of us as deeply as our heavenly Father who goes in search of the one lost sheep until He finds it and brings it safely home.
- ❖ Believers who have *not* seen the physical Jesus are the ones who are blessed to carry His message into all the world through deeds as well as words.

Only when we are filled with the Holy Spirit will we have within ourselves the power to transform our beliefs into actions and programs, and finally, Christ gives this gift of spiritual empowerment to those who believe so that they might lead others to grow into their own joyous relationship with God.

For over 100 years, this Congregational Church of the Messiah has served the Lord by

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ministering to the spiritual and practical needs of persons within and beyond its membership. As a church fellowship, we have come through times of steady growth and times of reduction of numbers. For everything, there is a season. Some times are of the past; others are of the present. Spring is all around us. New families and individuals are and will be moving into our neighborhood. This is planting time for the seeds sown by the Resurrection of our Lord. It is time for what was assumed to be spoken aloud.

We at Messiah are members one of another, not in our doubts, but in our belief and willingness to try to follow our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. This is our Covenant with one another and with God.

Who else would you rather follow?

God has been preparing us to serve the needs of our members and others in the community by being Good News—living lives with hope and worth, purpose and promise fueled by a passionate faith in a powerful and loving God who cares for every human being and can even resurrect people who are discouraged and disillusioned and beaten down by life and who doubt there is anything good left for them.

We cannot personally be everywhere that there is need for God's Good News. We cannot personally go over to Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Rwanda, China, or Iraq. Compared to the vastness of the world and the need for God's love—it is not possible for us to be personally everywhere. But through this church, our missions/benevolence committee, through our reaching out where we are to our neighbors and friends who may not yet have a church home, we *can* bring newness of hope, expressions of love and caring to an increasingly anxious and hurting world. We are not responsible for everyone, but God expects us to share His love where we can. Let once skeptical doubters become passionate believers as we continue planting, watering, and praying that God may bring new growth to our own spiritual lives and to those of others. God will answer our prayers in His own way and time with new life and growth.

Let us pray:

“God of the journey, as You give us a new heart and Resurrection Spirit, help us invite others to share the gifts You have given to us as we travel together on this road of faith.”

(Alive Now, May/June 1999, p.54)

Amen.