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Sermon Title: The Aftermath of Doubt
Scripture: John 20:24-31
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John 20:24-31

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a year of great doubt. I graduated from college, I started seminary, the Vietnam War was raging. America was torn apart, nobody liked anybody very much. We doubted ourselves. We doubted one another. We doubted God and country, church and state, parents and children, Mom and apple pie. So I decided to become a pastor.

I ended up at a seminary that liked doubt. They welcomed it. They embraced it. They taught it. They expected it. They practically demanded it. I began to hear phrases like "the first step to faith is doubt," "doubt is food for faith," "doubt is the building block of faith."

I was inspired by this. I sort of assumed that doubt was the opposite of faith, not on the same team at all. Even St. James, who is practically my favorite writer in the Bible, James is pretty tough on doubt. He urges folks to "persevere," to "believe and NOT doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by wind. That person should not think he will receive anything from the Lord (hear that again, 'the person who doubts will not receive anything from the Lord!'). Because such a person is a double-minded person, unstable in all he does." (James 1:4-8)

That's harsh. I'm not even sure it's true. I'm sure it's admirable. I'm sure we'd all like to have 100 percent certainty about everything, no second thoughts, no regrets, no hesitation. But it's not realistic. In fact, hardly anyone in the Bible measures up, if doubt is such a bad thing. In word or deed, all the great figures in the Bible hemmed and hawed.

When I used to sing rock 'n' roll, I had a favorite song, "The Hesitation Blues." They had doubts here and there, large and small. Abraham doubted God's promises; Moses was not keen to "go down to Egypt land"; Jeremiah and Jonah and Esther all tried to wiggle out of God's service. And the New Testament is just as full of doubters – including St. James himself.

Who was James? There are two possibilities. He was either James, one of the 12 disciples (that would be one of the gang who slept when Jesus asked them to pray with him, who skedaddled when Jesus was arrested, who hid out when Jesus was tried and executed, who laughed at the women who reported the Resurrection). It could be that James. Or, more likely, the scholars say, this is James, the brother of Jesus. Jesus's brother, part of the family who showed up early in Jesus's ministry to try to get him to stop, to go home. He would be the brother who is not mentioned once in the four Gospels as having anything to do with Jesus.

Either way, the best thing we can say is that these disciples knew doubt inside and out and hoped to convince us to not waffle, as they did, to not be blown about by the wind, as they were, to not be double-minded and unstable, as they were.

Of course, the most famous doubter is the real inspiration behind my sermon. Thomas, St. Thomas, better known as "Doubting Thomas." His main claim to fame is that Thomas doubted that Jesus was raised from the dead. Fact is, just about everybody doubted it, but he got remembered for it.

One night, all the disciples (except Thomas, *except Thomas*), all of them were gathered together behind locked doors, when Jesus, the executed Jesus, the spirit or ghost of Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, suddenly appeared,

right there, with them. They were thrilled, they were ecstatic, and above all they were convinced: Jesus was alive! Resurrection is real! Hallelujah! They tried to explain it all to poor Thomas, but poor, absent Thomas was about to become poor "doubting Thomas."

"I doubt it," Thomas basically said, "unless I see his wounds, his scars, his *self*, I doubt it." (John 20:25, almost) No surprise there. Nobody believed at first. It took just about everybody a double-take of some sort, a personal, almost hands-on encounter. So, a week later, the Bible says, Jesus showed up again. Same house. Same locked door. Same surprising appearance. AND same result. Everybody's thrilled; everybody's convinced, including Thomas, the present Thomas, but no-longer-doubting Thomas.

Indeed, this pretty much disproves St. James. Remember, James wrote, "[Doubters] will not receive anything from the Lord." Thomas actually got a lot from his doubts. He got another chance. He got a personal visit with Jesus. He got extraordinary success. He got martyrdom. And he got sainthood. All that was the "aftermath of doubt." So I am not afraid of it.

At this church, we are not afraid of anything – not afraid of questions, not afraid of skepticism, or wonder, or exploration, or doubts. We are not afraid of anything that's active. Now if you dry up, shrivel up on us, if you stagnate, if you stop reaching and growing and trying, then I worry about you. But if you are willing to match Thomas doubt for doubt, if you are willing to match Moses and Esther and Peter and James and, yes, even John the Baptist, even the sainted Paul, doubt for doubt, then we can work together on your own journey to sainthood. And that's the second half of this sermon, "The Aftermath of Doubt." The journey to sainthood.

In 1983, I was president of Habitat for Humanity worldwide. Those were heady days. Jimmy Carter had just started getting involved. Paul Newman was helping us. We were in *People* magazine, on "NBC Nightly News." And on the front page of *The New York Times*. That summer, Habitat sent me to India. It was an amazing trip where I ended up meeting my dear friend Azariah. We ended up starting Habitat in Asia. We ended up starting Friends of Christ in India (FOCI), our church's work in India, where Alida and our church mission team are today, where Dr. Longstreth and his team provide miracle after miracle each year.

One day, I was staying in the famous city of Madras (now called Chennai). My hosts took me on a trip to the beach. Traveling down the beach, they took me to a church, St. Thomas's Church. Just like our St. Thomas Church, on the Post Road in downtown Fairfield across from Starbucks. Except this

really was St. Thomas's church. Inside there was a big display case, holding the bones of St. Thomas and pieces of the spears used to kill St. Thomas.

You see, in the aftermath of doubt, St. Thomas hopped on a boat and took the Gospel of Jesus Christ all the way to India. He started at the very bottom tip of India and worked his way up the east coast, telling people about God's love, telling folks about Jesus, giving them the Good News, and starting churches. That was 2,000 years ago, long before St. Francis Xavier and the Jesuits landed in Goa, long before the British and their missionaries, long before America and our missionaries, long before David Rowe and Habitat and FOCI, long before Azariah and Alida and our church mission teams. Two thousand years ago, St. Thomas, with a faith fed by doubt, ended up taking what Kierkegaard called "the leap of faith."

Doubt can take you only so far. Hope can take you only so far. Even proof, facts, evidence, tradition, custom can take you only so far. At some point, the only thing we can do is to leap, to jump out further, farther than we might expect. That's "faith."

Here is the key thing about Thomas: he put himself in a position to believe; he put himself in a position to be confronted by faith. He could have quit, after the Crucifixion, he could have stopped, he could have left, or hidden out, or run away or gone back to his previous life. Thomas had good reason to doubt. Indeed, reason was on the side of Thomas's doubt, facts were on the side of doubt, experience was on the side of doubt. Jesus had been crucified. Crucifixion is a gruesome kind of execution. The Romans were very good at it. Jesus was declared dead. He was buried in a sealed tomb. For Thomas to doubt the Resurrection made sense. Yet Thomas didn't quit, didn't run away, didn't go back to his previous life. Instead, he kept putting himself in a position to believe. And once confronted by faith, he took an even greater leap of faith – way out into the unknown, all the way to remote, far-away, unknown India. And there he left his mark – in tiny villages, on anonymous peasants – to such a degree that despite 2,000 years of isolation and persecution, those Thomas churches survived and thrived.

Faith is always a surprise. Faith always takes us on a journey further and farther than we ever expected. This week eight people from our church are on that same journey of faith, taking them further and farther than they ever expected. Added to Dr. Longstreth's January team of 14, that's 22 people who have taken the leap of faith, following in the footsteps of St. Thomas. In some ways, those footsteps are as confounding and difficult today as they were 2,000 years ago for St. Thomas.

India is still a land of arduous travel, endless waits, unexpected problems, dizzying layers of failure and success; people who disappoint, things that don't work, stuff that breaks down; intrigue, drama, confusion. Yet, for 30 years, we educate thousands of children. We feed thousands of the poor and the elderly and the hungry. We provide thousands with a healing touch. Thousands attend churches we've built. Thousands feed their families with the work we've helped start. Thousands live in our Habitat houses. Thousands see God's love in Jesus Christ made real every day in a thousand ways.

Friday night Alida called, her voice filled with excitement and pride. She was practically doing her own leap of faith right out of the phone. She wished she could be here, herself, to tell you everything our church team was doing. She told me about the group going to our leprosy village. Yes, literally, our village full of lepers, those afflicted with that legendary, Biblical, scarring, horrendous disease that makes people literally the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low, the most untouchable of untouchables. And again we provide literally everything for over 250 people: the houses, food, clothing, medicine, school, church, community center, well. And love. Unconditional love, with no "Hesitation Blues."

Alida described how our Greenfield Hill Church folks, our FOCI gang, waded into the crowd, greeting them, shaking their hands, kneeling and sitting in the heat and dust, touching and being touched. Across the language barriers and cultural barriers, across centuries of fear and stigma, our people took St. Thomas's leap of faith, going where others are afraid to go, loving those whom others are afraid to love. History is full of people who get put off, discouraged, angry, overwhelmed, repulsed, defeated by the challenges of mission, of India, of the poor. But for us, the aftermath of doubt is faith, and love, in action.

Later, they went to one of our new schools, hidden down a long dirt path; escorted by a local town brass band with screeching clarinet and one lone drum, garlanded by the students, welcomed with speeches and poems. All because people in this church, in this town, decided those kids were worth it. And one after the other of our church teams stood up to proclaim the straight line that runs from God through Jesus Christ, through this church, through their hearts, leaping with faith, all the way to a lonely little town in the middle of nowhere. Nowhere, except to us, to them, and to God. Pretty cool stuff. All this is the "aftermath of doubt."

Let me close with this. Last Monday, I had my weekly Confirmation class, 23 eighth-graders turning my living room into a toxic dump of candy and sugar and crumbs, all fused together by laughter. Then in the middle of it all, we

tackle all the big stuff of faith: doubt, evil, good, God, hate, love, fear, hope. All getting each of us ready to take our own "leap of faith." Last Monday, with Alida in India, I showed a movie our own Becky Ward made five years ago when she went to India as part of our FOCI team.

Becky was a student at Dartmouth at the time. She is a creative genius. With brilliant images, stunning symbols, simple stories, her film took our confirmation class on a journey of faith. They saw it all – every reason to doubt and despair, every reason to hope and believe. When it was all over, I had Kelly Milicia read an essay her sister had written three years ago, after seeing the same film, sitting in the same living room for her own Confirmation class. That sister is one of our Junior Deacons now.

In her essay, Sarah wrote about seeing Becky's film, about the import of what she saw. Twice she said that it changed her life. Sarah wrote that she saw the difference between wants and needs, it helped her to appreciate the blessings of her life, made her determined to live a life of gratitude, of purpose, of will. "I learned that life is valuable," Sarah declared, "valuable and precious. Every day counts, every breath we take is full of freedom and determination."

Sarah is a person who has already taken some amazing leaps of faith in her young life. She is representative of us, of you, of our FOCI teams and ASP teams, and St. George's Soup Kitchen teams. She knows courage and determination, doubt and faith.

And I know you. I know your struggles and obstacles and frustrations and challenges; I know your doubts and fears and worries. And I know how you get up each day, ready to take another leap of faith, further and farther than you ever imagined.

Don't stop.