



LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS

Doubts,  
Belief  
and LIFE

SUNDAY, APRIL 24, 2022  
COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Sermon for Sunday, April 24, 2022  
“Doubts, Belief, and Life” | Second Sunday of Easter  
Pastor Charlie Berthoud | John 20:19-31

Before I read our gospel lesson for today, I need to acknowledge a problem.

The original text says “fear of the Jews” which is an unfortunate and inaccurate phrase. This and other texts have led some people to believe “The Jews killed Jesus.”

As a result, the Bible has been used for 2000 years to justify hatred and violence toward Jewish people throughout history, most visibly in the concentration camps of WWII. But anti Jewish sentiment has deep roots. I recently read *The Last Jew*, by Noah Gordon—historical fiction in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century when Jews were brutally expelled from Spain. While not as brutal or blatant, the hatred and violence continue today.

My two best friends from childhood are Jewish and they both have experienced plenty of bias and bitterness because of their faith tradition. Sometimes I wonder if I’ve let them and others down, but not speaking out on this more often.

Overall, the church historically has implicitly and sometimes explicitly supported this hatred and violence toward Jewish people.

The irony is that Jesus himself was Jewish! And when we read the gospels, we see that Jesus was killed by political and religious leaders, not by *all* the Jewish people.

So if a Bible verse has been twisted around and used for hate, we need to clarify.

I’m changing the wording of the reading, because of the way it has been abused—instead of “the Jews” I’m going to read “the religious leaders.”

Other than this concern, our reading today is wonderful and helpful for us as

people of faith. The focus is on Thomas. If you've heard of "Doubting Thomas" and wondered where the phrase came from, you'll learn today.

We heard those doubts two weeks ago in John 14 when Jesus spoke about being "the way" and Thomas asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" In our reading today, he has more doubts.

While there is something to be said for trusting God and believing your colleagues, it seems unfair and inappropriate to conclude that all doubting is bad.

In this reading, we also hear a blessing that Jesus gives his disciples not once, not twice, but three times.

The reading concludes with a message about life, which is our theme in this season of Easter.

We celebrate that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

We celebrate that Jesus came to give us life in abundance, or life in all its fullness.

And we celebrate the simple gift of life itself, with the words of the psalmist: "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Listen for God's word.

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the [religious leaders], Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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."

<sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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."

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> 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.

"Doubting Thomas" had the nerve to raise his hand and ask a question.

The naïve and simplistic response to this reading is to say: Don't be a doubter like Thomas; be a real believer.

Simply saying "don't doubt" is well intentioned but misguided.

We've all probably doubted at some point.

We wonder where God is in the midst of the chaos of the world, and of our lives. We wonder why God doesn't do more for the people with cancer or the people of Ukraine or us when we're struggling.

If even Mother Teresa had her doubts, it's reasonable that the rest of us will too.

What helped Mother Teresa and the disciples and hopefully us too is that we are never alone in our doubts and struggles.

Almost 15 years ago, my brother died suddenly at age 45, I was in shock, confusion, sadness. I'm so grateful for others in my church community who nurtured and helped me, who prayed for me and sustained me.

Through that dark time, I got renewed appreciation for church community.

When I met with the Confirmation Class a few weeks ago, almost all of them mentioned how much they value the community of this church, the community they have as a group.

As a community, we carry one another. We lean on each other. Community helps us with our doubts, our faith, our life.

Doubt isn't just about a lack of faith in God. Doubt is also about asking questions. Sometimes we need to ask questions about conventional wisdom and tradition.

For hundreds of years, many white Christians assumed that slavery was OK, because "it's in the Bible". But gradually more and more people started doubting that belief and asking questions.

For hundreds of years, women were denied the right to vote, to participate in athletics, to hold leadership positions in government or in churches. Thanks to people asking questions, we're gradually making progress in this area. I'm glad to be in the Presbyterian Church, where women have been welcomed as pastors and elders for decades.

And for way too long too there has been too much hate and hurt toward LGBTQ people. Some religious people cite about seven passages in the Bible to justify this hate, while not really noticing Jesus' barrier-breaking, outcast-including, welcoming-love for everyone.

The church that our confirmation class is joining today has a long and healthy history of asking questions and seeking God's will.

We earnestly try to learn God's love by asking lots of questions, and then live that love, by the way we live our lives.

One great example of the spirit of this church was in 2011, just over a year before I came, when Rev. Scott Anderson was ordained here, as the first openly gay pastor in the Presbyterian Church USA.

After a long process, the national church constitution was changed to allow lesbians and gays to be ordained. And a few years later same sex marriages were approved.

Scott is a friend and a wonderful pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church just a couple miles from here.

Mark Achetemeier was a key figure in the questioning and changing in the Presbyterian Church. For a long time, Mark was the theological voice of the so-called tradition understanding of sexuality. He gave the religious rationale for

excluding LGBT people. He argued from the Bible that it was not God's will to ordain or allow marriage for lesbians and gays.

But in the spirit of repentance, which means to change one's mind, Mark listened over and over to the stories of LGBT people, and he dug deeper into the Bible and prayer. He eventually did about a 180 degree change, realizing that LGBT people are beloved children of God just like everyone else. He has become a strong advocate of full inclusion for LGBTQ people in church and society.

He was here to offer the sermon at Scott's ordination in 2011. Later he wrote a book, called *The Bible's YES to Same Sex Marriage*.

His transformation is inspiring, encouraging, and humbling—reminding me of the need to continue to ask questions and seek God's will and be open to change.

Questions and doubts can help to bring new life.

Historically the church hasn't liked questions.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the new thinking of the Enlightenment which led to questions about traditions, some Protestants responded by affirming the inerrancy of the Bible and some Catholics responded by affirming the infallibility of the Pope.

To this day, fundamentalists in all religions don't like questions or doubts.

But look at Jesus. He asked all sorts of questions.

- While calling the first disciples, Jesus asked, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38)
- While talking about priorities and possessions, Jesus asked, "Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives?" (Matthew 16:26)
- When teaching about loving neighbors and after the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (Luke 10:36)

Jesus asked these questions and implicitly encourages us to keep asking questions so that we could keep learning and growing and so that we could fully experience the life that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

The Good News of Easter is that in Jesus Christ, we are given the gift of abundant, eternal life—life in all its fullness.

On the journey together, with our questions, and with our faith, hope, and love, we figure out what this abundant life is all about.