

## Sermon ~ April 11, 2021 Is Doubting a Good Thing?

### Scriptures

**Romans 8:28, 38-39**

**John 20:19-29**

Many of you know I grew up in Iowa. It was the very southeast corner of the state ~ in an area called the tri-state area. Illinois is east across the Mississippi River, and Missouri is south across the Des Moines River. My mother was from Missouri ~ from St. Louis.

When I tell folks I grew up in Iowa they will often say ~ oh ~ the Hawkeye State. When I tell folks I lived in Montana for forty years they often say ~ Big Sky Country. And now when I say I am from Oregon they say ~ the Beaver State.

Now what do people think of when they hear Missouri ~ Show Me State.

Where I grew up that was always a very derogatory remark. Since you're from Missouri you won't believe it unless you are shown. Or Missourians always have to have everything proven to them!! Oh you are from the Show Me State was a real put-down.

Growing up, however, I could always be very smug, because I was not one of them!! After all, I lived across the river in a whole different state!!

But.....lots of my relatives lived in Missouri ~ and they were OK people.

Now as adults we know this nickname for Missouri is not a reflection of the people living there. When I looked up online where the nickname came from, I got a whole variety of speculations ~ and the bottom line is ~ no one really knows where it came from!!

But I was a child when I was first hearing this. Children are very impressionable. I heard people in Missouri say they had to have everything proven to them ~ I didn't know they were joking. All I knew was I had some very special relatives living in Missouri. Therefore my child mind concluded ~ **it must be OK to have to have things proved to you!!**

I have never yet been able to read this story of Thomas without those childhood images popping into my mind. It must have been OK for Thomas to doubt.

Then why is he labeled "doubting Thomas"? Why do we say to people who don't believe us ~ oh, you're just a doubting Thomas ~ as if there must be something wrong with them.

Jesus was not impatient with Thomas. In fact Jesus just showed Thomas his hands and his side ~ **just as he had done the week before with the other disciples.** You see, we often overlook the beginning of this scripture passage:

*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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace ~ Shalom ~ be with you." After he said this, **he showed them his hands and his side.** **Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.***

Jesus, right away, had already offered proof of himself to the other disciples!!!!

For you see ~ doubt is OK. In fact, for me I've even found it is a necessary part of learning and growing in my relationship with God. Certainly I find questioning is important. And perhaps it even takes more courage to doubt ~ than to just go along with what's said.

I'm not quite sure when I learned it was OK to question ~ even to doubt. I do remember when I was maybe nine or ten years old a Sunday School teacher said to me that if a person was not a Christian they were going to hell.

I remember asking, what if they lived in deepest, darkest Africa (that was back in the days when we thought there was a deepest, darkest unknown Africa), and they had never heard of Jesus ~ does that mean they are going to hell? Even when they never heard of Jesus ~ I asked?

It was her answer that has stayed with me to this day. She said yes to me. I remember going home and thinking to myself, even at that young an age, there is something wrong here. If God is loving like I've been told ~ then there's something very wrong here! I think that is when the seed of questioning things about my faith was planted.

Fast track to maybe twenty years later ~ sometime in the 1970's. I remember very vividly sitting in worship at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Butte, Montana. It is so vivid a memory that I still remember I was sitting on the right side of the sanctuary. That means it must have been summer, as I was not in the choir loft.

The pastor introduced feminine references for God in the Bible. Now that is a whole sermon topic for another time.

The point today is my reaction to what he was saying. I had never heard the idea of feminine references to God before ~ and though it may seem hard for some of you to believe this about me now ~ I did not like the idea at all!! And I really had my doubts.

Except ~ at the same time the pastor handed out a sheet of paper on which the feminine Biblical references for God were listed. I took that paper home. That sermon had really gotten my attention.

Over the next few months ~ actually years ~ from time-to-time I would look up some of the references.

I finally lost track of the piece of paper ~ but I am very aware of the journey it started in my life!!

For me ~ my doubting made me further explore my understanding of God. Just because I had never thought of it that way before did not mean it was not Biblical!!

In doubting ~ in asking questions ~ we are often led to a much stronger faith.

In the many, many years since I heard that sermon, I have explored my understanding of God and Jesus and my whole faith with many people in many different Bible studies. I've explored my understand of God and Jesus through a whole variety of reading materials, and for me traveling to the Holy Land opened up a whole new understanding of God and Jesus.

Sometimes at the end of a Bible study, we would just sit around the table and shake our heads and laugh. The common theme became ~ *the more we learned, the more questions we had!*

I have discovered that when the times of questioning and doubting have been the greatest for me ~ I have encountered other folks on their faith journeys. They have listened to me and they have shared with me their understanding of faith ~ and in so doing, often helped me to get clarity to my questions.

My experience has been that out of my questions and doubts has come a faith and understanding of God that is far different and, I believe, stronger than my childhood understanding.

But I really believe that is what God desires. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians we read the following written to the people in the church in Thessalonica:

*We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.*

A natural part of life is doubting ~ and Jesus recognized that Thomas grew from that experience.

Sometimes the ***most difficult part is sticking with our doubts and working through all the questions.*** It would be so easy to sometimes just give up or opt out.

Recently I was listening to a sermon from friend and colleague, Rev. Jeremy Smith, and he said this about doubting: *God knows that we will doubt. God knows that we will ask for the doubt to be removed, to be certain of everything. But God doesn't remove doubt.*

Pastor Jeremy went on to reflect on the stories of doubt in the four gospels. He reflected: *People who knew Jesus or his first disciples valued doubt so much they wrote it in their Gospel, ~ and it was so scandalous the last Gospel of John ~ written some 20 or more years after Matthew, Mark, and Luke ~ tried to write it out.*

Jeremy went on to say: *But the practice of doubt endured, the act of reformation was modeled, and we can do the same things. God is constantly present alongside our doubts because doubt is the starting point for reformation.*

Hear that again! ***God is constantly present alongside our doubts because doubt is the starting point for reformation.*** That is what particularly grabbed my attention. Doubt is not only not a bad thing ~ but it can be the starting point for reformation!

When doubts arise God calls us to reform instead of retreating ~ to reconcile and live with doubt that guides us to something new.

And then as Pastor Jeremy said in his sermon:

*We have permission to doubt our church's decisions in the past and reform it.*

*We have permission to ask for reform in police accountability.*

*We have permission to ask about budgets and policies and personnel, to reform that which can't keep up with the needs of today.*

*We are called to this good work in church and society ~ and in ourselves ~ to reform our faith in God, our faith in our civil institutions, and our trust in that still-small voice within us that guides us through the doubt to something new.*

Doubting is not something we should hide behind or hide from ~ rather we face it.

We can doubt.....but we are not afraid.

We can question.....but do not give up.

We can wrestle.....but do not throw in the towel.

We can stumble and fall.....but we fall forward.

We can fall.....but we don't cease running the race.

The line from Natalie Sleeth's beloved song, *Hymn of Promise*, keeps running through my mind:  
*In our doubt there is believing.....*

We are in the Easter season. Easter is not over. In fact, Easter is never over!! We are an Easter people who celebrate new life continuously.

New life is a lifelong process ~ and some of that time can undoubtedly have doubts. And Jesus seeks us out ~ even as he sought out Thomas.

You see the Lenten journey to Jerusalem ended with Easter ~ but the journey of relationship with God ~ of new life ~ of exploring and living out our faith ~ is a lifelong process.....doubts and all!!

We can doubt and live a life of faith through the power of God who sustains us on our journey. And on our journey Jesus models for us what a mixture of life's uncertainty and certainty looks like.

So go now and doubt, struggle, reform, and renew, and know that again and again and again and again, God is with you always.

Amen