

OK.....I'm POSITIVE it's really a freight train....

So there is a story about a worship service at a local church where a mother had a fidgety seven year old boy who found it difficult to sit still in church week after week. But one Sunday, the pastor noticed that the young man who was sitting in the first pew suddenly grew very still and quiet during his sermon. The pastor was quite proud of himself that he had preached a sermon that even caught the attention of a seven year old child.

After the sermon the pastor stopped the young boy's mother and asked what had caused the change in his behavior. She said she simply leaned over about half -way through the sermon and told him that the pastor was going to lose his place and he would have to start his sermon all over again, if he didn't sit still.

With any luck at all, that won't happen here this morning.

So....this morning's scripture about doubting Thomas is one of those scriptures that we all have heard about many times. It has become somewhat of a cultural thing to call somebody who is expressing some concern or doubt about something a "Doubting Thomas".

My bet is most people have absolutely NO idea what the back story is on this phrase. If they did, they may think twice about saying it.

I mean this whole story is kind of creepy if you really think about it. The idea of sticking your fingers into holes in a person's body or putting your hand into a wound on the torso of a body to really believe somebody is in your midst is not very appealing at least to most people.

But this is what Thomas wanted to do.....it was the only way he was going to believe that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.

But before we delve too deeply into this, who the heck was Thomas? We really don't hear about him much in scripture except with respect to this story.

As it turns out, Thomas, as a disciple, is not a big player in the grand picture of the New Testament or the story of Jesus. He is only mentioned a total of 8 times in the New Testament, four of which are simply when various authors just listed the names of the disciples.

He is mentioned more significantly in John Chapter 11 when Jesus hears that Lazarus is critically ill and may die. Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to go to Lazarus in Bethany to heal him.

The disciples freak out because Jesus wants to go back to a place where there are a LOT of people who want to kill him.

And to paraphrase what Thomas says in John 11:16, "Well, we might as well go too so we can die with him".

He is mentioned again in John Chapter 14 verses 1-5 when Jesus is telling his disciples he must go to his Father's house and would then come back and take them with him. "You know to the place where I am going" Jesus tells the disciples.

Thomas' response? John chapter 14:5; "We have no clue where you're going so how can we know the way?" In other words, we don't have a GPS here.....

Can you say pessimist? Can you say party pooper?

For Thomas, the light at the end of the tunnel is not a sign of hope – nope, it's a freight train coming straight at him. His cup is always half empty rather than full. He reminds me a bit of Eeyore.....he'll go along to get along. But he is full of doubt about just about everything in life.

Salman Rushdie in his now infamous book *"The Satanic Verses"* talks about his belief that doubt seems to be the central condition of the human race.

There is no doubt that doubt is very prevalent all around us today. We often have doubt about things related to our jobs or careers: about our families: about our ability to do something difficult.

I have some significant doubt about being up here this morning....The list is quite long.

Doubt is very pervasive in our lives whether we want to overtly admit it or not. But at the same time, that doesn't necessarily mean that doubt is always a bad thing. It can at times be a very useful and a positive thing.

Doubt often forces us to think deeply about something and to examine the foundation from which we are drawing our conclusions or concerns. It forces us to really say "where is this coming from? Is it legitimate?"

But at the same time, it is not healthy to doubt everything. We need to know that we can trust some things.

The challenge comes in knowing or learning how to discern what doubt is "good" doubt and what is not. What factors do we need to take into consideration to make this choice.

So what happened to Thomas the doubter?

As the story goes, Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. But the other disciples told Thomas they had seen Jesus and that he had risen from the dead.

But Thomas wasn't having it. He simply wouldn't believe it unless he could see Jesus with his own eyes and touch Him with his own hands.

That was the only way Thomas was going to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

A week later, when the disciples including Thomas had gathered, Jesus appeared again. It is at this time that Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger in the holes in Jesus' hand and to reach out and put his hand into the side of Jesus. And then Jesus says "Stop doubting and believe". Stop doubting and believe. Just do it.

But the other lesson in this scripture comes in verse 29: "Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; but blessed are those who have **not seen** and yet have believed."

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

A simple yet elegant definition of Faith. It's as simple as that. But it is not just a blind faith or a faith without evidence.

Richard Dawkins, who is actually one of my favorite scientific authors but who is also a raging atheist and has written books like “The Selfish Gene” and “The Blind Watchmaker” wherein he works incredibly hard to disassemble religion, faith and anything associated with it says in one of his books:

“Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate science. Faith is blind trust, in the absence of evidence...

While I love Richard Dawkins, I respectfully disagree with him on this point.

The big issue is what evidence do we need to believe in something? What evidence should we use to believe in something? It is common to hear people say, and I’m one of these, “I’ll believe it when I see it”.

But what does Jesus tell us, blessed are those who have **not seen** and yet have believed. Generates a bit of a conundrum .

To be sure, Jesus is not suggesting we have faith without evidence. What He is suggesting is faith without *sight*.

If we only believed in and acted on those things we could see, as Thomas did, life would really be difficult.

We all know the world is round. The evidence that it is round is clear. But nobody SAW that until the 1966 when we sent men into outer space.

We all know that gravity keeps us attached to the surface of the earth. But nobody has ‘seen’ gravity.

One of the most difficult classes in my undergraduate curriculum was organic chemistry where to really grasp the concepts of this topic, students needed to be able to ‘see’ how electrons moved around and interacted with each other – things like sp³ hybrid orbitals. Right. We have all learned that matter is made of atoms – electrons, protons, neutrons, and the long list of other subatomic particles that have been described. But nobody has ever seen any of these things. We see indirect evidence of them, but we have not seen them. Does that mean they don’t exist?

If we all were to insist on seeing and touching Jesus to truly believe he existed at one time in human form and now exists in spiritual form, none of this would exist (the church).

But there are millions upon millions of people who believe in and follow the teachings of Jesus. They have not seen him, they have not put their fingers or hands into his body to have the visual *evidence* of his existence.

They simply know him and love him because of faith. Jesus calls them “blessed”. The apostle Peter in his first letter says: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy”.

So.... What of us today? How do we semi-doubters deal with this scripture in a world that is full of things that generate non-stop doubt in us?

I did a fair amount of reading to prepare for this little talk. And I ran across an essay that talked about the six principles to consider when dealing with doubt:

1. Have mercy on those who doubt. Jude 22 tells us to “have mercy on those who doubt”.

It is our job to be there for those who are questioning, who are trying to learn, who are trying to grow, including ourselves. We have all had or may still be in our agnostic phases of faith. Some people grow out of that. Others stay perpetually in this gray area of ‘well, I don’t know...show me”.

I often tell my students after an exam that if they did really well, rather than brag about it, find somebody in the class who didn’t do so well and help them out.

Same thing here. Those who are deeply spiritual, who have a deep faith and belief in the foundational principles of Christianity need to, rather than brag about that, find those who are in doubt. Listen to them as they express their concerns and disbelief. Help them try to see another way.

2. Realize that doubt is often the birth pangs of a deepened faith. We often become “believers” when we are young, at least to the extent that we can with a faith that is mediated through our parents whom most of us trusted explicitly at that point in life.

But as we became older, I am willing to bet almost all of us had our faith tested big time at one time or another, and to some extent still do today.

It is important to consider that the “truths” we learn early in life may not always be true later in life as we experience life and as we mature. Our truths are formed from our life experiences, and as those experiences change, for the good or bad, our truths change, for the good or the bad.

But it is doubt about long-held truths and the ensuing deeper evaluation and assessment of where they come from that often results in a deeper faith.

3. Be ready to live with mystery. We all, almost all of the time, just want the answers. We want to make sure that we are not walking into a trap, or being taken advantage of. We want complete understanding of a situation before we commit to something.

One of the biggest and most powerful lessons I have ever learned as a scientist is simply this.

Sometimes, it is OK to revel in the beauty and the magic that is the totality of life.

When I look at nerve cells under a microscope, there is a large part of my brain that immediately looks at and is intrigued by the morphology of things in the cell. I think about the biochemical and genetic processes that are going on that allow that cell to survive and function, and then allow it to connect to other nerve cells that allow me to walk, to talk, to be up here blathering on with you. I am immersed in what I can see.

But at some point, if I allow myself to do so, I think about the absolute beauty in all of what I am seeing, the magic of life, the beauty, the sheer magnificence of what it means to be amazed by all that is around me, that it is here for a purpose, that it is important for things to go on the way they do.

I don’t always need to know why, or how.

If I can let go of the ‘why’ and allow myself the joy of reveling in the magic, in the mystery, I reach a place in my heart that is truly spectacular and is where I truly grow.

It is the threshold of the line between science and theology or faith. It is OK to just revel in the magic that is life. We don’t always need the answers.

4. Make the main things, the main things. Paul told the Corinthians in I Corinthians 15:3, that he delivered to them things 'of first importance'. He goes on to talk about the atoning death and vindicating resurrection of Christ as being most central to faith.

Many of us have doubts about secondary issues such as how and when did God create the world, the immaculate conception, or the details of Christ's return. There are many issues in the Christian faith about which there has been and still exists legitimate disagreements.

So when you find yourself doubting what you were taught about secondary issues, don't get too bent out of shape. A lot of Christians are still working on them. Don't let them overshadow and drown out the ultimate message of love and faith.

5. Live according to the faith you currently have, in whatever state it may be in. Doubt is not unbelief. Doubt is the bridge that connects current faith to perfect faith. Doubt is what keeps us in the game and keeps us continuing the search for a true understanding of what it means to be Christian.

6. Doubt your doubts. When we go through times of doubt, we need to make sure we are critical of our doubts. Is the particular issue we are dealing with at a given moment and is causing us angst really one that is worth spending the mental and emotional energy on?

Is it rather, one we just have to learn to let go of, to keep the main thing, the main thing?

Too often doubt seldom offers a better solution than the solution we may be currently thinking about. For many Christians, we can be sure that the central truths of our faith will never be outweighed by our doubt. Pestered, yes. Challenged? Yes.

But never, when we learn to doubt our doubts can our faith be overthrown.

I think this is summarized very nicely in the last verse of our scripture for today. Again, I read a number of different translations of this verse to better understand it.

The one we read today from the First Nations Version of the New Testament is the most beautifully written of all the translations I reviewed: "But I have told you this much so you will believe that Creator Sets Free is the Chosen One, the Son of the Great Spirit. When you put your trust in all that his name represents, the life of beauty and harmony he has promised to all will be yours".

When you put your trust in all that his name represents.....this call to what we are to do and how we are to act as Christians, is clear, succinct, and to the point.....and beautiful.

Today at FMC, there are many things to be concerned about, and things that are causing significant doubt in all of us. Those doubts vary in content and they vary in intensity.

Some of us have doubts about how recent events all came down. Some of us have doubts about whether we will recover from our current situation. Some of us have doubts about whether we can or want to continue to be part of this community.

We are all waiting to "see" something that will let us know that things will get better. The problem is this: we can't always see what we want to see to resolve things.

We are all working through the existential angst of things that make us doubt ourselves, our community, our nation, our world, all the time, every day.

But here is the good news: “When we put our trust in all that his name represents, the life of beauty and harmony he has promised to all will be ours”.

I would also like to believe that we are all working through these doubts in our own way, and as a community, with an unshakeable faith at the core that says we will get through this.

Doubt stimulates thinking, sharing, listening, and accepting, all of which can only lead to one thing – an unshakeable belief and faith that all will be well in the end.