



***The Resurrection Power:***  
**“DOUBTERS WELCOME – BRING YOUR  
QUESTIONS!”**

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Scripture: John 20:19-31

*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 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 said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” 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.*

Thomas thought it was too good to be true, so he was skeptical. And rightly so. One of the cardinal rules of life in today’s world is that if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. According to a 2014 Ultrascan Advanced Global Investigation report, losses from Nigerian Internet scams alone totaled \$12.7 billion in 2013.

We have all gotten that email. You know, the one, saying you just received a big inheritance; or maybe you won the lottery even though you never bought a ticket; or maybe the email sender needs to smuggle money into the U.S. and promises to give you a portion of the money in return for just a little help. If these emails even make it into your inbox instead of your spam folder, hopefully you recognize the scam. But, according to the report, millions of people fall for these tricks every year, losing billions of dollars and making hundreds of thousands of Nigerians rich.

Right in the middle of working on the sermon last week, I received this email. “Dear friend, I got your details after an extensive on-line search for a reliable person. I’m Mrs. Suzan Boni, a 57-year-old dying woman who was diagnosed for cancer about four years ago. I have decided to donate my fund of \$4 million to you for charitable goals. I am waiting for your soonest response. Thanks and God Bless. Your Loving Sister in Christ. Please reply to me through my private email address.” Let me know if you’d like to be in on the deal! If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Where was Thomas that first Easter night, anyway? Hadn’t he heard what John says the other disciples had heard, these rumors of an empty tomb? Why wasn’t he with his friends to share their grief in those first days after the crucifixion? Was Thomas frightened and therefore hiding? Was he having a cup of coffee? Did he go out for a run to relieve the stress? Did he sit on a park bench and watch the ducks? Was he an introvert and just needed time by himself? Did he dismiss it is a scam? Where would you have been that first night?

Actually, Thomas was probably the courageous one. At least he wasn’t intimidated by the Jews and was bold enough to leave the disciples’ hiding place. Thomas did have an adventurous streak because tradition has it that Thomas’ mission work eventually took him to India, where he was martyred and came to be revered as a patron saint of the Catholic church.

John repeatedly refers to Thomas as the “Twin.” John doesn’t say why Thomas had that nickname, but a popular belief developed in the early church, especially in Syria, that Thomas was the twin brother of Jesus. Thomas is one of my biblical heroes because he’s a wonderful example of critical faith, a faith that is not afraid to question but also believes.

Consider the story. The rest of the disciples are behind locked doors. They’re afraid of the local Jewish leadership, afraid of what might happen if they’re discovered, fear draining their commitment to Jesus. All of a sudden, the resurrected Jesus appears, stands among them and says, “Peace be with you.” He shows them his wounded hands and feet so they really know it’s him. Then Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In the gospel of John, the Holy Spirit doesn’t wait until the day of Pentecost. It’s given to the disciples on Easter evening.

When Thomas returns, the other disciples tell him, “Hey, we’ve seen the Lord.” It’s the one thing that changes everything. But, like any reasonable person who knows how the world works, like anyone who has seen hundreds of Jews crucified by the Romans, like anyone who knows that the dead stay in their graves, Thomas says, “I won’t believe it unless I can touch him.” Critical faith at work.

Jesus is dead, so Thomas wants proof. He’s not about to be scammed. Thomas is a twenty-first century person in that regard. Science has trained you and me to ask critical questions before we believe. We want evidence. We want to make sure all the proper studies have been done. Like many of us, Thomas will believe only after all the facts are in, and he is honest enough to express his doubts.

One week later, same time, same place, the disciples are gathered, but this time Thomas is there. Again, Jesus appears and says, “Peace be with you.” Then Jesus says, “Okay, Thomas, here I am.

Now you get your chance. You can touch my hands and my side. Don't doubt any longer but believe." Thomas takes one look at Jesus and replies with what may be the most committed and sincere confession of faith in the entire New Testament, "My Lord and my God!"

Doubt. It's part of life, isn't it? Especially when it snows on April 10! Doubt is necessary for survival in this world. If you and I believe everything we're told, we'd soon be in trouble. If someone tells us their product is better than another, we question their word. If a cell phone company tells us their rates are lower, we check it out first before switching. If a complete stranger tells us to do something, we question their motives. The truth is that we have all been lied to and tricked, so out of self-defense, we distrust and we doubt. Doubt can protect us and keep us safe.

Doubt is also part of the very fabric of our faith. Without holy doubt, we would fall prey to religious hucksters and unscrupulous people who take advantage of our gullibility for their profit. Without holy doubt, we would blindly accept anything that is written or preached or proclaimed about Christianity. Without holy doubt, we would never stretch and grow in our faith. That's why we tell the youth in our confirmation class that it's good to ask questions and have doubts.

And we get the questions. Why did my aunt get cancer and die? Why was I abused? Why is one person born straight and another is born gay? Why do the police in our town stop black people more than white people? Why am I not born athletic like my best friend? Why does my brother have autism? Why can't I ever get a break? How do science and religion mix? Why can't I prove God exists?

If we think we know it all, we'll never grow. God did not criticize Thomas for his doubts. So God does not condemn our honest doubts any more than God rejects us for our sins. Holy doubt leads to critical faith.

Doubt may be necessary in this world, but it can also be dangerous. Doubt may save us from believing a lie, but it may also keep us from believing the truth. How many times have we been told in a bad situation, "Take my hand. I can help you. Trust me." And because we doubted, we made the wrong choice and missed out on the care we needed. Continual doubt about ultimate things can be like a whirlpool threatening to pull us under if we are not surrounded by a community of faith.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas was not a cynic. He was not indifferent to religious questions. He was part of the inner circle, a man of deep faith, so he didn't give up. He was right back there with the disciples the next week. He understood that there is a time to doubt and a time to believe, for when Thomas actually saw the risen Lord, he had no more questions. He was faithful enough to simply confess, "My Lord and my God." Then Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

When people first began hearing and reading John's gospel, it was at least seventy years after Jesus died. So who in this story would have seemed most like those early Christians? Who represents their situation, as people who were drawn to the truth and power of the story of Jesus, but were not even born when the central events of the Christian story happened?

Who represents those who could not see for themselves and yet are called to believe? Why, Thomas, of course. Thomas also had to hear the story from others that first Sunday, and he would not believe them at first. Despite not knowing, Thomas was back again and found himself this time in the presence of his Lord, where he was invited to touch, to feel, to see, and to know the great mystery of his faith.

Thomas represents the early Christians, those who wanted to experience resurrection in their lives but only had each other to go on. Thomas was a bridge to later generations, who also did not have physical evidence. So Thomas represents you and me today. His critical faith also represents The United Methodist Church.

Four weeks from tomorrow, I'll be traveling to Portland, Oregon, for our United Methodist General Conference, where I will represent the Michigan Area as a clergy delegate. Together the Detroit and West Michigan Conferences will have four clergy and four lay delegates. General Conference is the legislative body of The United Methodist Church. It meets once every four years and is the only group that can set direction and policy and speak officially for the church. The General Conference consists of 864 people, who represent the 12.3 million United Methodists around the world. We have one thousand petitions upon which we will be voting.

As you know, The United Methodist Church does not demand that everyone think the same about beliefs that are not essential to the core of our faith. Like Thomas, we United Methodists are not satisfied with other people's accounts but want our own strangely warmed hearts and experience of Christ. We want to touch the truth for ourselves. Our faith is continually searching for God by reading, listening, questioning, reaching out, praying and being in community.

Because we value freedom of religious expression, we're likely to have some intense discussions at General Conference, and there probably won't be any unanimous votes. However, I see our diversity as a sign of strength, not weakness, for I have great faith in The United Methodist Church. I remember something Wesleyan scholar Marjorie Suchocki said in back in 2004, "We must learn to disagree in love and find ways to move together toward what God calls us to in the future and be open in it. "We have to trust enough to stay together in the process and to love one another."<sup>2</sup>

I've decided that Thomas is going to be my patron saint right now, for I pray that God will give me a critical faith. I pray that I will not be tempted by two false options. I do not want faith without doubt, a kind of faith so smug and impatient with the Thomas' of this world that it would reject people for asking probing questions. But I also don't want doubt without faith, and I suspect you don't, either. I don't want to be seduced away from the love of God by the temptation to give in to hopelessness and cynicism. Like Doubting Thomas, I am not willing to take things on blind faith. I want to be open to the extravagance of God's grace and the wind of God's spirit, which blows where it wills and takes me to places I never dreamed.

At the same time, my hope is that each one of us here today would have a critical faith. For we live in challenging times. It's so easy to give in to the professional doubters of this world – the people who insist that the poor deserve their poverty; that women remain in their place; that refugees and immigrants cannot be equals with the rest of us; that race determines place in

society; that our LGBTQ friends must stay hidden. The people who cannot believe in a world that can be more fair than this one: they laugh at poor Thomas, who wanted to set aside his doubt to greet the kingdom of God with his hands. Thomas must be a fool, they say, for the world is as it always has been and always will be, violent and divided and mad, and we are deluded to follow anyone who points out a better way to live.<sup>3</sup>

How it easy it is to be seduced by doubt. How many of you have had a dream crushed? How many of you have failed at something? How many of you have lost faith in yourselves? How many of you have lost a loved one to death when they were far too young? How many of you are struggling with health problems that may not ever get better? How many of you have ever wondered if God is really with you? Yes, this story may say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” But we all know what it’s like to be Thomas.

The good news, friends, is that even in the midst of doubt, there is hope. Even when we can see Christ’s wounds everywhere in this world, we can still say with a deep faith, “My Lord and my God.” For just as the Holy Spirit was given to the community of disciples, so Christ calls you and me into this community of faith, where the Spirit works through each one of us to help each other, offer hope, receive forgiveness and bring peace to our world. Doubters welcome, bring on the questions!

Blessed are you if you are willing to ask difficult questions. Blessed are you if you are convinced that the Holy Spirit can move in the midst of our differences. Blessed are you if you don’t have to have all of your ducks lined up in a row before you can believe. Blessed are you if you, too, can say, in the midst of the challenges of life, “My Lord and my God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Walton, “A Critical Faith,” April 19, 1998, First Parish, Concord MA.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Green, “Scholar Urges General Conference Delegates to Heed Wesley,” United Methodist News Service, March 23, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Walton.