

Date: April 11, 2021

Scripture: John 20:19-31

Title: DOUBTER

Some of us are a little more gullible than others. A little too trusting. Did you know that some scientific studies claim that there's a correlation between high intelligence and gullibility?

Ricky Jay was a famous magician. He was considered by many magicians to be the best sleight-of-hand artist in the world. In an interview with *60 Minutes*, Jay said, "the ideal audience would be a group of Nobel Prize winners . . . They often have an ego with them that says, 'I am really smart so I can't be fooled.' No one," says Ricky Jay, "is easier to fool." That's interesting. No one is easier to fool than a really smart person. So being gullible can be a sign of intelligence.

Do you think that's why Thomas refused to believe the other disciples when they told him that they had seen the risen Christ? Was he afraid of appearing gullible? Afraid to trust something, that was too good to be true?

Our Scripture lesson from John's Gospel is about the world's most famous doubter. The news of Jesus' resurrection spread quickly among his disciples. You can imagine the quickened pulse and the rapid, excited speech of those who had encountered the risen Christ, as they shared their experience with others. You can also imagine the difficulty that those who heard their story had in believing them.

The first recipients, of the good news of Easter, considered it idle nonsense of distraught and hysterical women, and didn't believe it. But, as more and more of the disciples and followers of Jesus encountered the risen Christ, the stories gained credibility.

The most famous holdout of the group was a disciple named Thomas, called the Twin. Thomas said, "Unless I see the print of the nails in his hands, and place my fingers in the print of the nails, and unless I can put my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Many of us have had times in our lives when we identify with Thomas. We too have doubted. We too have rebelled. And here's something we need to recognize: Doubt is one of the most important tools that God uses to produce mighty men and women of faith. I worry about someone who says to me, "I have never doubted, for one moment, my faith in God." I would then ask, are you alive? Do you have a brain? Do you ever use it?

A few of you may have heard the name Ravi Zacharias. Ravi was a well-known and well-respected Christian apologist who died this past year. Lest you get the wrong idea, an apologist is not somebody who apologizes for the faith. Quite the contrary, Christian apologetics is a branch of Christian theology that defends Christianity against the objections of doubters, and Ravi Zacharias was one of the best.

Ravi grew up in India, one of four children. He endured frequent beatings by his father for doing poorly in school. His family was Anglican, but he was a "skeptical" until the age of 17 when he tried to commit suicide by swallowing poison. Not long before

this sad event, Ravi attended a Christian youth conference. At that conference he came forward to give his life to Jesus, but he still struggled with questions and doubts. An evangelist from the youth conference visited Ravi in the hospital. He listened to Ravi's questions, counseled him, prayed with him. When Ravi left the hospital, he dedicated his life to bringing others to the faith.

He became an author and speaker and traveled the world over, a 50-plus year ministry, sharing his faith and debating skeptics. He also led a ministry that trained speakers in apologetics and sent them to speak at college campuses and conferences worldwide. He understood what it's like to honestly confront questions and doubts about God. He understood what it's like to struggle with the idea of ultimate truth. And because of this struggle, Ravi and his colleagues were willing to take on any questions, in the spirit of open debate with compassion.

Over the decades, Ravi saw the questions change. As he says of the questions he was fielding from audiences today, “. . . the questions are getting larger and larger and the soul is getting emptier and emptier . . .” Ravi Zacharias understood what it is to struggle with one's faith, and so he could deal with doubting individuals with love and compassion.

I sometimes wonder if God hasn't deliberately placed obstacles, to faith, in our world. If God meant for us to walk with utter certainty, why doesn't God reveal Godself more clearly? Why didn't God give us a guidebook, that's not open to as many diverse interpretations, as the Bible? Why doesn't God just speak to us in a clear voice, and reveal Godself so that, like those early disciples, we can tell our friends, “I have seen the Lord.”

It seems clear to me, that God intends for us to struggle, with the great questions of life. It may be, struggles are essential to a strong, mature faith. Never doubting, is never to have taken the walk of faith seriously.

Now, we need to add, in order to experience the true joy that God intends for each of God's children, there must come a time, when we move beyond our doubts, to a faith that's stronger than our doubts.

I heard recently about a young couple named Tommy and Sophia. Tommy and Sophia experienced a struggle common in many marriages. Sophia wanted to attend church together, but Tommy didn't. He contended, he got nothing out of the services. No inspiration. No comfort. He had too many doubts, and unanswered questions. So, he wasn't going to church services every week, and pretend it meant anything to him. The arguments continued between Tommy and Sophia. One day Sophia asked Tommy in frustration, “What do you believe in?”

Tommy thought for a minute, then said, “Jesus. I like Jesus. Jesus makes a lot of sense to me, at times. But, to buy into Jesus, I've got to buy into too much other stuff, that isn't helpful. For example, take the Virgin Mary business. Then there's the miracles . . . Maybe the disciples just made them up, for all we know.” But, at the end of their discussion, Tommy agreed to keep his promise and go with her on Sundays, for a few more months.

One Sunday, the gospel reading caught Tommy's attention. It was about someone, who could have been called Tommy. It was, Thomas. Thomas had doubts. "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." Tommy couldn't have put it better. Tommy thought to himself, "If only I could see his body. If only I could touch his body. That's the way we Thomas people are."

Tommy became fixated on this one idea. "If I could just see Jesus, if I could just touch his body, then I would believe." He was still pondering this when Sophia went up to the altar for communion. Tommy's thoughts were interrupted by the priest holding up the broken loaf of bread and announcing, "This is the body of Christ given for you."

Tommy said, "If I could just see Jesus, if I could just touch his body, then I would believe." What does it mean to see Jesus and to touch him? Tommy couldn't see Jesus in the miracles. But, when he saw in the broken bread, a picture of Jesus' body, broken and scarred for him, he suddenly understood what it was to see Jesus. He understood why doubting Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"

Much of the doubt that we experience in young adulthood, is a need to rebel against our upbringing. Again, I suspect this is part of the plan of God. If parents and children didn't disagree on something, offspring would never leave home. Jesus didn't condemn the prodigal for leaving. All of us must do it, sometime. That's part of the maturing process. But, one of the lessons we learn from the prodigal is, we don't want to spend a lifetime in a pig pen either. Spiritual maturity comes when we're ready to move beyond our doubts, beyond our rebellion.

There's something within the human heart, that's always reaching outward and upward. There's something within our very nature, that senses an incompleteness. We see through the glass darkly, but somehow, we sense that the room into which we're peering, is not empty. This world is far too wonderful, to have occurred by chance. There's within us, a hunger that only a relationship with the Divine, can satisfy. It's actually very difficult for most of us, NOT, to eventually move beyond our doubts. The evidence for God, is just simply too strong. Some of us see God everywhere we look.

The final thing to be said this morning is, **Christian faith can only be analyzed from the inside. If you remain on the outside looking in, you will never find abundant life.**

Here's where those who have made a god of the sciences, are going to have a problem. You can't find God with the most powerful telescope ever built. You can't find God with a slide rule, or a test tube or an enormous computer. There's only one way to find God, and that's to take a step of faith, entrust your life to God, and enter into a daily walk with Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life. I can't prove to you the existence of God, but you can prove God to yourself, by giving yourself to God.

Could I prove to you that love exists? A scientist could attach electrodes to the skin of a person in love, and measure the pulse, the respiration, the blood pressure of a person, in the presence of their beloved. But that wouldn't prove love. Too much caffeine that morning at breakfast, might cause the same bodily reactions.

The only way you and I can ever prove love, is to have experienced what love is, to love and to be loved. So it is, with faith. There are only two ways, the existence of a loving God can be proved. The first is by the testimony of others. We can say with utter certainty, there have been millions of persons who have experienced God, as a reality in their lives. That's one proof, though it won't satisfy the skeptic. The most conclusive evidence, of the existence of God, is to experience God for yourself. Then you have a choice, when you experience doubts about God's existence or God's purposes.

God came and revealed God's self to Thomas. Now it's Thomas' choice. What happened to Thomas after his experience with the risen Christ? His later career is wrapped in mystery and legend. An Apocryphal book, called *The Legend of Thomas*, claims to give his history. It says that when the disciples divided up the world to conquer it for Jesus, Thomas received India. There Thomas died for the faith that he once had doubted. In South India today, you'll find a church called the Thomist Church of South India which claims that Thomas was its founder. Thomas dropped his doubts, at the pierced feet of Jesus, and became one of those, by whose testimony we have the faith today.

Thomas was a doubter. He had to see for himself. Jesus didn't condemn him for doubting. But Jesus did say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Doubt is an obstacle that, when overcome, can cause us to have a deeper, richer, more meaningful faith. In the struggle for meaning, the wise person learns to move beyond doubts. The way to prove faith, is to surrender yourself to the Lordship of Christ, walk in Christ's way, and experience Christ's love for yourself. In other words Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.