

“Even Believers Have Doubts”
Jeremiah 29:11-13 & John 20:19-31
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All Bible references in this sermon are from the New International Version (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 ¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

John 20:19-31 ¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” ²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” ²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” ³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

My sermon is called **“Even Believers Have Doubts”**. This is the season of Easter. We haven’t forgotten the painful sacrifice of Good Friday or the joy of Easter Sunday. When it comes to Jesus Christ and his rising from the grave, there are two ways that we can react to it. We either have faith and believe it, or we have questions and doubt it.

Faith is always better. Jesus said, **“With God all things are possible...” (Matthew 19:26)** Faith opens our eyes to many possibilities. On the other hand, a doubter is cynical or a skeptic. A doubter has more

questions than answers. One more faith blessing: Believers have better hymns.

When I look at your smiling faces, I see people with faith in Jesus and trust in God's Word. But I know how to turn everyone here into a doubter in ten seconds. All I have to say is that my sermon will be short. In a flash everyone will think, "I doubt it." My sermon will be short... Was I right?

How would you like to make one mistake in life and have it become the one thing that people remember about you? That's what happened to Thomas, a disciple of Jesus.

Like all the disciples he witnessed the horrific death of Jesus. But he wasn't there on Sunday when Jesus rose from the grave. Thomas wasn't there on Easter Monday when Jesus came to the disciples. They were hiding behind locked doors, afraid of the Jews. Suddenly Jesus stood in their midst and said, "**Peace be with you.**" Thomas wasn't there.

Later the disciples told Thomas, "**We have seen the Lord!**" But he said, "**Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.**" Thomas sounds like the first modern man. In school we learn the scientific way of learning. We only believe in what we can see, touch and measure. Thomas needed to see Jesus' scars and touch them before he believed in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Maybe the other disciples were hysterical? No one ever walked away from a Roman crucifixion. History has labeled Thomas a loser, a failure, the worst of doubters.

The remarkable thing is that Thomas had courage. When Jesus told everyone that he was going to Jerusalem to die, Thomas said, "**Let's go and die with him.**" (John 11:16) Thomas wasn't afraid to ask questions. Jesus said, "**I go to prepare a place for you (meaning heaven) and when that place is ready, I will come back for you**". Thomas asked "**Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?**" Then Jesus shared an amazing promise, "**I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to Father except through me.**" (John 14:3-6) Thomas had faith.

Even believers have doubts. That's true for you, me and everyone. Even the people who walked with Jesus and saw his miracles had doubts. Even his mother, his sisters and brothers doubted him at times. Even lifelong Lutherans can lose their first love for Jesus. Is your faith alive and vibrant or weak and apathetic?

Do you remember what happened at the Last Supper? Jesus said that one of the disciples was going to betray him and hasten his death. Judas was the guilty one, but the other eleven asked, **"Is it I, Lord?" (Matthew 26:22)** They had doubts.

If we have doubts in God, we are not alone. We don't need to stay home from church. We all struggle. Here's good news. We can find answers to our doubts in church and in the Bible.

There are four reasons that even believers might doubt in Jesus. We might have doubts because #1) We are not God. God created the heavens and the earth. We are the work of his hands, made of dust. We have limitations. Can tiny ants crawling on the ground understand you and I when we walk by? How can we fully understand God? God sees the big picture for our lives. We only see today, the aches, pains and trouble.

What does God tell us about the big picture? **"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."** (Jeremiah 29:11) It doesn't matter if we are young or old, male or female, healthy or sick, He has a plan for your life.

We might have doubts because #2) Churches are full of hypocrites. That's one excuse that people have for avoiding church. Of course, hypocrites can be found at the bowling alley, the grocery store and Taco Bell. That doesn't keep people away. It hurts if someone at church lies about us, or bullies us, or refuses to help in a crisis. We expect more from other believers. We blame God for their hypocrisy.

What does the Bible teach us about hypocrites? We read, **"God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19)**

Simply said, "God is not a hypocrite. If he makes a promise, he keeps it. If he speaks up, he follows through." He can't be God and break his promises. I call church "Hypocrites Anonymous". At least in church we find the courage to admit that we let others down. At least in church we're trying to learn a better way. Jesus said, "**Do to others as you would have them do to you.**" (Luke 6:31) Treat others the way that you want to be treated. Nothing else works.

We might have doubts because #3) Some of our prayers have gone unanswered. Maybe as a child we prayed to get a beautiful new bicycle, and it never happened. Maybe as adults we prayed to meet the right person to share our life, and it never happened.

God promises many times in the Bible to answer our prayers. But that doesn't mean that we get what we want, when we want it. When God answers prayer, it is either "Yes", "No" or "Not yet." Maybe God is telling you, "Not yet." We don't always know what is best for us or others.

When it comes to prayer James writes, "**You have not, because you ask not.**" (James 4:3b) We can ask God for anything. But we can't tell him to do anything.

What does God teach us about prayer? God tells us, "**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.**" (Jeremiah 29:13)

God knows how to bring good from our troubles. His plan is to give us a future filled with hope. I didn't say it, God said it. But we have to seek God with all our heart. I found a powerful promise the other night in my devotions. "**For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are committed to him.**" (1 Chronicles 16:9) It means that God is constantly looking to help people who don't give up and who put him first.

Our family prayed for fifty years for my brother to overcome his drug addiction. My mother never gave up. Our faith was sometimes strong. Our faith was often weak. But we never stopped praying. When he finally gave up drugs, apologized and came back to Jesus, it was worth every moment spent in prayer. It wasn't us. It was God.

We might have doubts because #4) We aren't sure that the stories about Jesus, the cross, and Easter are true. How do we know what really happened? Many people think that the Bible is full of fairy tales and myths. Did you know that the Jewish historian Josephus, a nonbeliever wrote about Jesus? Roman leaders wrote about him too. Many New Testament stories came from eyewitnesses.

Luke begins his Gospel by saying that he collected stories that **“were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses... .. I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”** (Luke 1:1-4) The New Testament writers often declare “I was there.”

The greatest proof of Easter is that 11 of the original disciples died defending their faith in Jesus. Christian history tells us that 40 years later Thomas was killed for sharing his faith. He was murdered in India when someone ran him through with a spear. All he had to say to save his life was “I made it up.” No one dies for a lie.

I left Thomas in the locked room saying, **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”** A week has gone by. Again, the disciples are in a locked room. This time Thomas is present when Jesus visits them.

Jesus knew Thomas' heart. Jesus tells him, **“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”**

Jesus didn't criticize Thomas or reject him. Jesus brought everything into the open. Thomas responded, **“My Lord and my God!”** Doubting Thomas knew the truth.

We might wonder why bad things happen to good people. We might question why marriages end or babies are born with problems. No doubt, however dark can push Jesus away.

Three quick ideas might help you bring your doubts to Jesus. #1) Give Jesus both sides of your heart. Do you remember the father who wanted Jesus to heal his son. Jesus said, **“With faith all things are**

possible.” (Mark 9:23-24) The man responded, “**I believe, help my unbelief.**” He gave Jesus both sides of his heart. He could believe some things. Other things filled him with doubt. It was enough for Jesus.

#2) Live each day as if you had faith, even as a doubter. Say your prayers as if someone was listening. Listen to sermons as if God was talking to you. Sing every hymn from the heart. Read the Bible and follow Jesus’s advice. He tells us to be peacemakers and to forgive our enemies. He tells us to confess our sins and feed the hungry.

If at the end of our lives, there is no Jesus, the worst thing that has happened is that we have lived with hope and love. But if at the end of life there is a heaven and a hell, and Jesus is our savior, then we will fall on our knees and shout, “**My Lord and My God!**” We do these things not to win God’s love but because he loves us already.

#3) Talk to Jesus about your doubts often. Tell him, “I can believe this promise and this story, but I can’t believe this and that.” As time goes by, you will be able to say, “I can believe this, this and this, but I still struggle with that.” Your doubts will lose their power.

At the beginning of my sermon, I said something that turned everyone into doubters. Now I am going to say something that will turn you into believers. All I have to say is that “I can’t wait to go out for lunch after church.” In a flash everyone will think, “I believe it.” I can’t wait to go out for lunch after church... Was I right?

God bless you. Amen.