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April 23, 2017

**Ashes to Fire, Easter Week 2**  
**With Jesus Behind Locked Doors**  
*John 20:19-31*  
*Galatians 3:1-5; 1 Peter 1:3*

- 1. Doubt is the first step on the road to belief.**  
- *Matthew 27:46*
  
- 2. God will grant us discoveries on the road to belief.**  
- *Isaiah 1:18; John 20:26-27*
  
- 3. Everyone can choose committed belief.**  
- *John 20:28*

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West Valley Church  
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**A2F**  
**Easter Week 2:**  
**With Jesus Behind Locked Doors**  
**(John 20:19-31)<sup>1</sup>**

Last week was an incredible opportunity to be together in worship as we celebrated the resurrection, wasn't it? Many very important decisions were made together, and I'm praying that you've sensed God's presence with you as you've allowed him to break the chains in your life, and I pray you won't go back into being in chains! I pray that you found yourself being truly free from your chains over this last week – keep trusting the resurrected Jesus to help you; don't go back to trying to do it in your own strength. The Apostle Paul wrote this valuable warning to the church in the town of Galatia:

“You irrational Galatians! Who put a spell on you? Jesus Christ was put on display as crucified before your eyes! I just want to know this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the Law (*or in other words, by trying to do it in your own strength*) or by believing what you heard? Are you so irrational? After you started with the Spirit, are you now finishing up with your own human effort? Did you experience so much for nothing? I wonder if it really was for nothing. So does the one providing you with the Spirit and working miracles among you do this by you doing the works of the Law or by you believing what you heard?” (Galatians 3:1-5, ceb)

Keep trusting Jesus!

“He is risen!” (*He is risen, indeed!*) That is the heartbeat of the message of the Christian church. These three English words are translated from one Greek word, *egeirō*, which literally means “to waken” or “to rouse from the dead.” Scripture reports that two thousand years ago, God became flesh in the person of his Son Jesus. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, lived a life without sin, took all our sin upon himself, and died on a cross so that we could be forgiven. Three days later, Jesus Christ rose from the grave!

What does *egeirō* mean to us two thousand years later? If Jesus has *not* been raised, we really don't have any hope of living an abundant life, or living up to God's standard of perfection. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then we're just kidding ourselves; there is no real hope, and what we're doing, is useless if Jesus is not risen from the grave.

First Peter 1:3 says:

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<sup>1</sup> Primary resources are William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Rev. and updated, vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), Craig Groeschel, “Doubters Anonymous,” <http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/july/doubtersanonymous.html?paging=off>, Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, ID: Welsey Publishing House, 1997), and *Faithlife Study Bible*, Lexham Press.

“May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be blessed! On account of his vast mercy, he has given us new birth. You have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3, ceb)

That means that not only were we born physically, but we can also be born spiritually; all of our sins can be forgiven. No matter how bad we've been, no matter how bad we've blown it, no matter how much we've surrendered to a lifestyle of sin, no matter how strong or long our chains seem to be, through faith in the resurrection of Jesus we can have a new birth. It also means we can live with hope. We would not live like those who have no hope in anything beyond this world; we have a hope in the eternal life that is to come.

What does the *egeirō* mean to us today? *Everything*. It's the most important question that we could ever ask. However, there's a difference between simply believing that Jesus was raised from the grave and believing that it applies to your life. That's what we said last week – remember that belief means we acknowledge something is true, but faith means we *act on it* as truth.

Maybe you made a faith-filled walk to the front here last week and picked up one of these little chain links to serve as a reminder to yourself of your faith in the resurrection of Jesus to set you free from your chains. I hope you are using it as a way to ask God the Three-in-One to help you (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). But maybe after last Sunday, you came to Monday and life hit you in the eyes. You found yourself with the same fear, the same wrong thinking, or habits, or addiction, or sin and death. And you wondered where Jesus was when you needed him most – you trusted him, but then you found that he didn't immediately set you free – on Monday you realized you had the same struggles.

If so, you are probably wondering, “What's going on? Where's Jesus?” That's a good question, and I believe we have an answer to that from today's reading in John from our “Ashes to Fire” daily readings. How many of us have been able to use to the “Ashes to Fire” morning and evening meditations? Have you enjoyed it? I believe there is something powerful that can happen in our church when we are all reading the same Scripture passages each day. I believe it gives the Holy Spirit a profound platform from which to speak to our entire church, to help us be united in heart and mind and mission. I believe it allows the Spirit to do a work in our church collectively and to lead us collectively to be able to do great and supernatural things in us and through us. That's why each Sunday from February 10<sup>th</sup> – Ash Wednesday – until the day of Pentecost, which is June 4<sup>th</sup>, our Sunday sermon focus is on the Scripture readings for that day.

So today we are in John 20:19-31. Let's see the passage before we learn from it, in case you haven't read it yet:

“It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’ Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven.’

Jesus appears to Thomas and the disciples. Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, 'We've seen the Lord!'

But he replied, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe.'

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!' Thomas responded to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!'

Jesus replied, 'Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe.' Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name." (John 20:19-31, ceb)

I want to start by examining the life of perhaps the best-known doubter in the Bible: Thomas. In Jesus' time it was commonly known that rabbis would go looking for students or disciples. The rabbis would look for the most qualified, most highly educated disciples who had the greatest potential. The rabbis would ask disciples to follow them and they would train them. Being chosen as a disciple was one of the greatest breaks for a man in this era.

As you know, Jesus was a very controversial rabbi because he healed people and performed miracles; to the religionists, he was a threat. One day Jesus approached a fisherman named Thomas and invited him to follow him. What you need to understand about Thomas is that he was not selected by any of the other "acceptable" rabbis. He probably wasn't "disciple" material. He wasn't educated. He wasn't among the elite. He was rather ordinary. In other words, to be chosen to be a disciple was the break of his lifetime. That's why it was easy for him to leave his family business and everything else behind to follow Jesus. Thomas staked the rest of his life on being a disciple of the rabbi Jesus.

That's why, when Jesus gave up his life and died on the cross three years later, Thomas didn't even show up for the event. He must have sunk into what surely was a deep depression. You'll notice that all of the other disciples gathered together just days after the crucifixion, but Thomas went AWOL. He was lost. He panicked. His world was spinning, and he didn't know which way was up. That's why many people call him a doubter.

I believe doubt can actually be one of the most effective elements to lead someone to committed belief. Doubt can actually help us on the journey. So if you woke up on Monday and had some doubts about what happened on Easter Sunday, you are in good company and you are on the journey. There are three elements on the road from doubt to committed belief that might help you on that journey.

## 1. Doubt is the first step on the road to belief.

I've told you that I didn't grow up in church, and didn't start attending until I was in high school. But as I spent more time around people in church, I began to hear from them that there was an understood rule that doubts were bad; they should be ignored or suppressed, and for sure never talked about. We were not allowed to admit doubts. But sometimes even the most committed Christ followers deal with doubts. In our passage today, all the disciples were gathered together and claiming they had seen Jesus—that he was risen—but Thomas was honest enough to say 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 it.”

There were three ways in Greek to say, “I will not believe.” Thomas used the strongest of ways: “Unless I can touch him and see him for myself, I refuse to believe that he is risen.” Thomas was making his statement in the most emphatic of terms, because Thomas also knew that if Jesus had truly risen from the dead, then that one act of God demanded the rest of Thomas' life. But, if Jesus had *not* risen, then his great hopes and dreams were all for naught. He *had* to know the truth for himself. That position earned Thomas a reputation as a great doubter. However, I'm going to argue that if you're wrestling with doubts, that position can be the greatest place to start on your sincere journey to committed faith and belief. It is as if Thomas was saying: “This means so much to me that I have to know for myself. I need to see it to believe it.”

Some of you may be wrestling with similar questions. *Do I believe this whole Christianity thing only because my parents were believers? Am I just a weak person looking for some kind of a crutch?*

Listen - God is not afraid of the hard questions. Even Jesus—from the cross—looked up to heaven when God withdrew his presence, and he cried,

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)

You know, some people say, “The Bible says it, and I believe it, and that settles it.” I really do admire the person with a simple faith, but for many of us, we can't be so simplistic. Many of us wonder, *Why? Why should I believe this?* Some people sincerely wonder, *Is Jesus really the only way to God?* That's a fair question and a decent place to start on our journey to real faith. The road to committed faith often starts with doubts, because...

## 2. God will grant us discoveries on the road to belief.

As we sincerely seek Jesus, he will let us know him in new ways. He will answer our doubts, although it might not be exactly the way we want – but he *will* reveal himself to you.

When I was a sophomore in college I had been a Christian for a little over two years, and I was struggling with some questions and doubts. I wanted to know if Jesus really was the Son of God; if he was truly risen from the dead, because if so, then that event alone demanded the loyalty of my whole life. If he didn't, then I might as well do whatever I wanted.

I had been studying in a class called “Psychology of Religion.” I learned that many cults would get “conversions” in ways that were familiar to the church and my experience. They would often start with teenagers, because they can be influenced more easily than adults. They would take them on a retreat, getting them in an unfamiliar environment, getting them to exert lots of energy to get them tired. They would keep them up late at night, making them more susceptible to suggestion. They would get the teens to “convert” by using music and an influential, emotional speaker. So I read that, and I began to wonder, “What was really different about *my* conversion to Christ? Was I simply emotionally influenced, or was there something more?” (By the way, if you do the math, you probably know the answer I got, since I’m preaching the Gospel to you right now!) But I finally realized, by reasoning and reflecting on all the things that led to the point of decision – that things were more than coincidental for me. Looking back I could see the work and timing of God – I realized that what I came to believe was far more than being emotionally influenced; there was *supernatural* involvement by God. And the best proof of God’s work was that my life was completely transformed. I was literally a new person with new values and new priorities.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. At the time, I remember talking with friends of mine who were strong Christians and had grown up in the church. I shared with them my questions and doubting. Some of them told me I wasn’t supposed to doubt. I told them, “Maybe God is taking me on this journey! If God is truth, what has he got to lose by my doubting?” I came up with this analogy: Here is a picture of a house along the beach. There are many of these along the coast – you’ve probably seen them or maybe even stayed in them, although this seems a little extreme to me! Let me tell you: if I lived in that house, then everything that’s dear to me – my family, my possessions, my memories – would all be supported by those stilts, right? I could lose it all if those stilts weren’t strong! So let me ask you, if *you* were going to live in that house, wouldn’t you go down and make sure those posts would hold you up? I don’t care if the builder is your best friend – you would go down and kick those posts and get every assurance you can that those posts are going to support your life.

Why is it any different with our Christianity? Shouldn’t it be even *more* important that we do all we can to kick the posts of our faith to make sure it is going to hold us up? What are we afraid of? If our faith is true, it’s going to hold up; we’re not going to be able to knock it down by our puny selves. I believe God is okay with us kicking the posts. After all, he told Isaiah:

“‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the Lord, ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’” (Isaiah 1:18, nkjv)

Maybe you’ve said, “God, if you’re real, I want you to show me.” So you do something to make him prove himself. Maybe you take two sticks and put them in front of you and you say, “God, if you’re real, move these sticks. If you move them, then I’ll know you’re real, and I will give you my whole life.” Two hours later, nothing happens; nothing at all. So you try again: “God, if you’re real, just do this one thing.” And God doesn’t do it.

The Bible tells us in John 20:26-27 that Thomas had not shown up for a week. He was devastated. But then a week later, the disciples gathered in the house again, and Thomas

was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus appeared among them and said, “Peace be with you!” He gave them the normal everyday middle-eastern greeting: ‘Peace be to you.’ It means far more than: ‘May you be saved from trouble.’ It means: ‘May God give you *every good thing*.’<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ greeting was the kindest and most generous Greek greeting anyone could offer. There were actually several layers to this greeting. The phrase literally meant, “All peace—in all ways and at all times—be with you.” Jesus gave Thomas the most benevolent greeting possible. He didn’t scold him for his doubt; he didn’t belittle him; he didn’t write him off. Rather, he greeted him warmly: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Jesus gave Thomas exactly what he needed in order to believe. I believe with all my heart that God will do the same for you. He may not give you what you *want*—two twigs moving – but he will give you exactly what you *need*. You might think that God didn’t come through for you because you woke up Monday and things weren’t magically or immediately changed. That doesn’t mean God isn’t at work. It just means he’s not acting in the way you think he should. And that can be disappointing. It was disappointing to Thomas when Jesus allowed himself to be killed.

When I accepted Christ during my junior year of high school, I prayed with a friend and mentor of mine at the time. And when we finished praying, *I was a different person*. It was a new birth. All of my sins were forgiven, and I knew it somehow inside. All of a sudden, the power of the addictions that gripped my heart was broken. God touched me in a way far more profound than two sticks moving. It wasn’t what I wanted; it was what I needed – faith. And when I doubted and kicked the posts while I was in college, I found that original decision held up – it was still true. My faith was going to be strong enough to hold up everything that was dear and important to me; my life direction, my choices, my marriage, my family, my career, my influence in this world. And let me tell you, I’m glad, because we’ve been through some *really* hard stuff.

But let me also say this: you can’t use “doubting” as an excuse to do what you want. I had another friend in college that had grown up in church, but decided that he “doubted” too, and that became his excuse to go out and sin in all kinds of ways. That’s not what we’re talking about here; your doubting is only healthy if it comes in the context of genuinely seeking God, because God said:

“If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.” (Jeremiah 29:13, nlt)

If you’re not looking for God wholeheartedly, all bets are off; you are simply using doubting as an excuse to keep on sinning. You *can* choose to seek Christ wholeheartedly. I found that I could choose a committed belief. And:

### 3. Everyone can choose ***committed belief***.

In John 20:28, Thomas says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” For a Jew to make this statement was considered a blasphemy that was punishable by death. But Thomas didn’t

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, [The Gospel of John](#), vol. 2, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY: Edinburgh, 2001), 317.

care. He got what he needed: *egeirō*. Tradition and other reliable sources tell us that Thomas became the great evangelizer of India. Many sources claim he was in India from AD 52 through AD 72 and founded many churches there. It is commonly accepted that, when a group of non-believers asked him to deny his faith in Christ, the one-time great doubter claimed, “I will never, ever renounce Christ.” Because of refusal, they drove a stake through his body, and he died the death of a martyr. The doubter turned faithful and committed believer.

The same can be true for you. Just like Thomas, and just like me, your seeming disappointment can be the opportunity for you to become more firm in your faith, to see God work when his timing is right, and he will work in such a way that not only will you be able to more fully and deeply confess, “My Lord and My God!” but you also will tell others that Jesus is true, because you’ve experienced it for yourself. Keep believing – keep having faith! And remember, Jesus said:

“As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” (John 20:21)

The evidence of your faith is when you go out for Jesus, carrying the Good News to show and share with others.

With everything in me, I believe in a new birth and a living hope that comes only through the resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Either we believe that or we're just playing church.

Jesus hung out with people like us – sinners. He loved people like us. He said: If you want to have a part of my kingdom, you must first deny yourself; it's no longer about you. Then you take up your cross and you follow me.

Being a disciple of Christ is not just praying some kind of “fire insurance” prayer. Neither is it about him just rescuing you from all the problems you’ve created; some of them, he will but others, he knows it’s better for you to take the longer route, where you need to work with him and make choices and changes. There’s going to be reparations that have to be made, reconciliation and forgiveness you need to seek, forgiveness you need to choose, and restitution to offer. It's about following Jesus, even when he doesn’t do what you want him to. It’s about making him the Lord of your life. If the resurrection is true, it demands our whole life.

Maybe you didn’t get the chance to come up last week and get one of these chains in order to demonstrate your desire to allow Jesus to break the chains in your life. If so, we’re going to pray and you can do so. Let’s bow our heads. Come forward if you desire to now.

*Pray*

*My journey included a small group of guys; best place to be is in a small group that accepts you, doesn't always try to spout off right answers, but helps you in your journey. Join a small group! Info at “Starting Point.”*