

The God of the second chance: Moving from doubt to devout

Message for Sunday, April 28, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: John 20:19-29

Children's Message: from Acts 1:1-11

Let's try a little game. Let's wait quietly for someone to giggle. Let's all be very serious and completely silent, and wait... (*probably won't have to wait for long!*)

Waiting is hard! Give me some examples of when you've had to wait for something:

- wait for my birthday
- wait in line
- "Wait until you're older."

When Jesus went back to heaven and left his followers, he told them that he would come back to earth again some day. But he didn't say how soon it would be. We're still waiting today for Jesus to come back to earth.

But while the disciples were waiting, they didn't just lie around! They spent a lot of time in prayer and worship. They continued Jesus' work of telling everyone the good news of God's love, of healing the sick, of caring for people in need, of helping people who treated unfairly.

Do you know what we call something that just sits around and waits and does nothing? *Various names.* I think of a jar of pickles.

Think of people in a jar of pickles! They're safe, they're kept in good condition. But they're not doing anything! I'd rather be an active Christian than a pickle Christian. I hope you do, too.

Message: "The God of the second chance:
Moving from doubt to devout"

At the end of World War I, Herbert Hoover, later to become President of the United States, led the Allied relief efforts in Europe. He kept hundreds of thousands from starving, and a new word entered the Finnish language. In Finland, to "hoover" means "to be kind, to help."

Your name is important. It represents you; it represents your character.

I'm going to say some names, and you think about the first thing that comes into your mind.

- Elvis Presley
- Donald Trump
- Amazon.com
- Thomas, the disciple of Jesus

Now I'm curious. Probably for most of those names, we would have a variety of ideas. But my guess is that for Thomas, almost all of us would have the word "doubt" or "doubter" in mind. Show me your hand if that's what you were thinking.

Thomas has become so connected with doubting that the phrase "doubting Thomas" is part of our vocabulary. I think it's unfortunate. I think Thomas got a bum rap.

Other than being listed among the disciples of Jesus, we know nothing at all about Thomas from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. That changes in the gospel of John.

1) Brave Thomas

Let's go back a few weeks before Easter. In John's gospel from chapter 7 through to chapter 10, Jesus is in Jerusalem for one of the big worship festivals. He spends most of his days at the Temple, teaching people about the kingdom of God. During that time, he is almost constantly in trouble:

7:30 Religious leaders try to grab him, but couldn't.

7:32 They send the Temple police to arrest him, but they didn't do it.

8:1-9 They try to trap Jesus with the question about the woman caught in adultery.

8:59 They are about to stone Jesus, but he slips through the crowd.

10:31 The religious leaders again try to stone Jesus, but miss the opportunity.

Finally, at the end of chapter 10, Jesus leaves Jerusalem, and goes to the relative calm of the countryside by the Jordan River.

He isn't there long, though, before a messenger comes and tells him that his friend Lazarus was very ill and dying. His sisters Mary and Martha send the message, asking for him to come and heal Lazarus. But there's a problem: Lazarus and his sisters live in Bethany, just a twenty-minute walk

from Jerusalem. Going there and performing a miracle which would immediately get reported everywhere, was going back into the hornets' nest. Jesus tells the disciples, "Let's go back." Here's their response.

John 11:8, Today's English Version:

"Teacher," the disciples answered, "just a short time ago the people there wanted to stone you; and are you planning to go back?"

Not *all* of the disciples, though. Thomas stood out from the rest.

John 11:16, Today's English Version:

Thomas (called the Twin) said to his fellow disciples, "Let us all go along with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!"

Thomas looked death in the face, and chose death with Jesus rather than life without him. This is brave Thomas.

2) Doubting Thomas

Things happened in quick sequence after that. Jesus was arrested, tried, killed, and then rose again on the day we now call Easter. The evening of that same day, Jesus came to be with the disciples, to show them that he is alive. Thomas wasn't with them, though, so he missed it. When they told him about it, this is what he said:

John 20:25, Today's English Version:

"Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

That is where Thomas got the label of "doubter." Give him a break, though. He was asking only for the same evidence which all the others had.

3) Believing Thomas

I'm calling this series of messages "The God of the Second Chance." Well, Thomas got his second chance the following Sunday.

John 20:26-31, New International Version:

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!" 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."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

The confession of faith which Thomas makes is unique. Others called Jesus "Teacher," "Master," "Messiah," "Son of God." This is the only place in the entire Bible where Jesus is called "God" in plain language, no interpretation needed.

"You are my Lord and my God." These are not the words of a doubter. These are the words of a believer. God gave him a second chance, and he grabbed hold of it and never let go. That's why I want to finish the story about Thomas by calling him...

4) Faithful Thomas

Although not recorded in the Bible, history and tradition tell us that Thomas travelled farther than any other disciple, to tell people about Jesus. He spent years in India, which is where he died. Not peacefully, though. He was branded with hot irons, then put to death with stones and a spear. He could have saved himself by simply saying, "No, I was wrong. I don't believe in Jesus after all." But he didn't. He was faithful to the very end.

5) God gives you second chance too

Sometimes when I'm visiting, I meet someone who says, "I could never be a good Christian. I have too many doubts." Maybe some of you here can identify with that.

Here's what I want to say to you: You don't have a perfect faith before you can come to Jesus. I'd like to meet the person who has no doubts, no questions about their faith, who never wonders "What if..." and "What about..." Yeah, I'd like to meet that person and check to see if they have a pulse.

Jesus welcomes people who have doubts. The gospel of Mark chapter 9 tells of a father who brings his son to Jesus to be healed of the convulsions that ruin his life. Jesus says that all things are possible for the one who believes. The man answers, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." Jesus was delighted with that answer, and healed the boy.

Maybe you think you're not good enough to be a Christian. Friends, the good news is that Jesus *loves* sinners. It's the self-righteous, proud, stuck-up people that caused him headaches. He wants to

work in your life to help you overcome sin. Let me tell a couple of stories to illustrate that.

A Christian once visited a farmer to talk to him about Jesus. “I wouldn’t come to church up there.” the farmer said. “I know old So and So who claims to be a Christian and who goes to that church, and also So and So who also claims to be a Christian and who goes to that church, and they don’t live any differently from me. I’m as good as they are.”

Everywhere the farmer went he told about the hypocrites in that church. Some time later the Christian went to see the farmer again. “I want to buy a hog”, said the Christian. The farmer showed all his best hogs to him. Then they came to the runt. “I believe I will take that one” the, Christian said.

The farmer replied, “But you don’t want that one. He’s the worst runt to the litter.”

“I sure do” said the Christian. So they loaded the runt in the truck.

“Now” said the Christian, after paying for the animal, “what if I take this hog and ride all over this area telling folks that this is the kind of hogs you raise?”

“That’s not fair!” the farmer exclaimed. “I have some nice hogs and you want to show people that runt?!”

The Christian replied, “If it’s fair for the church, then it’s fair for the farm!”

Sure, I’ll admit the our church has people who are an embarrassment to Jesus. I’m one of them. But I’m praying and asking Jesus to work in my life to change that. You can, too.

Fred Smith was famous as the founder and CEO of FedEx, the worldwide courier company. Less well known is that he was a Christian, and often spoke at churches and conferences. He loved to ask people this question: “If you were arrested on a Saturday night for drunk driving, and the news on the radio on Sunday morning announced, ‘*Your Name* arrested for drunk driving,’ would you still go to church?”

Here’s the story told by the pastor of a church where Fred was speaking:

I’ve watched men blanch when Fred asked that question. When he asked it of me, I said: “Fred, I’m the preacher. I’d have a serious problem if I were caught driving drunk.”

He asked again, “But would you go to church?”

And I said, “No. I’d take a sabbatical for about a month and then try to weasel back in if I could.”

And he said to me, “That’s stupid. It’s sort of like a man who’s hit by an automobile, and he’s got blood all over the place, and his bones are broken, and they try to take him to the hospital, and he says: ‘Wait. I’m a mess. Let me go home and get cleaned up. Let me get these bones set, let me heal, and then I’ll go to the hospital.’ ”

The church is a place where broken people can come and be loved just as they are, no matter what they’ve done. God is the God of second chances. You can come just as you are. Even more: you can serve the Lord while you’re still undergoing his therapy.

Next Steps:

- Pray: “Jesus, there are lots of things about you I don’t understand. I’ve got lots of questions, lots of doubts. But don’t get me wrong: I still trust you, and I give my life to you.”
- Live your faith! Follow Jesus, instead of the world’s ways. Let your light shine. Don’t be a pickle Christian!