

## **Blessed Are the Doubters: Finding Faith in Questioning**

By: Shelby Erickson - Student Preacher from Lutheran Campus Ministries

Good morning. My name is Shelby Erickson and I am a student at the University of Minnesota participating in this year's Lutheran Campus Ministries Sunday service. I want to thank you for hosting me today and know that your support of LCM is very much appreciated. As I said before, I am a student at the U and I'm studying Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior as well as Environmental Sciences, Policy, and Management. I will be graduating from the University of Minnesota this spring - yikes - and I will be attending the University of Maine School of Law to pursue a career in environmental law.

For me, science has always been fascinating. Even as a young kid, I would look up at the stars and wonder how they got there, why they were placed in that particular orientation, and why I was seeing them at this time in my life. In fact, I loved outer space so much that at the ripe age of 8 years old, I made it my life's goal to become an astronaut, along with being a part-time volunteer firefighter and a part-time piano teacher, on the side. A girl has to make her money!! The astronaut dream dissipated quickly when I realized that I would have to do math and engineering for the rest of my life. No thank you.

However, the questions stuck with me. The wonder stuck with me. I felt things deeply and I was not afraid to ask "Why?" I loved that science gave me an outlet to discover and ask these big, bold questions that some didn't even have answers to. Why was the ocean acidifying? Why is the lake next to my grandma's cabin greener than the lake in my town? Why is "north" always north? Why do the seasons change? Why are my siblings so annoying? Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

One aspect of my life where my questions ran BIG but my mouth did not was at church. My hometown church, also ELCA Lutheran, always felt like I was being taught at. I would sit in the pew, usually in the middle right section with my family, and listen, sing, listen some more, sing again, pray, take communion, sing again, then leave. Sermons would be delivered and I would take them at face value, even if I didn't understand. It was hard to be curious because I didn't know that I could? If I had big questions about the world, about God, I felt like I wasn't a good enough Christian for QUOTE "trusting in Him no matter what" UNQUOTE. I felt that I was being unfaithful if I disagreed with a sermon or had doubts. I would ask "Why, God why?" and feel guilty about it. And people would placate me with "Everything happens for a reason" or "Trust, it is all in God's plan". And I would spit back silently, "But did you see those kids God, the ones that died in that shooting? Was that a part of your plan?" and I would hear no response. Questioning, being curious, and having doubts made me feel like I was an imposter - that everyone believed in everything all the time and that there was something wrong with me for questioning the (all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present) God.

This brings us to the story of Thomas, nicknamed "Doubting Thomas", for his seeming unwillingness to believe. We are going to debunk that nickname today. One detail I think that goes unnoticed in this story is that **before** Jesus comes to visit the disciples (without Thomas), word from Mary Magdalene, who was one of the first to know of Jesus' resurrection, reaches the disciples, yet they remain in hiding. Then, when Jesus comes before the disciples, He announces who He is and **ALSO SHOWS THEM HIS HANDS, HIS FEET, AND HIS SIDE**, it is **THEN** that they recognize that He is Jesus, the

Messiah. THEN they rejoice - after they see His hands, side, and feet, not by word of mouth from Mary Magdalene. So I think it is interesting that Thomas is the one who is called "Doubting" when all the other disciples did not first believe when they heard via word of mouth. I digress.

We also know that Thomas is not with the other disciples when word from Mary Magdalene gets to them and also when Jesus comes to visit the disciples. We are not told where he is. However, we do know that Thomas is very loyal to Jesus, even meeting his death because he was a disciple of Jesus, so perhaps he was out mourning.

Thomas is then told by word of mouth that Jesus is alive and well, just a few days after the crucifixion. What comes out of Thomas' mouth next, I think, is a rather reasonable response. "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Let's say that you found out that one of your closest friends had died, and three days later you were told that they were out and about, living and breathing, chatting, getting coffee? I think a reasonable response would be to give them the old, "Yeah right pal, I'll believe it when I see it." I think another rational response would be to become angry and accusatory at said messenger because they would be giving you false hope that your friend, who could not possibly be alive, is alive? How devastating would that be to hear? THIS is putting ourselves in Thomas' shoes. And we dare to call him Thomas the Doubter? This sounds more like Thomas the Passionate, maybe Thomas the Critical Thinker, Thomas the Loyal, Thomas the Caring? Are these adjectives not worthy to describe him, a disciple of Jesus who was attempting to process his grief at the loss of his friend?

And now, we come to the part of the story where Jesus visits the disciples, after 8 days, and Thomas is with them. He says to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas does as Jesus says, and believes. Jesus then says, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." I could write another entire sermon on the last line alone, but the scope of this sermon is focusing on doubting, so we will stay there. Jesus could have chastised Thomas, He could have criticized him, bringing up a story about how doubters would be last in line while believers would be first, etc etc etc. But He doesn't. He blesses those who see without believing, but He also holds space to bless those who believe while needing to see, NEEDING to question, those like Thomas, and those like myself. The blessing of one, in particular, does not dictate the casting out of the other. Both of these truths can be held in the palms of each hand. **Just because a person doubts does not make them unworthy of Jesus' love or blessing. Thomas was not cast out for his failure to believe upon just hearing.**

In fact, Jesus welcomes questions and challenges. He is well-known for His stories and parables that bring up hard topics and truths that may cause doubt. Jesus knows that for some, strengthening of faith may require doubt.

Instead of shutting down questions and believing everything that we see blindly, as people on this planet it is our job to assess the information given to us critically. We do not fault ourselves or our friends for fact-checking the latest news report, TikTok storytime, or Facebook post. So why was "doubting" the takeaway from this story? I think, if

anything, the Thomas story teaches us that questioning is allowed, doubts are allowed, and that wrestling with God is not frowned upon but encouraged.

We do not have all the answers. How can we? As humans, this is not possible. We cannot fathom the inner workings of the universe, we do not know why a sunflower is yellow, why the ocean contains exactly 3.5% salt, or how Caitlin Clark is able to make so many logo threes. Questions, curiosity, doubt, and wonder and awe all go hand in hand. Without the awe, without the wonder, we cannot discover **anything new**. This newness allows us to learn more about ourselves, the world around us, and the Creator of the universe.

My time at the University of Minnesota has strengthened my desire to discover through many many MANY science experiments, independent research projects, philosophy papers, and thought-provoking questions about what it means to be a person in this world. So funnily enough this means that the slogan "Driven to Discover", a trademark of the University of Minnesota, actually holds some truth and it isn't just a cheap slogan to market students to come here.

My time with Lutheran Campus Ministries has also allowed me to exercise my curiosity. Instead of sitting through a traditional Lutheran sermon like in my home church, at LCM, we still read the gospel, and then we discuss what we heard with our neighbors. We are allowed to question, to have doubts, to TALK during worship! Crazy, I know. Our pastor, Pastor Kate, then lets us shout out our thoughts about the reading, sometimes sharing hard, hard questions, and if we don't know the answer, we just sit with it. Curiosity is even in the motto of Lutheran Campus Ministries, which is "Be Real, Be Curious, Be

Community". Being curious is part of WHO WE ARE as Christians in this troubled world, and I have loved that Lutheran Campus Ministries has supported my doubts since I first came to worship during COVID times.

Doubt and questioning, much like the beginning of the science questions that I once held so dear, teach us more than simply believing everything that we see and hear. **It is in the act of asking questions where discovery can be found.**

So if you find yourself questioning, like me, doubting like me, yearning to know more, like Thomas and me, know that Jesus will always show His hands, His feet, His side to you, He will never cast you out. He will not embarrass you or judge you, no, the Good Shepherd, the Redeemer, is a friend first, always.