

"Healthy and Unhealthy Doubt"

Text: John 20:19-31

May the empty tomb fill your heart, and may the risen Lord lift your spirit. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Does it ever all sound just too fantastic to be true? A nice Jewish boy from a poor family in no-account Galilee claims, at age 30, to be both true God and true man, and, more than that, claims to be the promised Savior of the world. His mother was a virgin when he was born. The boy (and later the man) never sins. Not once. But he does heal all the sick who come to him. He even raises the dead. He himself is then put to death by the duly appointed officials of his day – all but a handful of which believe that he is a fraud. But then that same man is himself raised from the dead on the third day, but appears only to those who believe in him – never once to unbelievers. Forty days later he ascends bodily into heaven, again seen only by a handful of his closest supporters.

Seriously, does it ever sound just too fantastic to you, too improbable or fanciful to ever be true? The world, for example, will accept Christianity, but not *that* sort of Christianity. Rational people can buy into the good example part of Jesus. They can even buy into the part where we feel bad that such a good man was mistreated so terribly. But *virgin mother?* Rising from the dead? Coming back again on the clouds with angels blowing a trumpet? Really?

Believe it or not there is good and bad in taking a step back and objectively reexamining the Christian faith from time to time. The important part is that we understand the process and act accordingly. That means we need to bear in mind how and why we came to believe such things, and to include that power – those forces – in the reevaluation process. There is, in other words, both a healthy and an unhealthy form of doubt and introspection. Our text for today will show us the difference. That text is found in the Gospel of John, the Twentieth Chapter:

John 20:19-31 Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to

you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ ¶ Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." ²⁶ ¶ And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." ²⁸ And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

³⁰ ¶ And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Here ends the very words of God. These are not man's words; they are the precious words of Almighty God. May we all honor them as such and learn from them accordingly. **"Sanctify us through the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

What a joy and privilege to continue to draw joy, strength, and comfort from the message of the empty tomb – even as last week's Easter celebration fades into a pleasant memory. The joy and comfort remain because God's pronouncement remains – intact and applicable, still today. The empty tomb is God the Father's immutable assurance that his Son has paid for your sins. That means that no matter what you have done, God has declared your sin-debt to have been paid in full by Jesus. In Christ Jesus, you are forgiven. In this we have confidence, now and forever.

Yet the question of the day is "Or do we?" Do we have such confidence? We are not always so certain, are we? Doubt plays a huge role in our lives. Though our faith in Jesus Christ should never know doubt, skepticism can protect saving faith, and it can destroy saving faith. Herein lies the problem. If we do not learn how to control the uncertainty or skepticism that is clearly a part of all of us, that doubt will one day rise up and consume us -- as it already has so

many Christian churches. You can see then that the stakes are great indeed. This is not an inconsequential question but a vital issue for all of God's Children. How will we control the uncertainty that has become such an integral part of so many aspects of our lives – including also our faith?

First of all, what earthly good does doubt provide for the Christian? For starters, we would not have a Church today if it were not for healthy skepticism in the Church. Our Lord himself, through John, told us in 1 John 4:1, "**Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.**" If godly men throughout the ages had not "**tested the spirits,**" the gospel would have been buried long ago under centuries of man's intellectual garbage. Without this healthy kind of skepticism, men would have followed false messiahs long before and long after Jesus had come and gone. Even to this very day, doubt and skepticism are essential tools in sorting through what is true and what is not in our society.

But how do we tell fact from fantasy? How do we distinguish between what is wonderfully true and what is diabolically false? What standard are we supposed to use?

This last is the key question, isn't it? It all comes down to the standard, the basis according to which we label something true or false, and here we really only have two options: ourselves, or a trusted outside source.

Consider for a moment how you sort through conflicting information in your everyday life. When you hear something out of the ordinary, how do you decide whether or not to believe it is true? Usually if it lies outside of the realm of possibility *according to your own personal understanding and experience*, you dismiss it as false – *unless it is verified by a trusted source*. Your child, for example, comes home from school and breathlessly tells you about a kid in school who was sniffing so much glue that when he went to smoke a cigarette his head exploded. You smile condescendingly knowing, based on your life's experience and your basic understanding of anatomy and physics, that the story is a product of childhood imagination and rumor. But then the next day you pick up the local paper and there, on the front page you see the headline: "*Local Boy's Head Explodes*" and instantly the whole account gains credibility. You read further and find the story is corroborated by teachers, police, doctors, and Oprah Winfrey, and suddenly that which was pure fantasy becomes reality – so much so that you can't wait to tell others about it. Everything within you told you the story couldn't be true, and yet the trusted sources convinced you almost instantly.

That's why skepticism or doubt concerning the Christian faith is really only dangerous when you set yourself up as the judge and leave the authoritative outside source out of the process. That outside source is, of course, God's Word – the Bible – and it is more than just a source of information. It is the very portal to divine wisdom and understanding. It is the one infallible source not only of truth, but thereby also the key to heaven. (To this end, beware of any religious leader who asks you to trust *his* word alone. Men of God should, in fact, demand of you that you put everything they ever speak to the test of God's Word. If it fails that test, then they have failed God and they have failed you. How many errors of the past would have been prevented by this simple procedure.)

There are therefore obvious benefits to doubt - vitally important benefits. However the negative aspects are as deadly to the Church as the positives are good and necessary. Our text does its usual inspired job of showing us the difference, and of setting the direction for all future believers on how to handle their natural doubts and questions.

The topic of doubt is natural considering the fact that our text for this morning, as you know, is the account of "Doubting Thomas." Our text is really a manual on how to deal with doubt. It also demonstrates to us the inevitable result of dealing with doubt *the wrong way*.

Most Christians today condemn Thomas because he demanded visible proof for what he was supposed to believe by faith alone. Yet a careful reading tells us that the other disciples were guilty of the same thing. In fact the parallel account in Luke 24 tells us that when they first saw Jesus they thought they were seeing some sort of a ghost or apparition – so certain were they that Jesus was still dead.

Jesus here demonstrates tremendous patience with his disciples, the men who would go out and be the pillars of his church. They had seen him crucified, dead and buried. *This was the evidence for doubt that had to be overcome*. Jesus gave them special, visible, tangible evidence to prove that it was really he when he let them touch the nail holes and the wound of the spear. He ate food in their presence to show that he was no ghost. He wanted no doubts in the minds of these key men. Still, their skepticism lingered, and we read in Mark 16:14 that Jesus took his men to task for it: "**Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack**

of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen."

Thomas, of course, took it a step farther. Thomas did not just express lingering doubts; his words demonstrate the wrong kind of skepticism, and it is here that we can see a dissected view of the beast. Here we can examine it in detail. While we make no judgments as to whether Thomas was or was not a believer at this point, he clearly demonstrates the sort of skepticism that leads to unbelief. Did Thomas have a right to be immediately skeptical of the news that the man he had seen die was again alive? Yes and no. Humanly speaking he had as much right as did the other disciples to believe what they saw. None of them, however, had a right to *dismiss what Jesus had told them would happen*. Just as he had prophesied of his death, so he had told them of his resurrection.

The bottom line here is that Thomas failed to go to that sure source of truth – Jesus' own words – and the result was nearly catastrophic. Jesus patiently called Thomas back from his stubborn refusal to accept the good news of the Resurrection, but in so doing he made it very clear that a change was now to take place, for a change *had to* take place. Jesus was leaving. The special gift he had given to Thomas (his visible presence) would be given only one more time - to Paul, the last of the Apostles. From that time on we hear no more about special appearances by our Lord. Jesus had to drive this fact home, both in his disciples' minds and in the hearts and minds of every Christian who would follow. The luxury that Thomas demanded is no more. With these words Jesus began a new era in the Church: ***"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."***

So it was that pure faith was outlined for the Christian Church and later defined in Hebrews 11:1 as ***"being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."*** Given our skeptical minds, this will never be an easy thing for us. Perhaps that is why a growing part of the Christian Church is still demanding the visible signs of faith-healings, speaking in tongues, and the like. These are "Thomases," demanding that God provide visible proof for that which, by God's own definition, cannot consist of visible proof.

The key, again, is the source. When doubts assail, as they will – for it all sounds too good to be true – turn not to yourself and your own wisdom; turn to God's Word. There God himself has promised to meet with you, and there he provides you with that ***"peace that surpasses all understanding."*** God himself has brought this light into your hearts. Do not allow your natural doubt to rob you of this priceless gift and to again

darken your world with the hopelessness of unbelief. You *do* have the truth, and the truth has made you free – free from sin and an heir of everlasting life. Believe, and rejoice. Amen.

Scripture Readings

NKJ **Acts 5:12, 17-32** And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch...¹⁷ ¶ Then the high priest rose up, and all those who *were* with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation,¹⁸ and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.¹⁹ But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said,²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life."²¹ ¶ And when they heard *that*, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.²² But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported,²³ saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!"²⁴ Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be.²⁵ So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!"²⁶ Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned.²⁷ ¶ And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council. And the high priest asked them,²⁸ saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"²⁹ But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men.³⁰ "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.³¹ "Him God has exalted to His right hand *to be* Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.³² "And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so* also *is* the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

NKJ **Revelation 1:4-8** John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne,⁵ ¶ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood,⁶ and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him *be* glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.⁷ Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.⁸ ¶ "I am the Alpha and the Omega, *the* Beginning and *the* End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

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The Sunday after Easter – April 11, 2010

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn -#192- (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Awake My Heart with Gladness"

The Order of Morning Service – Red Hymnal page 15.

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back of the bulletin)

The New Testament Lesson: (Acts 5:12, 17-32) What exciting days in the early Church as men and women dedicated their lives to the service of the Lord Jesus - this despite deadly persecution. May God give us such zeal and rekindle in us that same "first love."

The Epistle Lesson: (Revelation 1:4-8) John was given symbolic pictures of things to come. Many of these signs or events have already come to pass. At least one remains - the return of our Risen and Ascended Lord Jesus. God the Holy Spirit keep us focused on that great day, and continually remind us to work diligently to share the gospel while there is still time.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed (Red Hymnal page 22)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn -#245- (Brown Hymnal)

"God Loved the World So that He Gave"

The Sermon - Text: John 20:19-31 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Healthy and Unhealthy Doubt"

"Create In Me" (The Offertory) – Red Hymnal page 22

The Offering, followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn -#193- (Red Hymnal)

"Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24)

The Distribution -#305- (Red Hymnal)

"Soul, Adorn Thyself with Gladness"

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 29)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -#192- (Verses 6 & 8) (Red Hymnal)

"Awake My Heart with Gladness"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!

To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Last Sunday (78) 2010 Average (52) Clausnitzer Funeral (329)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Mon-Thurs	-9:00 a.m.	– Pastor in Eau Claire for meetings
Next Sunday	-8:45 a.m.	– Sunday School (No Bible Class)
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC Board Meetings – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend meetings in Eau Claire from Monday through Thursday. Please call the cell number in an emergency.

Ruth Meiers Food Pantry – Please note the food drive that is on-going for the Ruth Meiers Food Pantry here in Bismarck. Canned goods can be deposited on the designated tables in the fellowship hall.

Schedule Changes – Please note that there are no midweek meetings this week in the Pastor's absence. Also no Bible Class next Sunday.

Audit Committee – Our thanks to this year's Audit Committee (Keith Mantz and Melvin Sutheimer). Their report, which found the books to be in good order, is available upon request.

Revised Usher and Cleaning Duties – A revised summary of the duties of the Sunday ushers and the weekly cleaners is available. Please check your mailboxes or contact a Church Council member.

Delegates – 2 delegates are needed for the Jamestown Conference (May 25-27) and one more for the CLC Convention in Eau Claire (June 21-25). Please see the Pastor for further details.