

## **"Healthy and Unhealthy Skepticism"**

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 relatively 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 (the man) never sins. Not once. Instead he heals 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. Not to unbelievers; to believers only. Forty days later he ascends bodily into heaven, again seen only by a handful of his closest supporters. Yet, though gone, he promised that he is not gone but with us still, until the day he returns to take us to heaven.

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 all are supposed to 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 same divine power – those same divine 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:

**ESV John 20:19-31 *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."* <sup>20</sup> *When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.* <sup>21</sup> *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."* <sup>22</sup> *And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.* <sup>23</sup> *If you forgive the sins of any,***

*they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."* <sup>24</sup> ¶ *Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.* <sup>25</sup> *So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."* <sup>26</sup> ¶ *Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* <sup>27</sup> *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."* <sup>28</sup> *Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"* <sup>29</sup> *Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* <sup>30</sup> ¶ *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;* <sup>31</sup> *but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

So far 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. To that end we pray, **"Sanctify us by 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, unchangeable assurance that his Son has paid for your sins. That means that no matter what you have done, God has declared that the debt you owed to God because of your sins has been paid in full by Jesus. In Christ Jesus, you are forgiven. This is the basis for our confidence, now and forever.

Yet the question we force ourselves to ask on this particular day is *"Or is it?"* Do we have such confidence? Are you always so certain? One of the cold, hard facts of life is that doubt plays a huge role in our day-to-day existence. Though our faith in Jesus Christ should never know doubt, skepticism often peeks its nasty little head in the door, takes a look around, and lifts a skeptical eyebrow. The good news is that doubt can be made to *protect* saving faith, just as it can also be allowed to 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 Christians down through the ages. Obviously then the stakes are great here. 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?

So just what earthly good does doubt provide for the Christian? First of all, we need to be clear that we are not talking about the sort of doubt here that our Savior routinely condemned. We are talking about the opposite of mindlessness; about an occasional reexamination and reevaluation. The fact is we would not have a Church today if it were not for healthy skepticism in the Church. Jesus himself, through John, told us in 1 John 4:1, "**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.**" What this tells us is that if godly men down through 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 good and what is bad in our society – what is true and what is false.

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

This last question is the key, isn't it? It all comes down to the standard, the *basis*, according to which we label something as true or false. When it comes to adopting a standard by which to judge all that we hear, there aren't a lot of options. In fact we really only have two choices: you can trust yourself, or you can trust an 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 because you know, 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, Oprah Winfrey, and Geraldo Rivera, 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. (Okay, so maybe not so much Oprah and Geraldo.)

All of this explains 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, truth, and understanding. It is the one infallible source not only of truth, but thereby also the key to heaven. That's also, by the way, why any spiritual leader worth his salt will tell you to beware of any religious leader who asks you to trust *his* word alone. True men of God will always demand of you that you put everything they ever tell you to the test of God's Word. If it fails that test, then that shepherd has failed God and he has failed you. Think of 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 doubts *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 later become the pillars of Christ's Church. They had seen Jesus "*crucified, dead and buried.*" *This was the evidence for doubt that had to be overcome.* Jesus gave them special, visible, tangible evidence 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: "**Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.**"

Thomas, of course, took it a step farther. Thomas did not just express lingering doubts; his words were indicative of stubborn unbelief. His words thereby demonstrate the *wrong* kind of skepticism, and it is here that we

can see a dissected view of the beast. Here we can examine the bad sort of doubt in intimate 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 Jesus had also told them, repeatedly, 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. That means you and me. 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 ***"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** 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. To do that today is to play the role of Thomas, demanding that God provide visible proof which, by God's own declaration, he will no longer provide.

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. This might be the one time in your life where it is actually true that something that seems too good to be true is, nonetheless, true. Jesus Christ was and is real. He was born of a virgin, did live a sinless life, was crucified, and did rise from the dead on the third day. The result is that our sins have been forgiven. In God's eyes we are innocent, holy children of God and heirs of eternal life.

Do not allow Satan, or your own natural pessimism or doubt, to rob you of this life-giving truth. *Amen.*

## Scripture Readings

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 5:12, 17-32** Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. <sup>17</sup> ¶ But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy <sup>18</sup> they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." <sup>21</sup> ¶ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council and all the senate of the people of Israel and sent to the prison to have them brought. <sup>22</sup> But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, <sup>23</sup> "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." <sup>24</sup> Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. <sup>25</sup> And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." <sup>26</sup> Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. <sup>27</sup> ¶ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Revelation 1:4-8** John to the seven churches that 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, <sup>5</sup> ¶ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood <sup>6</sup> and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. <sup>7</sup> Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. <sup>8</sup> ¶ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**The First Sunday after Easter – April 28, 2019**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 193 (Red Hymnal)

"Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"

## The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

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

**The First Lesson:** (Acts 5:12, 17-32) The good news of the empty tomb, together with what Christ's resurrection means to every human soul, was never meant to be hoarded or hidden. Our first lesson this morning gives us an example of the sort of boldness that our God wants to see in those he has commissioned to spread the gospel. This reading should also remind us that the One whose work we seek to carry out is the One that will both provide for and protect his faithful servants.

**The Second Lesson:** (Revelation 1:4-8) John saw a vision of things to come. Many of these signs or events have already come to pass. At least one remains - the return of our Lord on the Last Day. May God the Holy Spirit keep us focused on that great day, and continually remind us to work tirelessly to share the gospel while there is still time. While that day will be amazing beyond compare for God's children, not so for those who reject Jesus Christ as their Savior. God grant us love for souls.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 196 (Red Hymnal)

"I Am Content, My Jesus Liveth Still"

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

**"Healthy and Unhealthy Skepticism"**

## The Offertory – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

## The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer

## The Pre-Communion Hymn – 210 (Red Hymnal)

"The Strife Is O'er, the Battle Done"

## The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

## The Distribution

## The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn – 207 (Stanzas 1-2) Red Hymnal)

"Like the Golden Sun Ascending"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

## Attendance – Sunday (58) Average (38)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service w/communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee hour
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>- No midweek classes</b>	
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee hour
	<b>-11:30 a.m.</b>	– Women's Fellowship meeting

**CLC News** – Pastor David Schaller has returned the call to Prince of Peace of Loveland. Two Christian Day Schools (Okabena and Clarkston) have submitted calls for the two ILC teaching graduates, and five congregations have submitted calls for the one seminary graduate. The Call Committee for Graduates is scheduled to meet on Wednesday of this week. The various Boards of the CLC are scheduled to meet in Eau Claire on Monday and Tuesday, and the joint Coordinating Council of the CLC is scheduled to convene on Wednesday.

**Women's Fellowship Meeting** – The Women's Fellowship of St. Paul has scheduled a meeting for next Sunday, May 5, following the fellowship hour. For more information please see Cindy Ollenburger.

**Pastor Out of Town** – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend CLC Board Meetings in Eau Claire this week, returning on Thursday.

**Delegate Conference** – St Paul is still looking for another delegate to represent us at the WCDC in Rapid City May 21-23. See President Johnson or Pastor Roehl for more information.