



The Benefit Of The Doubt | Thomas Wasn't Wrong

Preached on September 29, 2025

Speaker: Scott Palmbush

Well, hi everybody. So good to see you again. What's it been, about a month since I've been here? But I just couldn't stay away. You know, Scott, "How can we miss you when you never leave?" But I'm just really honored to be able to bring the message to you today. And I want to say hi to folks at our campuses in Saratoga, Mountain View, San Mateo, those of you joining us online, those of you in this room. I'm so really honored and glad to be here and excited for what's ahead for us in the next few minutes.

I want to also ask, you know, if you missed the sermon last week, if you didn't get a chance to hear Phil's message, I just really want to encourage you to go and have a listen to that message because in

addition to adding a new chapter to the Screwtape Letters, which is one of CS Lewis's amazing works, this was a clear and heartfelt call to consider our posture and our allegiances in the light of the gospel. And it's something we all need and it's worth your time. You can find it on our website or on YouTube. We want to be a community of healing and grace, and our conversations to be full of love in this time that we're in. Amen.

Well, I want to start with a question today, and that question is, What do you do when you're struggling with something about your faith? When you're having doubts about the Bible or the gospel story and the answers aren't coming, what do you do when you have doubt? What do you do when you have questions?

And I'll start today with a confession, which is, there are times when I have doubts and I wonder if it's all true. Now, I know pastors are supposed to be rock solid in their faith and never have any questions, but guess what? I'm a human being as well and facing all the same

things we all face in our lives. And some of those experiences have led me to question my assumptions about faith.

I remember as a young pastor, I put older pastors, seasoned pastors, and Christian leaders on a pedestal, and when their words on Sunday didn't match their behavior during the week, it left me with real questions. And I wondered, is this just for show? Does Jesus really transform us? Is my faith built on something solid?

And maybe you're here today because you have some questions and some doubts. Maybe you've been disappointed with God or those who represent God and you're ready to throw in the towel. Or maybe you've been away for a long time and someone invited you to this service and you're giving God one more chance.

Or maybe you've been around a long time, but you've got those nagging doubts that you're sitting on. You haven't really dealt with

them, and they're slowly eroding your faith. Well, whatever way you're showing up, if you have doubts, you are not alone.

And not only that, I believe that when we bring our real doubts to Jesus and our honest questions to God, it can become for us a path of deeper faith. Now, what if our doubt isn't a detour from discipleship, but it's a door to a deeper relationship with Jesus?

So, we're beginning this new series called **The Benefit of the Doubt**. And for this message, just want to say this up front, I'll be drawing a lot on a book by Craig Groeschel called *The Benefit of Doubt*. I'd encourage you to pick it up if you want to dive deeper into this topic. It's a great resource.

But I'll start with this. The reality is we all have doubts about lots of things. It's natural to try to figure out what's true and what's not. It's really helpful to think about these doubts and be a skeptic sometimes.

For example, we should probably question whether or not kale is good for us. Really, kale?

Anything that you have to massage, I question whether or not it's something that you should eat. How about that, the printer is going to work when you need it to work the most. You know, that seems to be the time for me when it runs out of ink or paper or is jammed or just won't connect. I have trust issues with my printer.

Or how about that your kids when they say they're ready to walk out the door are actually ready to walk out the door? You know, that's usually the time in my house when my kids go grab a snack or go to the bathroom or play one more game of Brawl Stars. Or the five minute oil change. Really, can you change the oil in my car in five minutes? I don't think that's true. I don't think that's possible. I'm a skeptic.

And this last one, kind of self-explanatory, but that Cal has a good football team. I mean, we can all question that. Oh, yeah. I like having Stanford students in the congregation today. And if you don't like that example, it's a peubank@menlo.church.

But doubting something we all do and skepticism can be valuable at times, and it's important given how many claims we all receive that come our way that seem or that demand to be true. You know, every year I do an IT training course so that I don't get tricked by fake emails, malicious texts, manipulative phone calls, and most recently virus-laden calendar invites.

And it's no wonder that some of that skepticism that we're dealing with leaks into other areas of our lives. We wonder if what we've been told is actually true. Can I trust that this is real?

You know, there's an entire television show based on people trying to figure out whether something is real or fake. And they get it wrong a

lot. You know, what do you think? Is it the shell or the ball or the cooler? It's the cooler. Okay, it's the cooler. If you're wondering.

These days, we crave certainty, but it seems so hard to find.

Institutions that we once took for granted have changed in profound ways. People we looked up to have failed. And assumptions that we built our lives on have been challenged. And when my understanding of faith falls short of my expectations, I'm left with lots of questions and few answers. Maybe what I thought was real is just cake.

What is it for you? And what are you a little afraid to say out loud?

Why do my prayers go unanswered? I thought God would provide for me, but I'm struggling to pay the bills. My kids loved church, but now that they're older, they don't believe in God. My spouse, who loved Jesus when we met, doesn't think any of it's true anymore. How could a good God love me and let me hurt this much?

Our hope in this series, and my hope in this message, is that we'd be able to bring our unflinching questions before God and see what he does with them. And hopefully we'll discover that our doubts are not a problem but a portal to a deeper relationship with Jesus, that our doubts can be a portal to a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Now, we're going to dig into this a little more by looking at the experience of the disciple known as the doubter. But let me pray before we get there.

Jesus, would you open our hearts and minds to what you want us to hear today? Would you use John's words in this gospel and my voice for your spirit to touch our hearts and minds? We love you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Here's the text, John 20. "Now Thomas, also known as Didymus or the twin, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We've seen the Lord.'

But Thomas said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.' And then a week later, the disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. And 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 in my side. Stop doubting and believe.' And then Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God.' And Jesus told him, 'Because you've seen me, you've believed. But blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" (John 20:24-29)

Thomas was the disciple that got left out. He missed out on the experience of seeing Jesus. Can you imagine how hard that must have been for him? I mean, everyone's talking about this amazing thing that happened, the thing he'd hoped for, and he missed it.

And you got to know Thomas really wanted this to be true. He wanted it to be true so badly, which is why he's got so much energy around this. And it would have been easy for him if he didn't to just go along with everyone else. You know, just pretend that he didn't have doubts. I mean, he liked hanging out with the other disciples. His life group was awesome. He liked the music on Sundays. The donuts were top-notch. Coffee was good. Why rock the boat? "Let them believe their fiction. I'll be fine. It's fine."

And I wonder what questions you're just living with day after day. I think this is especially challenging for those of us who've been followers of Jesus for a long time. You know, it might be fine for new Christians to have questions, but surely not me. So, we fake it. But Thomas doesn't do that.

It's interesting that we have this idea that when we express our doubts or uncertainty, we think that people are going to move away from us, that they're going to reject us. But actually, the opposite is true. We all tend to feel more connected with people that are relatable.

Let me ask you this. Do you feel more connected to a person with well-behaved kids, a perfectly clean house, who works out every day, and observes a strict vegan diet?

Or the one whose kids are having a full meltdown, they have laundry on the couch, you wonder if they ever work out, and they have an entire pantry shelf set aside for chips. These are my people. Doesn't everybody have a pantry shelf set aside for chips?

And if you have doubts, if you have questions, it's not hard to find your people in the words of scripture in the Bible. There are many examples. Here are a few. There's Sarah and Abraham. Now, they had this great promise from God. They were going to build the nation of Israel. And God, they wondered, "Okay, God, are you really going to answer that? Are you really going to honor that? We're too old. There's no way."

And then the Israelites, they're delivered from captivity, defeated the Pharaoh. And then they get to the Red Sea. "Okay, God. Well, I guess you did that, but the Red Sea, you know, we're not going to—" And then he delivers them across the Red Sea and then they're like hungry and "Oh God. Well, surely you're not going to feed us. You're going to let us starve out here."

Then there's Gideon, great warrior Gideon. He gets a word from the Lord and then he says, "Well, you know, if it's really you, then you know, would you make this fleece wet, you know, and then well, that was cool, but I'm still not sure. Do it again. Do another test."

John the Baptist, he proclaims Jesus is the one. And then later on, he's like, "Hey, you know, I thought I was sure, but I'm not quite sure. Could you just make sure I'm right?" Then there's Peter, the great disciple Peter. He walks on water. He gets the gift that Jesus gives him to walk on water and he's doing it and then he sinks. He starts to sink. He starts to doubt. And then the one who boldly proclaims Jesus in the Gospels denies him three times.

And then there's the disciples as a group. This is at the end of Matthew's gospel when he gives them this great challenge to go out and make disciples and the eleven come to this mountain. "The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

And when they saw Jesus, the risen Christ, they worshiped him; and some doubted." (Matthew 28:16-17) The disciples saw Jesus risen from the dead, and they worshiped him, and some doubted. I find it very comforting that Matthew includes this detail in his account.

But where does that leave all of us? You know, we don't have the eyewitness accounts of the disciples. And this isn't simple stuff. You know, when you stop and think about it, the gospel involves a lot of claims that require some thoughtful consideration. To receive the gospel, I need to absorb the reality that I was born with a propensity to sin that came from two people who ate the wrong piece of fruit. Then there was a man named Jesus who is also the living God. This Jesus had to die on a cross so that I have forgiveness for my sins.

And finally, Jesus came back to life and now, if invited, lives in my heart as a spiritual presence. There's a lot of room for questions here.

And if you've placed your faith in Jesus, which I hope you have, you have had to make sense of those questions in the middle of your life experience, your family story, your experience of the church, your experience with other Christians, the cultural backdrop you live in, and the assumptions that go along with it, and so on and so on.

We all receive the gospel in a context and we construct a narrative that works until it doesn't, until something shakes it. You encounter a question that you can't answer. You face a situation that seems unfair and doesn't make sense and you can't make it make sense. You experience something hurtful that you just can't resolve. This can happen in lots of ways that can be really big and disillusioning, painful: a bad diagnosis, a painful and unexpected death, a huge relational failure, family pain, betrayal, injustice. Life brings these things to us and we have to incorporate them into our understanding of the gospel.

And it's at this point, if you're up against one of those things, it's at this point that you have a decision to make. Will you be honest about your questions and your doubts? Will you invite God into them? Will you lean into your community?

Going back to our text, we see that the disciples were gathered together one week after Jesus had appeared. And it says Thomas was with them. Thomas was with them. This is really important. Thomas could have just walked away. "You guys are not making any sense. Jesus is dead. I saw him. This whole thing is done. I'm out." But he stays connected. And the disciples continued to invite him and welcome him into their lives. And he borrowed on their faith and hope in those moments.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great pastor, saw this with a group of underground pastors during World War II. He observes this: "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's word to him. He needs them again and again when he becomes uncertain and

discouraged. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother. His heart is uncertain, but his brother's sure."

You know, historically, the church has not always been the safest place to share your faith questions. It could sometimes be hard for us to sit with people who are questioning their faith. We just want them to be fixed.

Maybe their questions tap into some of our own insecurities or we get defensive and we feel the need to defend God. Maybe we just don't want to deal with the messiness of it all. But keeping people close to us gives us a chance to love them and for them to see the grace and patience of Jesus.

Our love and consistent presence might be the conduit God uses to draw someone closer. Notice the disciples, they're not trying to argue Thomas into faith. They don't berate him or make fun of him or twist his arm. They're simply bearing witness. "This is what we've seen. We

believe what we saw was real. And we love you, Thomas. And we want you to experience it, too."

It's the Lord's job to answer Thomas. And ultimately, that's true for all of us as well. We all need some kind of encounter with the risen Lord. We're all asking for a touch from Jesus. And that's exactly what Thomas gets.

Again, it's one week later and they're gathered together and then in the middle of that gathering, Jesus just appears, goes through the walls, just shows up in the middle of their group. Suddenly, he's there and he speaks directly to Thomas and he doesn't chastise him for his questions. He doesn't get mad at him. He simply invites him to get his proof.

Jesus, the God of the universe, comes to Thomas and says, "I love you, and if this is what you need, if this is what it will take for you to believe, here you go." And now the one who was left out, who missed

out, gets this very special moment. Thomas spent a week feeling jealous of the other disciples, and now they're jealous of him. And if you just can't get past something, if you're profoundly hurt, if you're disillusioned, I want you to know Jesus is not upset or afraid, he can handle it all. And if you're honest with him, he'll meet you right in the middle of it.

And here's the crazy part with Thomas. You know, once he experiences Jesus face to face, the proof he demanded is no longer needed. The text tells us he doesn't actually put his finger in the hole. He knows it's all true at that moment when he sees Jesus face to face. Jesus is who he claims to be and he's undone. And then Thomas the doubter makes one of the most profound declarations of faith found in all of scripture. He calls to Jesus and he says, "My Lord and my God."

My freshman year of college was challenging. I was getting crushed in calculus. I was getting beat up on the football field. And in the classroom, my faith was getting dismantled in my Western culture

class. We'd actually read parts of the Bible and other foundational texts that are pillars of Western civilization.

But the assumption of our teacher was that the Bible and Christianity were a pleasant fiction. You might be able to extract some helpful values from it. But smart, educated people didn't really take Jesus any more seriously than Zeus or Athena. And I'll tell you, my simple Montana faith was not up to the barrage of criticism and questioning. And I began to wonder and I began to doubt.

And I remember my head was just spinning with all these questions as I headed home for that first summer. So I called Bill. Bill is the pastor of our tiny church, First Presbyterian Church of Cut Bank, Montana. And he immediately called me a heathen and tossed me out of his office.

No, he didn't do that. He was actually gracious and kind with my questions. He listened carefully to my doubts and he shared some

scriptures and some resources. But most importantly, he encouraged me to take my questions straight to Jesus. He told me that God was not afraid of anything I could bring to him.

So I spent hours that summer walking and praying and asking God to show himself to me. And after lots of silent walks, I finally heard from God. There was nothing profound about that particular walk or that particular day, but that was the space and time that God chose to meet me.

And I felt like Jesus was right there next to me. And I sensed his presence. And I heard God as audibly as I have ever heard God speak to me. He said, "Scott, I have heard your prayers. I am the God you have known all your life. It is all true. You can trust in me." That was it. But my heart felt steady again. And I felt like the ground under my feet got solid. And I said in my own way, in the quiet of my heart, "My Lord and my God."

Now, as important as that walk and that moment was for me, it was not my last walk with Jesus. Over the years, I've continued to lay out my questions and doubts, you know, when I wondered about my call to ministry, when I struggled with a painful breakup, when Rachel and I wrestled with a risky pregnancy, when Rachel, my wife, was diagnosed with cancer, when my father died, and on it goes. "God, do you hear my prayers? Do you really care about me? Where are you when I need you?"

And each time, each time I brought those to the Lord and I wrestled and I prayed, God showed himself to me in a new way and my faith grew a little more and a little deeper.

You know, faith is not a destination. It's a journey of deepening trust.
Faith is not a destination. It's a journey of deepening trust.

Sometimes I think about Peter and that invitation to walk on water.
Can you imagine how much faith did it take to trust Jesus like that?

To step out of that boat. "And yet when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14:30-31)

Now, sometimes we can hear this as an accusation. You know, Jesus is saying, "Why did you doubt? I'm so disappointed in you, Peter. You should just be better." But what if instead of an accusation, we heard it as an invitation? An invitation from Jesus where he grabs the hand of Peter, catches him, pulls him up and looks into his eyes and says, "Ah, Peter, you had this. You were walking on water. Did you see what you could accomplish when you trusted? Let's go back to the boat and you could tell me what got into your head."

What if in your doubts and concerns, you knew Jesus would grab your hand and catch you and bring you close to him? That he would help you work through your questions and rebuild your trust. What if?

Now, in the next couple weeks, we're going to be talking about how to wrestle with those questions and come out on the other side and how we rebuild. And you're not going to want to miss it.

But if you came today, if you came to this message with big questions and real doubts, I just want you to know it's okay. You're welcome here. You're not alone. If you came here with a skeptical heart, wondering if any of it can be true, it's okay. You're welcome here.

If you came to this message today with pain and hurt in your heart and are struggling to see God in any of it, it's okay. You're not alone. You're welcome here because you are not a problem to be fixed. You are a person to be loved. God is not distant in your doubts. God is not distant in your doubts.

And so I want to give you a little challenge this week to be honest before God, to maybe take 10 minutes of prayer, however you want to

do it. Maybe you need to write something out. Maybe you need to rehearse it a little bit.

But take some time with God and offer up something you've been too scared to say out loud. Let him in on your questions and doubts, but be honest. You don't have to sugarcoat it. And then for extra credit, maybe share it with a trusted friend. And for double extra credit, maybe share it with a life group and see what happens.

Maybe you'll tap into other people. You'll create a safe place where other people can share what they need to share. So let's do that this week and see what God does.

You know, sometimes the church is referred to as the body of Christ. You might have heard that. Now Thomas asked to see the body of Jesus, but we have that available to us every week. And in worship, our doubting selves, we bring our doubting selves in and we're given an invitation to experience God's presence, to reach out our finger

and touch his wounds, to experience the power of resurrection every week.

And I hope that we have the courage to bring our real selves into that space, into whatever space you're in. That we trust that Jesus will not only meet us in our doubts, but he'll use them to bring us closer to him.

Let's pray together. Jesus, we thank you for your promise to us today. Thank you that we can bring our doubts before you. You know us. You know everything that we are thinking before we even think it. And we want to admit right now, I want to admit right now that I struggle sometimes.

I wonder what you're doing or where you are. I wonder why there's so much pain in the world. And why I can't seem to shake a destructive habit or why you seem so silent sometimes. God, would you give us the courage to open our hearts to you? Really open them. And I pray

for those that are just hanging on right now that need a touch from you. God, you would show yourself to them in a profound way.

God, be with us in our doubts and our questions. Reach out your hand and catch us. Walk with us and show us the way forward. Lord, we need you. We love you. And it's in your name we pray. Amen.