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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Second Sunday of Easter, April 3, 2016
 Text: John 20:19-31

St. Thomas

The other disciples told him they had seen the risen Lord, meaning their friend and teacher Jesus who had been executed. Mary Magdalene had also said the same thing, “I have seen the Lord.” But to Thomas, this was a crazy tale. A man crucified on a Roman cross, laid in a stone sepulcher, deader than a doornail, now alive, popping about like a gardener outside his own tomb and appearing inside a locked room—really, it was too much to swallow. It was wishful thinking. How could it possibly be true?

“Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in those very spots, and stick my hand in his side, I won’t believe it.”

With those words Thomas forever sealed his reputation throughout history. He’s known as Doubting Thomas because he wanted some proof, some assurance. He questioned what others told him. He just couldn’t summon up belief out of thin air. Doubting Thomas is the nickname he’s borne ever since.

But he already had a nickname. His nickname was “The Twin.” That’s what Thomas means in Aramaic. John tells us so by giving us its Greek equivalent, *Didymus*. There is never any mention of who his twin might have been, but I wonder. I wonder if his twin might be any one of us who has ever harbored a doubt about God. I wonder if his twin might be any one of us who has ever asked:

- Does God really exist?
- And that old chestnut worn shiny by turning it over and over: If God does exist, what about awful, unfair tragedies that befall the innocent?
- And more personally, does God actually care about me--my failing health, my screwed up finances, my messy relationships?

These are questions we all ask from time to time.

When I was about 13, I remember lying in bed one night and having an unsettling thought. What if, I thought, the Bible were a hoax. What if some people just made up a bunch of stories and wrote them down, saying they were true and passing them off as the Word of God. That’s the earliest religious doubt I recall.

My latest was last week when Glenn mentioned the hypothesis of Planet Nine. That’s a planet thought to exist at the outer edge of our solar system, some 65 billion miles from our sun. I know that our solar system is located toward the edge of our galaxy, the Milky Way. And that our galaxy is but one of the estimated 1 billion galaxies in the universe. So, the doubt flickered across my mind, what possible meaning can our lives have, for in the scheme of things we are

tinier than the antenna of a flea on an elephant under a very, very big tent.

We all have doubts.

Thomas had them, yes. And yet, did you notice that despite his doubts he was still hanging out with the Twelve. He was still a part of the community of Jesus' disciples.

A woman said to me once, "I love the fact that we all recite the Apostles Creed together in church. I love it because some days I can't honestly say that I believe it all. But there are others all around me who do believe it, or who do believe it that day, who are saying the words that I just can't muster. On other days, when my faith is strong, I know I am saying the words for someone else who just can't say them that day."

As a community of faith, we can carry one another through our times of doubt. We can take turns being strong, like geese take turns leading a Vee formation. When one leader tires and no longer has the strength to face the headwind alone, it drops back and another goose takes its place.

So Thomas in spite of his doubts was still keeping company with the others who professed their faith in Jesus' resurrection. It was a week later, John tells us. They were again inside. Though the doors were closed the risen Jesus appeared among them. As before, he greeted his disciples with words of peace.

Then, turning his attention to Thomas, Jesus spoke to him. Jesus' words to Thomas have been read as a reprimand. But I think Jesus spoke to Thomas kindly. He had, after all, just said, "Peace be with you." I think he spoke compassionately, offering Thomas the experience he needed. "Put your finger here—look, here are my hands. Take your hand and poke it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

The next thing we know Thomas is exclaiming his faith. "My Lord and my God!" he professes. Apparently he doesn't ever even touch Jesus' wounds. In his case, seeing is believing. That is enough.

Jesus then responds, also in a kind, not condemning, voice, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That beatitude, that blessing, is for Thomas's twins. It's for us. It's for all who are generations removed from eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus, who have never literally seen Jesus but who nevertheless believe, however haltingly, however unevenly.

Belief in Jesus is ultimately not about intellectual assent. It's not about accepting doctrines. It's about seeing with the heart which is another way of saying it's about trust and commitment.

I'm sure you've heard the story about the man who slipped off the edge of a cliff and was desperately hanging by a rope. "Help!" he yelled. "Is anybody up there who can help me?"

A calm, reassuring voice responded, "I am here. I am the Lord. Let go the rope."

The man thought about it a moment. He looked down. Then he yelled even louder, "Is anybody else up there?"

But seriously, when you are hanging by a rope, when your life has slipped over an edge,

it's not a matter of intellectual assent. It's not a matter of the orthodoxy of your doctrine. It's a matter of trust. It's a matter of your willingness to let go the rope. It's a matter of surrendering yourself to One whom you cannot literally see, cannot absolutely prove, cannot physically touch.

It's a matter of seeing with your heart that there are hands stronger than your own holding you. It's a matter of perceiving that you are loved by God and trusting that love to carry you through. It's a matter of faith.

I think about this often when I am trying to fall asleep. I toss and turn. I worry and fret. I think up unanswerable questions. I replay scenes that cannot be undone. I hang onto every ounce of consciousness as though I am in control of my life and of my world, when all I really want to do and all I really need to do is to let go and go to sleep.

I sometimes wonder if it's the same at the end of life. We fight and cling. We hold on with every ounce of will we have, afraid to let go, afraid to relax into God's good hands.

Having faith is like falling asleep and like dying. It's entrusting ourselves to something, to Someone beyond ourselves.

For some people that trust comes easier than for others.

For Thomas's twins, trust comes only after some doubt, or maybe, through some doubt.

The great theologian Paul Tillich once said, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith. It is an element of faith." So doubt is not something to fear or condemn. The witty 19th century journalist Ambrose Bierce quipped, "Who never doubted never half believed. Where doubt, there truth is—tis her shadow."

After all, Thomas's faith grew out of the soil of his doubt. Only after he had the chance to voice his skepticism did he come to believe. Only after he questioned the claims of his friends did he encounter the risen Jesus in a way that changed his life.

Because we are dealing with God, who by definition is infinite and beyond us, we will always have questions:

- In what way, we may wonder, are miracles possible?
- How can we possibly understand the Trinity—God as one yet God as three?
- Could there really be life after death?

We will always have questions. And we may never have satisfactory answers, at least on this side of the grave. But at some point we must make some commitments. As they say, at some point you must throw your hook into the water rather than sit on the dock cut bait. At some point you must take the gamble, must make a decision. We have to do it with all of life's big questions at some point:

- Will you marry this one?
- Will you put your reputation on the line for that issue?
- Will you sacrifice something dear for this cause?

And, most importantly, Will you trust Jesus?

It's a leap of faith. It's a bet on the wild improbability of a dead man alive. It's

banking on love beating out hate, on good triumphing over evil, on peace winning over violence.

Faith takes seeing with the eyes of the heart. However, it's not as though we don't get glimpses all the time. Our heart skips a beat when we see a sky full of twinkling stars like so many diamonds flung across a black velvet cloth. Or when we behold someone we love asleep. Or when we do a double take when we see a bearded stranger panhandling on the corner. Or, perhaps, when we are startled into considering the beauty of this place and what our being here represents.

Two particularly visible signs happen when we are gathered here in this beautiful place. When a minister draws a watery cross on the forehead of a child and declares the Holy Spirit has descended upon that child and claimed her forever, it's a glimpse. And when we gather at this Table to eat the broken bread and drink the poured wine, it's a glimpse. In the wet cross and in the body and blood—symbols of Jesus' wounds—when we are gathered together as his disciples on the first day of the week, we see signs of his presence when we look with the eyes of our hearts..

A third century source says that Thomas preached the good news of the resurrection beyond the Roman Empire all the way to India. There are Christians in India this day who trace their faith for generations back to Thomas. He is sometimes regarded as the patron saint of India, and if Presbyterians had patron saints he would be mine: Saint Thomas, who was honest enough to doubt and courageous enough to believe. Amen