

## April 19 message

We've all heard sermons on "Doubting Thomas." Often they speak of how it's okay to question one's faith and have doubts as long as the questions and doubts get resolved. Others will speak of how Thomas has gotten a bad rap over the years for his doubt. They might mention how Peter denied Christ three times on the night of betrayal and yet he is not referred to "Denying Peter." Still others will tell other things about Thomas including his faithfulness to his death. Today let's put ourselves in Thomas' place and think about what we might have said and done. A good way for us to do this is to consider our upbringing and how we may or may not have ever questioned what we were taught.

This week I read an article by Chuck Lawless, a pastor and a religion professor on "Why Some People have left the Faith." He commented on several reasons why this might happen. I have chosen two for us to have a quick look at.

The first reason he feels some people have left the faith is "their faith was never really theirs." He comments on how some are obedient children and did what others expected, including accepting the beliefs of parents and grandparents never really questioning anything. Then something happens, usually some kind of tragedy and there is no follow through.

This can hit close to home. Like many of you, I grew up with a Christian upbringing attending Sunday school and worship, youth group, getting confirmed, serving on councils and committees just like my parents. Maybe we can look at the lives of our parents and see how while there are similarities our paths different. People who make faith their own have had to figure some things out on their own. While the support system was always there, they had their own faith journeys. They see faith as constantly growing rather than only a set of beliefs. That could be where the problem lies with why some have lost the faith. Many feel that faith is something you achieve a certain level in and then cruise along in life. I hear this once in a while when someone tells me how they believe in God, yet this belief is not really evident in their words and actions.

In 2002 the United Church of Christ began a new campaign. You may remember it. Maybe this church learned about it. It simply said, "God is still speaking, never put a period where God has put a comma. The idea was to help members recognize how God is still at work in their lives and the world.

Another area Lawless cited as a reason people have left the faith is 'Questions and doubts were never properly addressed.' He spoke of how some have had their doubts about their faith met with anger and negativity. Sometimes parents, grandparents, and those in positions of leadership in the church see questioning as a personal attack and get defensive. He tells how just about everyone has had times where they may have drifted away from the word of God. He tells how one needs to be honest and relate these times to others, especially kids and grandkids when the opportunity presents itself. Open communication is needed and will in the long run be productive.

Fortunately I don't see a lot of the former. Most are quick to realize there are no easy answers to many of life's questions. Many know that people need time and understanding to sort through questions of faith. Being good listeners often one of the best qualities we can have.

On that note let us look at how Jesus responded to Thomas' doubt. He was not angry. Instead He grants Thomas what he asked for. This is the moment Thomas becomes fully committed to Christ.

In many ways we are fortunate that we have this story of Thomas. He has given us permission to question. This scripture shows us that our Lord is not put off by such doubts. Rather He reaches out to us with understanding. Each time He appears He blesses them with the phrase, "Peace be with You." This type of peace is much, much more than the absence of conflict. It is a peace that knows God is in control and that no matter what happens God is with us. Those who have this peace put their affairs in God's hands. They go about their business in this world looking to the Lord for direction and guidance no matter what life throws at them. I have witnessed this many times in many faithful people over the years. It is in the words of Philippians 4:7 "a peace that passes all understanding."

This is a peace that many don't have. Fortunately, our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter gives us direction on how to live. Verse 17 speaks of how we are like foreigners living in a strange land. We probably have never thought of ourselves as that. Far too often we fit right in with everyone else. Yet we all know how the life of a Christian should be different. Sometimes in our faith journeys we are reminded of Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God." Many will also acknowledge they are on a journey and that the earth is not their home.

I'm a big fan of western movies. Usually a western has lone hero who stands up for what is right. Even though they may face tremendous odds the person in the right prevails; usually. One of my favorite quotes at the end of such a situation is the ending from the movie *Broken Trail* in which the late Robert Deval's character looks back at life and comments, "We're all travelers in this world, from the sweet grass to the packing house, Birth 'til death. We travel between the eternities." Now I know most westerns are filled with violence and death and here your pastor is quoting from one filled with such. But even though this quote has nothing to do with Christian living it does acknowledge how this life is temporary.

This week I read a daily devotion on the very same verse. It spoke of how most Christians feel right at home in this world and how it's difficult to view ourselves as foreigners. I would have to agree. So as I look at this passage and what Peter is trying to say about being holy some things come to mind. I remember last year's Bible school when we learned about Daniel and how he kept praying in public even though it was forbidden and he could have lost his life. I remember the implications for us and how we need to follow what God rather than man. So let's look at a few today:

We may hear, "Assert yourself," in the competitive world we live in, yet we are taught, "Deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me."

We may hear, "Climb high, the ladder of success waits for no one. Yet we are taught, "The greatest is the one who serves."

In some ways, being a disciple of Jesus can be like foreigners living in a strange land filled with customs we're not used to. Think of how we drive on the right side of the road. But if you go to England, Australia, India, or Japan you'll soon find out they drive on the wrong side of road. Then of course there is the language barrier. We may think we understand what we are trying to communicate but that is not always the case. Once there was a traveler in rural France wanted "just a trim" but didn't know the French word for it. So he made a cutting motion with his fingers and said what he thought meant trim. The barber, smiling, nodded—and gave them a very short buzz cut. He spent the rest of the trip wearing hats and telling people about his cultural experience.

When we look at our own culture we also see how following the teachings of Jesus can be like being strangers in a strange land at times. Think of these two examples: Choosing to forgive someone when getting even is what most others do. Choosing to give and share rather than trying to get more.

Peter reminds us that we are redeemed with the blood of Christ, not with silver or gold. The key then as visitors living in a strange land is to remember who our guide is, none other than the Lord Himself.

Because of this our language is not the same as some of those around us and what is common in our society. We remember and follow the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment and James 3: 10 "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

We also follow what Jesus taught: Forgiveness, service, care and empathy for others. We keep learning and worshipping with others for guidance and fellowship.

And we keep our Christian identity at hand so we don't lose sight of who we are. We strive to remember where we're from and where we are going so that we don't get lost in the culture around us.

Finally, we stand out; we don't worry about not fitting in. Rather, we embrace it, because we try to do our best to follow what the Lord teaches. Amen.

