

Easter 3 Sermon
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More and more it seems like we're forced to be certain of everything. If you change your mind about something you're a flip-flopper. If you can see both sides to an issue you just can't make up your mind or you're afraid to offend anyone. If you're willing to listen to someone else's opinion it's because you haven't put in enough effort to come up with your own. The internet especially is full of people looking for a fight, so you better not have any doubts as to anything important in your life. And this is especially true when it comes to our faith. If you're a Christian, you better be 100% sure that you're a Christian. Because you're going to encounter people that think that you're ridiculous for even entertaining the idea that there is a God, let alone that God cares about you at all. You're going to come across other Christians who believe if you're not sure about every little detail that you're not a faithful person at all. And you're going to come to know people who wonder why, if you're not certain, you bother putting any effort into your faith at all.

This is the message that we tend to get bombarded with these days, but it's a terrible message. And it's a message that doesn't hold up in scripture. In the Acts reading today, Peter and the other apostles are traveling the country following Jesus' commands—teaching, preaching, healing, and baptizing people in the name of God. Peter had just healed a man who was begging outside the temple because he could not walk. And when the man was miraculously healed, he began running around and praising God, telling others he had just been healed in the name of Jesus Christ. The people were amazed. This man had been begging for quite some time outside of the temple, and they had known of his crippling disability. So to see this man running and jumping and in good health must have been astonishing. It must have seemed impossible. And it is true that scriptures tell us that many came to believe in Christ because of this healing. However, not everyone in the crowd was willing to accept that what had seemed to be impossible was possible through Christ. The temple leaders at the time, especially, refused to believe in Christ and his teachings, in spite of all evidence, and instead tried to quash the Gospel, and they arrested the apostles.

Now the temple authorities are obviously the bad guys in the stories. They have a lot of power and influence and they don't want to lose it, so it may not be surprising that they would refuse to believe in Jesus in spite of all of the miracles being done in his name—in spite of the testimony of so many people teaching of who Christ was and all that he had done. They don't WANT to believe. They're better off if THEY get to be the big shots in town, so they'd rather be willfully ignorant. And yet it is not only those who would lose from accepting Christ as the messiah who have their doubts about him.

The Gospel reading tells us the account of the first time Christ appeared to the apostles in his resurrected form. After Jesus was killed, the apostles were terrified that they were next, and so they were trying to lay low. Instead of being out in the world teaching, preaching, healing, and baptizing, they were hiding. And as we spoke of on Easter, in spite of the fact that they found an empty tomb and Mary and the other women told them of her sighting of the risen Christ, and in spite of the fact that Christ himself told the apostles that he would be raised to new life on the last day, the apostles still had their doubts. We are told, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." In the reading today, two of Jesus's disciples had just met up with the risen Christ on the road and so they went to tell the apostles. As they recount their experience, Christ suddenly appears and says "Peace be with you." Yet even though Christ has appeared to them, and even though he shows them his hands and his feet which had been pierced by the nails of his crucifixion, the apostles still have their doubts. We are told that, "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." It's not until Christ speaks with them more and opens their minds to understand the scriptures that the apostles finally believe, and actually start going out into the world to do what Christ called them to do from the beginning.

From the very beginning the story of Christianity is a story of doubt. Though Christ taught his followers that he would be resurrected, the women didn't believe him until they found the empty tomb. The two disciples on the road did not believe until they encountered Christ themselves. Even after all that, and even after Christ appeared to them, the apostles didn't believe until Christ opened their minds to the scriptures. Still others did not believe until they encountered one of the apostles' healing miracles, and some refused to believe in spite of everything. In a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, we pray that we can sow faith where there is doubt. However, as we can see from the story of Christ's followers, you can have faith while still having doubts.

Though society seems to be pushing more and more for us to be sure about everything this kind of mentality is not only terribly unhelpful, it's also disingenuous. Because having doubts is natural. If you're 100% certain about everything, chances are you're either delusional or just plain wrong about a lot of things. One of the few things we can be certain of is that we just can't be certain about everything, even something as important and fundamental as our faith. But we can have doubts and still go to church. We can have doubts and still be followers of Christ. We can have doubts and yet we are still children of God. Because it is not our doubts that define us, but our identity as a people saved. Regardless of our certainties and doubts, the truth remains the truth. God has created us from the dust in his own image and has redeemed us from sin and death by the cross of his Son Jesus Christ. Through the water of baptism God clothed us with the shining garment of his righteousness, and established us among his children in his kingdom. And Christ continues to make himself known to us in the breaking of the bread. May he open the eyes of our faith, that all may behold him in his redeeming work. Amen.