

## "God's Mercy to the Unbelieving Disciples"

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Second Sunday of Easter

Text: John 20:19-31

**DATE: April 11, 2010**

IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

"Doubting Thomas" he is often called. The disciple who did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. When he was told by the other disciples about Jesus' resurrection he said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." (John 20:25) Thomas is not simply 'doubting'... Scripture says he's completely unbelieving!

The difference is huge. Every believer has doubts. You can believe in Jesus but have nagging doubts that sort of buzz around your heart and mind like pesky mosquitoes. As long as we are in this fallen world we will have doubts. Fact is – you can only have doubts about something if you actually believe it.

Doubt is not unbelief. Thomas wasn't a doubter - Thomas was an unbeliever. He did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead in the flesh. Listen to his words, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." If I'm going to believe that the same Jesus who was crucified is now alive in the flesh – I will need to see and touch for myself. Unless this happens "I will not believe it."

Thomas is not dealing with doubts – he clearly doesn't believe. He was with Jesus at least three different times when Jesus told his disciples that he would rise from the dead... Matthew 16:21, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Matthew 17:22-23, "When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief." And Matthew 20:17-19, "Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!""

Thomas and the other disciples had clearly heard Jesus himself say on numerous occasions that he would suffer, die and rise from the dead. When the other disciples told Thomas that Jesus had kept his promise, Thomas refused to believe it.

But wait a minute – let's not beat up Thomas - he wasn't the only disciple who didn't believe. Remember Easter Gospel lesson from Luke? The women go to the tomb, find it empty, are told by the angels that Jesus is risen. They return to the 11 disciples to tell them the news... "When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. *But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*" Luke 24:9-11

Let me repeat that – "They did not believe the women." The disciples are not champions of faith at this point. They are all unbelievers.

Speaking about Jesus few verses later some of the disciples say... "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." (Luke 24:19-21) The implication is very strong – "We no longer believe he is the redeemer – the Christ – the Messiah – because he is dead. That was our hope – but not any more." That's not faith – that's unbelief.

Here's the good news... the unbelief of his closest disciples does not stop Jesus. He might have said, "How am I going to use you guys to spread the word about my resurrection if you didn't even believe it until you saw me alive?" "After all I've done for you guys – all I taught you and all the miracles I showed you... I'm going to find some better disciples." The good news is that the unbelief of his closest disciples does not stop Jesus. It does not stop him from loving them. It does not stop him from coming to them. It does not stop him from calling them, giving them faith, and equipping them to carry out his mission. He is the good shepherd – his sheep are lost – confused – scattered – and unbelieving. And so he comes to them so they might believe. He does whatever is necessary to bring them to faith. This should bring us great comfort.

Listen – this is pure grace – (John 20:19-23) "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." The disciples did not believe – so Jesus came and stood among them. He gave them his peace – restored their faith – sent them - and gave them His Holy Spirit. He told them to go and share the forgiveness he had won through the cross. He even gave them authority to forgive and withhold

forgiveness. Why? Because forgiveness conquers sin and unbelief. God's forgiveness works faith and hope in human hearts.

This amazing calling and commission is given by Jesus to disciples who didn't believe the same message they would be called to proclaim. They were completely unworthy – but Jesus' love and forgiveness took care of all that. They were completely unbelieving – but Jesus' presence took care of all that. They were completely fearful and weak – but Jesus' Holy Spirit took care of all that. They didn't know what to do – but Jesus' Word took care of all that.

It was all about that death on the cross to pay for the sins of the world. They were called to share it with unworthy sinners like themselves. They were called to share the Good news of Jesus with unbelievers like they had once been.

But let's get back to Thomas... "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. 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 into my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:26-31) Jesus' powerful word speaks faith into Thomas' heart. We are told that these words are written in order to speak faith into our hearts. God has blessed us to believe without first seeing. This is just as much a gift as Jesus visibly appearing to Thomas. We are no more worthy of God's mercy than his first disciples. But we are called by Jesus – we are sent by Jesus – we are given God's Holy Spirit and we are told to share the hope we have with others.

We might worry about how we are going to tell people about Jesus because we've never seen him. But think about how Jesus' first disciples had to call people to believe the same message they didn't believe until they saw Jesus. Jesus assures us today that that doesn't matter. His word, his presence, his forgiveness, his Spirit will take care of everything – we just have to share the message.

Perhaps you know someone who doesn't believe. In light of the unbelief of the first disciples – I pray we can see those who don't believe in a totally different light. Let's see them as those who don't believe YET. It is Jesus' words that will call them and bring them to faith. Jesus and his word – his forgiveness and love CAN CHANGE THEIR HEARTS AND GIVE THEM FAITH.

Perhaps you don't believe. Take heart – neither did Jesus' first disciples – but God still loved them and called them and eventually brought them to faith. Consider Jesus' death on the cross to pay for your sins. Look at God's love and mercy to his unbelieving disciples. Listen to his call to you, "Do not disbelieve, but believe."