

THANK YOU, MARTIN LUTHER—CELEBRATING OUR GREAT CONFESSIONS
“Confessing Christ in a Skeptical Culture”

John 20:24-29

Associate Pastor Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri
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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/celebrating-our-great-confessions-confessing-christ-in-a-skeptical-culture/>

In an age of great doubt and disillusionment, we believe in Jesus.

Two weeks ago, we began a new series called, “Thank you, Martin Luther!” Hannah Coe, our pastor of children and families, did a great job introducing us to the German professor and monk, Martin Luther, who 500 years ago this October 31, posted the first ever post-it note on the Wittenberg door, a note urging reforms to the practice of issuing indulgences and recognizing limits on the pope’s authority. Luther’s famous posting of his 95 theses is often credited with launching the Protestant Reformation, the 16th century religious, political, intellectual and cultural upheaval that splintered Catholic Europe. But it really was a spark that fell on the dried, parched ground of displeasure and discontent with the larger church and religion. The Church was corrupt and society was fed up with all the greed and abuse of power among church leadership which spilled over into every aspect of their lives. The disruption sparked by Luther and other leaders triggered wars, persecutions, and a Counter-Reformation. It was a devastating 130+ year journey which resulted in significant and needed religious and political changes throughout Europe. Luther’s posting was one moment among many that shaped the Reformation and revolutionized how Christians interact with the Bible and with God.

Let me be the first to admit that I had no clue that 2017 was the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. And I am a former history teacher and a Protestant Pastor. I hadn’t marked my calendar and the kind folks at Apple had not listed it on this year’s holidays. I’ve seen no card line at Hallmark or Martin Luther party hats or pin the paper on the Wittenberg Door at Party City. I’m just sharing this so that you know it is safe for you to admit this morning that, you, too, forgot yet another anniversary. There is enough grace for each of us. It was our Ukrainian friends that clued me in to the anniversary. It is a big deal over there and, when I was there in June, plans were well-developed and promotions had begun for the festivities. I didn’t see any “Pin the 95 theses on the door” games but I dropped the hint that that would probably go over well.

The point of our sermon series is not really the history lesson or Martin Luther but rather the reminder to us of the power that comes from confessing what we believe to be truth in a world desperate for, yet leery of, truth. Our culture is not so different today. There is a lot of displeasure and discontent in our culture for the church – some of it for good reason. And there is a lot of skepticism in our world. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing.

It was skepticism that led to Martin Luther's push for reform. Let's define skepticism because in the words of the great Inigo Montayo from *The Princess Bride*, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." Most of us treat the idea of skepticism with disdain or judgement, like it is a weakness or some character flaw. "You're such a skeptic." By definition, it simply means, "*the attitude of doubting knowledge claims set forth in various areas.*"

So, when you see an infomercial late at night where the spokeswoman, who appears to have had three espressos with extra shots of espresso, claims that this little hand weight that shakes while you hold it will help you drop 30 pounds in 3 days – when you see this infomercial and your brain says, "wait I am doubting that knowledge claim," is this a bad thing? No, it isn't. You just saved yourself three easy payments of \$29.99 and a whole bunch of disappointment.

Or if your teenage daughter comes home and says to you, "I have a new boyfriend and he is the one." And then you meet him. It is true ... he is her boyfriend. That is fact. That knowledge claim checks out for now. But the second part ... about him being the one? You are seriously doubting that knowledge claim.

So, being a skeptic isn't necessarily a bad thing or a weakness or a lack of intelligence. A skeptic is not the same as an atheist, humanist, scientist or an attacker of Christianity. It can be quite the opposite, in fact.

I understand this. My Myers Briggs personality type is INFJ. We could do a whole sermon series on this but basically one of the descriptors of this personality type is the phrase, "There's something rotten in Denmark". I'm naturally a skeptic. My instinct is to say, "Hold up. That's really interesting but I'd like to know more about why." It isn't because I don't want to believe or don't believe. It's because I don't take belief lightly. I place a high value on trust and truth so I'm very protective of giving it and receiving it.

This is why I feel for Thomas in our scripture passage today. Poor, doubting Thomas.

Have you ever been given a nickname that you hated? A nickname that didn't really reflect who you are? A nickname that started because of one, little mistake or one, little moment in your otherwise long life? Thomas – forever known as Doubting Thomas. In fact, the expression,

“don’t be such a doubting Thomas” has become popular even in secular culture where people don’t even know who Thomas is.

Thomas was inquisitive. Thomas was a thinker. Thomas was a skeptic. It’s not so much that he doubted the resurrection but that he needed a personal encounter with Jesus to make the resurrection real to him. So, it might be helpful to think of him as the pragmatic Thomas or the inquisitive Thomas rather than doubter because of all the biases we have toward that word.

A few chapters earlier in John 14, we see Thomas’s thinking nature in action. Jesus is talking about going ahead and preparing a place for them in his Father’s House, and it is Thomas that asks, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” In that question, you can hear Thomas isn’t doubting that Jesus is going to do what he says he is going to do. He is thinking through how it will happen, not if it will happen. Thomas is just a skeptic who needs to know more to fully believe.

I’m saying all this because I want us to give Thomas a second chance this morning. Who wouldn’t love a second chance? I want us to be a little more understanding and little less judgment about Thomas the Twin; Thomas the Apostle; Thomas a leading church planter in India; Thomas who was bold enough to ask questions because he cared enough to ask. I want us to reframe how we think of Thomas so that perhaps we will extend more grace to those in our world who are skeptics and more grace to ourselves when we find ourselves questioning.

You see, if you are afraid of rollercoasters, you don’t really want anyone riding rollercoasters. You can’t help yourself. It is not enough for you to be on the ground. You need everyone to be on the ground, too, for you to feel like we’re all safe. We project our fears. So, the more we fear our own doubts, the more uncomfortable we are with our own questions about God and matters of faith; the more likely we are to not allow others to doubt or express questions. If we feel like it is a weakness in us, we most certainly will have little grace for it in others. And our world desperately needs safe places to express doubts.

So, let’s go back to the setting of today’s passage and just slow down a bit and give Thomas a chance to clarify some things. Some of us are very familiar with this story; and the more we hear something, the less we tend to hear.

Our Gospel passage today picks up right after Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb, seen the stone rolled away, told the disciples, went back to the tomb and ran into a gardener...who turned out to be Jesus. She then went and told the disciples what Jesus had told her. The disciples had essentially been hiding out behind locked doors...they didn’t know what to think

about the fact that the stone had been rolled away and that Jesus's body was gone. And so, they hid and they waited ... waited for things to die down; waited because they were still in shock and disbelief about everything that had just happened in the past few days.

And then Jesus showed up.

Jesus suddenly just appeared in the room to the disciples. Well, all the disciples except for Thomas. We don't know where Thomas was. Maybe he was sent out for pizza. Maybe he was the only one not afraid and so he was out sharing all that Jesus had taught him. We don't usually think that because Thomas has been forever etched in our mind as the weak disciple because of his questions. Scripture doesn't say where Thomas was; it simply says, he wasn't there.

Can you picture the scene when he arrives back at the hiding spot with 8 large, single-topping pizzas?

Thomas walks in...and everyone just kind of looks at one another:

"Tell him."

"No, YOU tell him."

"Just tell him what we just saw."

"Okay, so....Thomas...you might want to sit down ..."

And then Thomas says the line that forever has him labeled as the one who doubted...he says to the other disciples: "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Thomas is skeptical. He knows these disciples, these brothers well. They've lived together through all kinds of miracles and trials the past three years with Jesus. By now, you would think he would be able to call their bluff, know their tells. But this is too important. Thomas wants to see for himself what they have claimed to see. Thomas just did what ANY of us would, didn't he? He wanted to be able to see Jesus with his own eyes...he wanted his eyes opened, as the eyes of the disciples had been to the Risen Christ. How many of us have said while still believing in Jesus – "if I could just see him?" We are able to hold both belief and hesitation in the same breath.

But Thomas had to wait for a whole week. We skip over it fast in the passage but I wonder what that week was like for them, for Thomas. Scripture tells us the disciples were energized, emboldened by their encounter with Jesus. Scripture tells us that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into them when he visited them.

But not Thomas. For one week, he was the guy who didn't get the inside joke. The guy who missed the once in a lifetime, unbelievable touchdown pass because he was in the kitchen getting some nachos. While others had seen, and encountered Jesus, Thomas had not. He was waiting and wondering if he would ever see Jesus, too. There had to be so many doubts that ran through his mind during the week. So many emotions. How did the other disciples deal with it? I'm mean, if you had just seen Jesus alive, risen from the dead, I would imagine you would be talking about it non-stop. Did they quiet down when Thomas was in the room out of sensitivity? Did they tell him about it non-stop? Did he storm out of the room or get upset every time he was reminded that Jesus had appeared to them but not him? Scripture doesn't tell us. It is just a single space between two sentences. Two things we can take away: Even though the disciples were certain of their experience with Jesus, they did not abandon Thomas while he waited. They were still with him a week later when the most important thing we can take away happened – Jesus showed up again and Thomas was there.

Although the doors were shut and locked, Jesus appeared and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you" and he focused his attention on Thomas.

Finally, after waiting for a whole week.... after sitting alone with his doubt, with his questions...wondering why Jesus would show himself to the other disciples, but not to him...Jesus arrived. And He brought peace. And let Thomas have the same experience that the other disciples had a week earlier.

He offers Thomas exactly what Thomas needed to believe. He invites him to touch his hands and his side but scripture doesn't say if Thomas followed through. Some scholars say he did, others that he didn't need to. When he saw his Master, when he heard his voice, Thomas knew and believed. Jesus said to Thomas, "Don't be unbelieving. But rather, believe, have faith.... you will believe because you've gotten the chance to see me...but there will be others who will believe without seeing..."

Others like you and me. We haven't had that first-hand experience of having Jesus just show up in a room. We haven't seen Jesus's hands and side. And yet...here we are. Many of us devoted followers of Jesus. Many of us who still encounter moments of doubts.

And while we have those doubts...we wait. We wait like Thomas waited that week for Jesus to show up. We wait with our doubts, with our questions...and it may be a day, or a week, or years...but at some point, Jesus shows up in the locked spaces where we are hiding...and says, "Peace be with you."

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to have Jesus just appear? What you would think or feel? This happened to me. Several years ago, nearly 20 or so years ago, before I was the youth pastor, I was a volunteer youth worker here. I was meeting with my high school small group of girls in the parlor for Bible study. While we were meeting in there, the choir and orchestra were in here rehearsing for the Easter cantata. Part of the cantata was some drama/acting out scenes from the Bible and the youth pastor before me was playing the part of Jesus. The night of our Bible study was a dress rehearsal. So, I'm sitting in the parlor with five high school girls with the door closed. (It wasn't locked. This story isn't that awesome). The door opens and in walks Jesus. (Ok, the youth pastor dressed up like Jesus but it was a very convincing costume). When Jesus walked in, my unguarded, immediate reaction was a mixture of great love and great shame. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I was so conflicted – wanting to run to him and run from him at the same time. While the high school girls were laughing, and pulling at his fake beard, I was barely keeping it together. If you had had me guess what my reaction would be when I encountered the Risen Christ, I would not have imagined the latter of the two emotions, the shame emotion. It caught me off guard enough that I had to deal with it; I had to figure out why I felt shame in the presence of what I knew to be a very loving Christ.

You see, at different times in my life, I've experience doubt and I will continue to. I've been skeptical of the claims of Christianity. Sometimes I've questioned whether Biblical accounts were true. But the one knowledge claim that I have struggled to believe the most is this: I am deeply loved by God and there is nothing I can do to earn it or deserve it. This nagging doubt was what caused the shame reaction when Jesus came through my door – that here I was in the presence of Jesus, who I know loves me deeply, yet I feel like I am so unworthy of that love. Surely, all he can see when he looks at me are my failures.

I believe in the unending grace and unconditional love of Jesus Christ for you and for me. But that doesn't mean I don't doubt it some days; that I don't trust it in some moments; that I don't need Jesus to show up in the parlor in a costume of himself to help my unbelief. Most mornings I pray, "I am Your beloved" with the hope and the prayer that I'll believe it that day. It is a statement and a question at the same time. "God, I am your beloved. Right? You've said that is true. So, even though I'm doubting, help my unbelief." And based on a multitude of conversations with people and the plethora of songs and stories and books simply about God's love and grace, I know I'm not alone. Thomas is not the only one who believes in Jesus while at the same time waits with doubts and fears.

So, what can we learn this morning about confessing Christ in a skeptical culture?

1. We are sometimes Thomas.

Sometimes we feel like we missed Jesus while others have experienced him ...and we sit with our doubts and our fears and wait for Jesus to show up again. Where are we struggling to trust the promises of God? Do we question that God will truly love us the way that God has said he'll love us? When things are dark and hard in our lives, are we skeptical of God's faithfulness?

It has been said the most powerful words you can hear from another are, "You too?" We must learn to embrace our moments of doubt and skepticism and learn to be comfortable with it to be a faith family that is safe for others to ask questions and to express doubts.

May we extend grace to ourselves and to others as Christ did for Thomas, and continues to do for us, in our moments of unbelief.

2. We are sometimes the other disciples.

Sometimes we feel like the disciples...having experienced God's presence and feeling that new life has been given to us by the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in those moments and we are called to confess these moments.

The last two verse of Chapter 20, right after where our text ended this morning, says this, "Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it." The author of the Gospel is clear in stating the purpose of sharing Thomas's story among others – that they have experienced the Risen Christ first-hand and they confess in order that others might believe! Sometimes we are the other disciples – we have seen Jesus and we must tell our stories.

3. Jesus shows up.

I think the good news for us in today's Gospel story is that Jesus shows up. He brings them peace and encourages Thomas's faith. Jesus isn't upset, irritated, or disappointed with Thomas's skepticism. He reaches out to him in just the way Thomas needed.

And Jesus continues to reach out and show up today in our lives and in the hidden places where he says with tenderness, "Peace be with you. Don't be unbelieving. But rather, believe, have faith."