

## **Prayer as we come together in Worship.**

We gather as people on a journey. We believe & we have doubts, we do good & we sin.

We are imperfect humans, yet still beloved by God. Love and grace. Hope and faith.  
These are at the core of the one we call God.

We seek forgiveness & grace from the One and from those we've harmed. Assured of that grace, we are ready to grow again.

We yearn for a new way, a new perspective, and a clear path. Though we are full of trust and full of doubt, we are here.

Speak to us, God! Continue creating us! Inspire our hearts. Enlighten our minds.  
Guide our actions.

Amen.

## **Pastoral prayer...**

Jesus,  
We dare to believe in the things we cannot see:  
In your love for us  
In your love for those around us  
In the hope of eternity.  
We dare to believe that another world is possible  
That suffering can end  
That we can play a part  
In the kingdom to come.  
In the light breaking through  
In justice made new  
In your love for us.

-Congregation...prayer and praises...

We pray Lord for: Edna, Dan, the family of Chris, Sandy, Tammy, family of Patricia, David, Deb, family of Bunni, Elizabeth, Renee, Chuck, Linda, Kelli, Joann, Dan, Jim, Megan, Eric, Tod, Doug, Dick, Bethann, Brenda, Brandon, Judy, Karen, Steve, and Christine  
As well as those concerns both voiced and unvoiced.

Jesus, you take us exactly as we are. You encourage our honest conversations with you. You already know what bothers us, where our faith is fickle, and where our hearts need reassurance. Thank you that you are big enough to handle our doubts. Thank you that you are aware with what we wrestle. Thank you that in your great power, we can simply be weak before you. We trust you...Amen!

## **Offertory Prayer...**

You are an abundant God and out of Your great mercy you have given us so much. We give you this offering today. With it we worship You and give our whole selves to You. Please now take it and use it for Your kingdom and Your glory.

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Preparing for today I examined several accounts regarding lessons on faith and doubt, all the while looking at the life of Thomas, the disciple. So...as we start... let me pose a question.

## **Is It a Sin to Doubt?**

One of the hardest decisions Linda and I made before Gretchen was born was **not** which hospital to have the birth. Not which doctor would deliver our little one. Not which pediatrician we would see. The hardest decision was what to name the new baby. Names are big stuff. We tend to be stuck with our names for life. Names have meaning, so we looked for a name of someone in the bible that God used in a special way. That worked out for her middle name...Rebekah...but her first name, Gretchen, was ethnic.

What's in a name? No...I am not quoting from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet...

But...Names change. They're often shortened. Elizabeth-Beth or Liz, Kathleen-Kathy. William-Bill. Yet, Today, if you don't like the label your parents gave you, you can go down to the courthouse with \$x and change it.

Some of us take on nicknames, pet names. Babe Ruth, Dizzy Dean, Mr. October. Johnny Appleseed, Air Jordan, Ike. Maybe you have nicknames and don't even know it-- in my experience, the smart students were called Einstein, funny students and or trouble makers were class clowns, athletes were jocks, then there are workaholics and, Black Sheep. No matter how hard you try, it's hard to shake those reputations, even if they're wrong.

One of the bible names many definitely chose to avoid is Judas. Judas Iscariot, as you know, was the disciple who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Often labeled as a traitor or a fake follower of Jesus. Judas has forever become a bad label. It wasn't always that way.

In Jesus' day, Judas was one of the most popular names among parents in naming their boys. Why? Because one of the heroes of Jewish history was a Judas Maccabeus who led the Israelites in a revolt in 167 BC against the Greeks and won independence for Israel. He was a national hero. Judas means "Praise of God." According to Christianity Today magazine, 99% of parents would not name their kids Judas because of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus.

Yet, another name that developed a bad reputation in the Bible was Thomas, even though parents often name their kids Thomas-or Tom. There's nothing wrong with the name-it comes from Ta'om in the Aramaic, meaning "Twin". In the Bible, Thomas was one of the twelve disciples-but he appears to have forever developed the reputation as "Doubting Thomas"... even though doubt appears nowhere in our scripture...He doubted - seemed to have had weak faith. He didn't believe enough. Thomas-known as the doubting one.

Well...Let's read the scriptural account, and see why he developed such a bad reputation ...  
The stage is set...the Empty Tomb...

Let's Read ...John 20:19-20; 24-29 NIV

## **Jesus Appears to His Disciples**

**19** On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

**20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

## **Jesus Appears to Thomas**

**24** Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

**25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "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."

**26** 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!"

**27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

**28** Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

**29** Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Would you believe that this doubting one, was also one of the most dedicated of the followers of Christ. That, despite his doubts, he had more faith than many others? If you are a Christian, but still have questions and doubts, that does not make you a lesser person or a weaker disciple. In fact, you may be the most dedicated Christian in church and still have loads of questions.

1. Look at Thomas again.

In John 11, we're told that Jesus was chased out of Jerusalem. Bible says the Jews tried to stone him but he escaped their grasp. So Jesus and 12 disciples find safety in hills. Suddenly, news comes that Jesus friend, Lazarus has died. Jesus decides to go back to Bethany, only 2 miles away from Jerusalem. The Disciples are thinking-Jesus is that a safe decision? He's going to get stoned if He goes near Jerusalem. Verse 8 "But Teacher, a little while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" Jesus made up his mind. Yes he was going. Verse 16 "Then Thomas said to the rest of the disciples- "Let's go too, so we can die with him." Thomas the doubter. Thomas the pessimist. People can say whatever they want, but he was no coward. He had loyalty and courage. Death was no deterrent from following Jesus. The danger was real, but he followed anyway.

2. See John 14

It's a day before Jesus is crucified on a cross.

The scene is a candlelit upper room. Jesus' last supper with his disciples. John 14:1-6. Thomas wanted to follow Jesus, but had questions. He was sincere. "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered that the way to eternal life is not a road you travel, not a city you conquer, not a path you travel, but a person you love and trust. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

3. Even though Thomas had the bad rep, the other disciples were just as guilty.

Matthew 28:16-20, tells us that, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." (v. 17)

It's not clear in this passage from Matthew's gospel exactly who is doubting. Are some of the disciples just worshiping and others just doubting? Are some of the disciples worshiping and doubting at the same time? Not clear. We do know, that more than one person is referred to...for the text says...Some!

However we interpret Matthew's text, what's remarkable in it is Jesus' response to the doubters, whoever they were. At first he seems to ignore them. He immediately gives the disciples the 'great commission': "go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." It is quite easy for us to regard this as the sort of task appropriately given to faithful, confident worshipers, not to doubters. It seems natural for us to want to make sure our own doubts are resolved before going out to tell others about God. We assume that sharing our faith should be left to those who feel 100% confident about our message. To go out and preach when you're not totally sure about it seems like a good way to make a fool of yourself, or worse, a way to become a hypocrite.

A contemporary Air Force Chaplain, Dr Randy Croft, has commented about faith and doubt this way..."A mind that never examines its beliefs is a rusty mind. Instead of solid faith, it could be gullible faith." He uses 2 Corinthians 13:5, as his justification..."Examine yourselves to see whether you are still in the faith; test yourselves."

3. When Mother Theresa died, it was amazing to see how millions of Hindu's paid respect to her Christian service in their country. The church in India where her funeral was held is known throughout the world as St. Thomas' church. Not much is known outside of the bible about this doubting disciple, but several early Christian writers-Eusebius, Ambrose, Jerome & others - that Thomas went to India to spread the gospel. In Madras, India, today known Chennai - there is still a mountain, named, St. Thomas Mount. Thought to be one of the most ancient Christian communities in the world, from 3rd century, trace their existence from doubting Thomas. And large groups still call themselves "Thomas Christians." We're not sure how Thomas died, but tradition says he went to a part of India and converted a Queen to the gospel, but not the King. The King was jealous and ordered Thomas assassinated and thus died with a spear through his side. That is the symbol of Thomas to this day...A spear. Just because a person has doubts, does not mean that they aren't extremely dedicated or devoted to God. Even though Thomas had doubts he was still with the other disciples when Jesus came. He didn't run off alone and reject it all. He was with the other believers, searching for answers. He lived his life with devotion, in spite of his doubts.

In case you have never doubted...hear what Mother Theresa had to say...about her dark night of the soul.

"Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The Child of your Love—and now become as the most hated one—the one—You have thrown away as unwanted—unloved. I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One.—Alone ... Where is my Faith—even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness—My God—how painful is this unknown pain—I have no Faith—I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart—& make me suffer untold agony.

So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them—because of the blasphemy—If there be God —please forgive me—When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven—there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul.—I am told God loves

me—and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart?"

Mother Teresa

Is it wrong to have doubts?

What do you do with your doubts? What do you do when you are confronted with questions you can't answer; or with a truth from the Bible that you don't understand? What do you do when prayers go unanswered and you find yourself wondering if God cares about you... if He is even there? What do you do when circumstances in your life, at work, at home—are going lousy and you've tried your best. You doubt if God is strong enough?

You ask "Why did my father die?" Or "Why am I still single?" Or "Why did she get the promotion, God. I worked twice as hard?" or "Why is my family falling apart?" "Why can't we meet our budget?" And our temptation is that if we don't get the answers now, we give up on God?

What do we do with our doubts? If we're honest, most of us would admit that we struggle with doubt from time to time.

Those of us who doubt need to hear this good news from the Bible: Doubt is a normal and natural part of faith in God. Even the most cursory look at the Bible would reveal that some of the people most looked up to as biblical heroes experienced doubt from time to time -- Abraham, Moses, Sarah, Jeremiah, David, Elijah, John the Baptist, Peter and, in our text, Thomas. Yet even during their doubts, they stayed connected to God.

Not only biblical heroes, but some of the greatest teachers, preachers, Christian leaders, reformers, and theologians in the past 2,000 years dealt with doubt.

Yet these people, like the biblical heroes didn't withhold commitment to God until they had all their answers. They didn't throw God out. It's like throwing the dictionary out while your trying to define a word. You may want to define it differently, but you still need the dictionary. You need to know what it says about other areas. We must never hold God at arms length while dealing with doubt. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, rather its a stepping stone that can cause our faith to grow.

For example...read a John Wesley biography dealing with his uncomfortable journey aboard a ship during a savage storm and how the Lord used Moravians on several occasions to minister to the Methodist.

Or

Lee Strobel was an award winning journalist for the Chicago Tribune. For most of his life he was an atheist. But after his wife became a Christian, he started to see positive changes in her life. So after a few months, Lee decided to attend church with his wife, partly because he was curious and mostly because he wanted to poke holes in her faith.

However, in that worship service he was confronted for the first time with Jesus' claims. And after that service he made a decision. He says in one of his books: "While I didn't believe the Gospel was true, I was convinced that if it was the truth, it had tremendous implications for my life. So I vowed to check out the Christian faith as a journalist would. I'd separate myth from reality and see what remained. I'd examine the evidence and see for myself."

And he says that he began his search with this prayer: "God, I don't even believe you are there, but if you are, I want to find you. I really do want to know the truth. So if you exist, please show yourself to me." In that moment Lee Strobel moved from an atheist, an agnostic, to a true spiritual seeker who

honestly sought after the truth. After two years of intensive research, Lee Strobel became a Christian and now serves on the staff at the church where he first heard the claims of Christ in the Chicago area. Were all of his questions answered? No. But he knew that the gospel was founded on rock solid claims and had to go by that while he dealt with his questions. Today when we have question, what's the first thing we do? Stop reading the bible, stop going to church, leave other Christians. We tell ourselves, "I'll come back when my questions have been answered." Then I'll believe. I have friends who've done that. What's funny is that soon they begin to doubt their own unbelief...did I make the right choice to throw it all out?

There's an anecdote relative to doubt and faith, that goes something like this,

A little girl went up to her atheist parents and said, "Mom, dad, does God know that we don't believe in Him."

The Story of Thomas gives us a clear reminder that it is not wrong to have questions, but it is best if we trust and rely on God while we deal with those questions.

Piece of advise one of my pastor friends gave me. I found it helpful. He reminded me that all of our doubts and questions in this life will not be removed. For many of us, our questions will be answered years from now. For others, they will be answered through a simple and short bible study. For others, our questions will only be answered in heaven. But know this. God has given us sufficient evidence upon which to base our lives. Like Thomas-everyone is called to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Everyone. Though Thomas was a skeptic, he was still in the inner circle. If you have questions, spend time looking into it. But never make a rash or impetuous decision about faith in God because of your doubts.

The Pew Research Foundation indicates that there's a reason that Christianity is the largest religion in the world. There's a reason that the Bible is the most translated book in the world. There's a reason why those who have faith in God end up with much happier and healthier lives than the average person.

Honestly admit your doubts.

Deal with Them.

But don't withhold your devotion to God while you find your answers.

Doubting Thomas is a hero for the way he stayed faithful to God even though he doubted.

Know this...God will be faithful to you, just as He has been faithful to the biblical heroes who trusted him in the face of doubt.

### **Closing Prayer...**

How strangely comforting, Lord,  
That so many of your servants  
Have doubted you.

So,

If I cannot always see the sense  
Of your Word;

If I do not always feel confident  
About my faith;

If I wonder where your love is  
In the face of pain and death;

I am not the first.

A great company of saints and martyrs  
Has felt this way before me.

Now, in your presence,

They see face to face

And know as they are known.

Teach me, like them,

Not so much to fear doubt

As to see it As a sign of the mystery of life

And a door to deeper connection with you

**Benediction:**

Doubt and Fear locked away behind closed doors cannot stop God.

The God of Love and Faith is with you Now, and Forever .

Go in Peace...

AMEN