

# Can't Believe, #6 // The Skeptic

## // John 20:24–28

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### Introduction:

- Welcome back, everybody.
- Chapel Hill campus.

If you made a resolution to start going to church more over the New Year, welcome. If you are new to church, and not a Christian, I don't think you could have picked a more perfect week to come... The subject we're looking at this weekend is **doubts**.

My guess is that whether you are a Christian or not you've dealt with doubt.

- Some of you who aren't Christians have these thoughts about God and the world and you say, *"Well, I don't know why this question doesn't bother everyone else—I guess I'm just not cut out for belief."*

But almost every conscientious Christian I've ever known has had doubts. We may believe differently, but we have a lot of the same questions.

- Maybe it's questions about the **Bible itself**: You ever hear a story from the Bible and you're like, "A **worldwide flood**, really?" God put one family on a boat and in came the animals two by two... and that's how God preserved life on earth while he destroyed the rest? The **Red Sea actually parted** and a nation of people walked over on dry ground?
- **Cain get this wife?** Or what about parts of the Bible that seem like they **contradict** other parts?
- Of what about **difficult doctrines** like hell? Or questions of why, if there is a loving God, there is such pain in the world. You **watch the news** and you say, *"I don't see how there could be a loving God in charge and things be like they are."*

- Or questions about whether **scientific discoveries** have invalidated biblical claims
- Or maybe you have feelings that some of the Bible's teachings about **morality** are outdated or just plain wrong. Why are Christians so hung up on sex?
- Or do you ever sometimes just hear the **Christian message** and think, *"Really?" (I think sometimes in church we get used to it and forget about how strange the message is):* A guy was born 2000 years ago who **saved the world** dying on a couple of sticks? And he brought **peace on earth** even though there's been a ton of violence since then... but one day soon he's going to **come back again** riding through the clouds on a white horse to collect the faithful, destroy the wicked and restore the earth?" Of course. Doesn't everyone believe that?

**Some of you say, "Well, I didn't realize I had doubts until you went through that list." I get it. You have questions. I've had them too.**

And doubts are a reason that many people *can't believe*.

- *I know a lot of people who I think would like to believe, but they feel like they would have to turn their minds off to do so and they don't feel like that is right, so their doubts hold them captive from belief.*
- *Last year called Can't Believe, in which we looked through the Gospel of John at a series of people who, for whatever reason, couldn't bring themselves to believe. And due to an unforeseen circumstance I had to skip one—and probably the one most relevant one to people in our culture. One of the most famous skeptics in history: **Thomas. Doubting Thomas.***
- *—and I promised we come back and so this weekend I am making good on that promise.)*
- **I want to show you today how Jesus taught us to deal with our doubts.**

**John 20:24–31**

Now, to be honest, I feel a little bad for Thomas. This is what he is remembered for: doubting.

- *Other disciples didn't get named for their faults.* Peter had a problem with fear but he didn't get labeled “**Petrified Peter**” or “**Peter the pansy**” or anything like that. **Lusting** Luke. **James** the Judgmental.

**But Thomas got named for his. HERE'S THE STORY:**

**Mary Magdalene**, one of Jesus' followers, went to the tomb early on Easter morning to anoint Jesus and she found the stone rolled away—so she assumes someone has stolen the body so she runs back to tell the other disciples. **Peter and John** run to the tomb; Peter goes in and finds no body but Jesus' headscarf neatly folded up and laid on the bench, which indicates **a couple of things** to him: a. this **wasn't a burglar** as burglars usually don't take time to fold clothes after they steal things. b. **a miracle has happened.**

- **Two in fact:** *Jesus' body has been resurrected and a single man remembered to fold his clothes, which means it had to be God.*

**Well, late that night Jesus appears** to all the disciples in the middle of a room where all the doors are locked because the disciples are terrified they are going to be crucified next, but **Thomas** isn't there (he was out making a **Starbucks run** for everybody.)

So when they see Thomas they tell him what they have seen. But Thomas says, No: ***“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”*** **John 20:25**

- *Now, this has got to be at the top of the list of “Things-You-Regret-Saying.” Think about it: **You** say something stupid in small group and you're embarrassed for 5 minutes. Thomas says something stupid and it's written down in the Bible for 2,000 years. And, not only that, as I already mentioned, he gets named for it!*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Mark Comer, message on Thomas.

And here's **the other reason I feel bad** for Thomas: ***Lots of people in the Gospels doubted.*** The Gospels are filled with stories of doubting people:

- **Starting with the one Jesus called the greatest prophet of all time: John the Baptist.** After preaching that Jesus was the promised Messiah, John gets discouraged because Jesus doesn't seem to be bringing in the kingdom as quickly as John would like, so he sends a message: *“Are you the one or should we look for another?”* **(Luke 7:19).** In other words, *“Was I mistaken? Are you not really who I thought you were?”* This is the same **crazy radical homeless prophet** who wore a frock of camel hair and lived in the woods ate locusts and proclaimed, *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* He was the **Matt Papa** of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, and he went through a time of doubt.
- **John tells us (7:5)** that James, **Jesus brother**, who would go on to become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, write the book of James, and be the first martyr for Jesus, at one point doubted Jesus and publicly accused him of losing his mind.
- Or one of my **favorites:** The Gospel of Matthew tells us that as Jesus was ascending into heaven, ***“And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.”*** **Matthew 28:17**
  - How crazy is that? Here is Jesus back from the dead. He's levitating into the sky and some of the Apostles are going, *‘Yeah, I don't know. I'm still not sure about all this. Maybe, maybe not. I'm gonna **stay agnostic** for a little while longer.’*<sup>2</sup>
- Point is: Lots of people doubted, not just Thomas.
- **In fact, here is what is significant:** John tells **THOMAS' story LAST.**
  - John says the **purpose of this book** was to give you **stories of people** that believed, so that you could learn to believe: ***[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,***

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Louie Giglio's sermon on this passage.

*the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)*

- **Well, when he puts Thomas' story last**, he is saying that Thomas is the best example in the whole book of someone who couldn't believe that learned to believe.
- **Thomas, in fact**, makes one of the **clearest, boldest confessions** of faith found anywhere in the Bible and it is the ultimate "Can't Believe" story for John.
- **We should probably call him not "Doubting Thomas" but "Overcame my Doubting" Thomas.**

So **how** did he do it? **How did he learn to believe?** Let's take a deeper look at Thomas.

- First, why was Thomas so stubborn to believe? I mean, 10 of his friends told him they'd all seen the same things. For most of us, that would be enough. A couple of reasons:
  1. Jesus had **shattered just about every category** Thomas had for what God was supposed to be like. In Thomas' mind, the Messiah would come, crush the bad guys and reward the good guys. But Jesus had shown up as the **friend of Romans** and tax collectors and prostitutes... and then he had **died in weakness** and shame... and Thomas had no category for a dying Messiah or a suffering God.
  2. Jesus had really **disappointed** Thomas, personally. If you read the other accounts of Thomas in the book of John, you'll see that Thomas had started to come around to believing in Jesus,<sup>3</sup> but then all at once Jesus gets taken away and crucified. Thomas is **humiliated**: all his friends had told him he was crazy for following this guy around, and now they are all proved right; plus, Thomas had bet his livelihood on Jesus and it had all fallen apart.

**You resonate with that?** The way God appears to be acting is so much different than you expected; the way God paints himself in

the Bible just blows your mind. Or certain things God has or hasn't done really disappoint you?

Thomas' **mind has been blown and his heart has been broken**, so he is reticent to believe. And so he says, "Unless I see the scars I won't believe."

Let's pick up in vs. 26: [26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

- Which is funny to me, because if a guy you think is dead suddenly shows up in the middle of a locked room, the last thing you feel is peace.
- (Think about if your house was locked and you're in bed and you roll over and there I am beside your bed staring into your eyes: "*Peace be with you,*" I think the last emotion you'd be feeling is peace.)

[27] Then he (turns and ) said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

- How did Jesus know to say that to Thomas? He wasn't there when Thomas had made that statement to his disciples "*Unless I see the nailprints in his side and put my hand into his side...*"
- Ahh... the resurrected Jesus is **omniscient** (meaning he knows everything) and **omnipresent** (meaning he is everywhere at once) and Thomas realizes that, and feeling the weight of Jesus' omniscience and power, he falls prostrate before Jesus and says,

[28] Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

- BTW: if anyone ever tells you Jesus never claimed to be God, this shows you that he most certainly did.
- Any other time the Bible when this kind of thing was said to anyone else, like **Peter, or Paul, or Moses, or even the angels**, they immediately say, "I am a creature just like you."

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<sup>3</sup> See esp. John 14:1–6

Don't be a blasphemer, worship only God." Yet Jesus here receives Thomas' worship, which shows that he is God.

- I've heard the **Jehovah's Witnesses** get around this by saying that Thomas turned around and looked back up at the heavens and said, "My Lord and my God," so he wasn't actually talking to Jesus when he said that. And I was like, "Really? That is your answer?" Textually speaking, that is utter nonsense.

[29] Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

- *Thomas would go on, btw, to die for his faith.* Church tradition says he was speared to death in India for preaching the gospel.

Now, let me be totally honest with you: when I was doubting, this passage didn't really help me. Because I'd think, "Well, duh, if Jesus showed up and let me touch his wounds, I'd quit doubting, too."

- Aren't you like that? If tonight, if Jesus showed up in your room and said, "Hey, just so you know. I'm real and the Bible is true" ... Or even if I could get an email from God once or twice a year ([god@heaven.org](mailto:god@heaven.org)), with instructions for the upcoming months, that would keep me from doubting.

**Fair enough. But think about what happened in this moment.**

*Did Jesus answer any of his questions?* No. Jesus never explained to Thomas all the reasons for the crucifixion or why he hadn't done all the things Thomas thought he should have done.

He just revealed himself. And Thomas had so suspend his doubts and embrace what was revealed. In other words, he **quit demanding explanation and submitted to revelation.**

Now, you may say:

### Why did Thomas get this vision and we don't?

- Because Jesus was appointing Thomas to be an apostle, and the requirement for the Apostles was that they had personally seen Jesus.
- We would believe through their testimony.

*But the evidence they gave us would be sufficient for all who have ears to hear.*

### Some Other Reason

You see, when people don't believe, it is not because the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is not strong enough, it is because they have some other reason; some other motive; some other question, that makes them unable to believe.

- Alduous Huxley, who coined the term "agnostic," wrote *Brave New World*, said, "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; and consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption... The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics; he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do. For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation... from a certain system of morality." —Alduous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (1937)<sup>4</sup>
- **Bart Ehrman**, our friendly neighborhood skeptic at UNC-CH: "I think that if, in fact, God Almighty appeared to me and gave me an explanation that could make sense... of the slaughter of innocent children, and the explanation was so overpowering that I actually could understand, then I'd be the first to fall on my knees in humble submission and admiration." —Bart Ehrman, *God's Problem*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alduous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (1937).

<sup>5</sup> Ehrman, *God's Problem*, 153.

- What he's admitted there is that until he gets that explanation he is CLOSED, or at least biased against, the evidence that points toward the resurrection!
- **What if God showed up to these guys?**
- What we often call a **head problem** is really a heart problem... we don't want to **surrender our understanding** or our wills.
- When Thomas said, "**My Lord and My God,**" essentially he was saying, "I don't have to understand and I don't get to call the shots."
- **One more: Anne Rice**, who set out on a quest to figure out the truth about the Resurrection:
  - "Having started with the skeptical critics... I expected to discover that their arguments would be frighteningly strong, and that Christianity was, at heart, a kind of fraud.... Surely Jesus was a liberal, married, had children, was a homosexual, and who knew what? (After years of study) "(However), I was unconvinced by the wild postulations of those who claimed to be children of the Enlightenment. (At the end of her study she said) *Christianity (could only) achieve what it did... because Jesus rose from the dead. It was the fact of the resurrection that sent the apostles out into the world with the force necessary to create Christianity. Nothing else would have done it but that.*"<sup>6</sup>
  - She went on to say, "(In my study) I sensed something else. Many of these scholars, scholars who apparently devoted their life to New Testament scholarship, disliked Jesus Christ... (which is evidently why they denied his resurrection!)" –Anne Rice, 'Postlogue,' *Christ the Lord*
- The first one is the **hallucination theory**: "They didn't really see him—in their grief, through their tears, they thought they saw him." That happens sometimes. You really miss somebody and you have a dream where you see them... But 11 people at once? Twice? And you have conversations with him that other people remember you having? That is like "Inception" level hallucinations, and marijuana wasn't even legal in Jerusalem yet.
- Another is the **willful deception theory**. (They made up these claims to bolster their own authority—religious leaders certainly do that sometimes.)
  - But think about that one for a minute. Is that what the Apostles got? Power, prestige? Did their claims make them rich?
  - No—it had the opposite effect. Paul said they, the Apostles, were like the offscouring of the earth. They were poor, persecuted and many eventually martyred.
  - Imagine Peter—he's out fishing after Jesus dies and he says, "I know! Let's tell everyone that He resurrected! And we'll get to be the leaders of this new religion. **Except, let's teach everyone that Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world, and so we'll give away all of our money; and when other people try to kill us, we won't fight back. And maybe, just maybe, if we're lucky, we can all get martyred through painful, humiliating deaths.**" And all the disciples are like, "That's a GREAT idea. Yeah. ME FIRST!" That just doesn't seem that plausible to me.
  - **Peter was crucified upside down.** Remember Peter was the one who denied Jesus 3x in the space of one evening; once to a middle school aged girl because he was afraid of her! Would Peter, who denied the living Jesus, really have died for a dead one?
  - If there were a **cult built around Matt Papa...**
  - **James, the brother of Jesus, who I brought up earlier...**
    - **...The secular Jewish historian** Josephus says that James became the leader of the church and was

## (The Evidence for the Resurrection)

### Have you ever considered the evidence for the resurrection?

It is pretty overwhelming, just on the surface. The alternate theories just don't up:

<sup>6</sup> Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, pp. 312, 314, 318–19.

stoned for his belief that Jesus was Lord and died and rose again.

- Jesus was James' older brother. You younger brothers out there... What would it take to convince you that your older brother was God? Or how about this—**sinless?** I might be able to convince you your older brother was the devil incarnate, put on earth to afflict you, but the perfect Son of God?
  - James came to that. He was like... “Yep, come to think of it, he never really *sinned* and now I worship him as God.”
- One of the most popular theories is that these things were **legends** that got added in later.
    - As in, the first disciples believed Jesus was a nice guy but a fringe group started to make all these supernatural claims about him and eventually they won out and silenced everyone else.
    - And there were variant opinions out there during those days. But here's the thing: there was unity among the Apostolic community: Peter and Paul and John. And the earliest Christian documents demonstrate that the first Christians were worshipping Jesus as God and celebrating his resurrection.
    - In the book of Philippians (written about 57 AD), chapter 2, Paul quotes a hymn the early church sang which declared Jesus to be the resurrected Son of God, which shows you that was a well-established fact among the Apostolic churches.
    - Even Antony Flew concedes that the resurrection of Jesus was part of the story of the church from the very beginning.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Antony Flew, in *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?*, 52, 66. Flew is, of course, on the other side in this book, but I thought it was at least telling in what he conceded.

- The idea that it was added in later or evolved slowly into the story is way out of sync with the textual evidence.<sup>8</sup>

On the surface, the evidence is overwhelming. When people don't believe, it's almost always for some other reason.

*My challenge to you is for you to be honest with yourself:*

- If you don't believe, what is the real reason?
- ***The evidence is there if you want to believe.***

If you have the **humility to recognize** there are going to be a lot of things about God that you are not going to understand and you're going to find offensive and you're just going to have accept because he's God, and if you have the **humility to submit** to him and do what he says even when you don't agree or find it difficult, you'll see it.

But if you don't approach the question of Jesus with that sense of humility and submission to God and truth, you'll never know the truth about Jesus.

Look at what Jesus said about belief earlier in John: ***If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.*** (John 7:17)

In that verse—what comes first? ***Belief***; or the willingness ***to*** believe?

- The will to believe. Willingness to do God's will. Willingness to humble yourself and accept God's judgment.
- Many of us don't want a God, we want a divine reflection of our ideals.
- If you're the kind of person who cuts out certain parts of the Bible...

Jesus went on to explain: ***The world... hates me because I testify***

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<sup>8</sup> See William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 262.

about it that its works are evil... (John 7:7)

- Why don't they see it? Because they have blind hearts; arrogant hearts; evil hearts.
- **When Jesus preached, he would often say things like: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."** (*The sound is being made; the voice is speaking; do you have the humility to hear and believe it*)

Ours is not fundamentally a head problem; it's a heart problem.

- **Jeremiah 29:13–14**—"When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord." (like me playing hide and seek with my kids)
- **Submission to God precedes knowledge of God.**
- Postmodern philosophy has actually taught us this from a different angle. Foucault; Derrida; Richard Rorty.
  - What the mind sees is determined by the condition of the heart.
  - William James called it 'the will to believe.'
  - Blaise Pascal, who anticipated the postmodern movement by a couple of hundred years, said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."
  - All they are doing is rediscovering what Jesus said... only those who have ears to hear will hear.

**One final observation...**

**It was not just the fact of Christ's resurrection that changed Thomas forever; it was feeling the wounds of Christ's resurrection that did.**

- What's it like to touch the wounds that were put there by you and for you?
  - Here was a God who never gave up on Thomas, even when Thomas had forsaken him and quit believing in him.
  - Thomas would one day be willing to take wounds in his body for Jesus.

- He would give everything for Jesus because Jesus had given everything for him. And when he called out to God to deliver him from those trying to kill him, and Jesus didn't answer, Thomas wouldn't doubt him again because HE HAD SEEN THE WOUNDS OF JESUS.
- You ever wonder why Jesus' resurrected body has wounds? God could have healed them. It is because **Jesus' wounds are always supposed to be in front of us, reminding us of his steadfast loyalty and love.**
- **They show me that:**
  - Brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and friends may fail me; Jesus never will.
  - My dreams may crumble around me; Jesus is the rock who will never disappoint or falter.
- **They show me that though** I may not understand everything God is doing in the world, **I can trust him!** There is no one loves the world, or loves justice, or loves grace, like God does in Jesus.

**When he saw the wounds, Thomas said, "My Lord and My God," not just "The Lord and the God."**

**Have you seen and felt the wounds of Jesus for you?** They will give you the ability to trust him through your doubts.

- Maybe **other religious leaders**—a father, a teacher, a pastor, have let you down. He never will.
- Maybe you've been **used or abused** by them—Jesus will never do that. He was used and abused for you, in your place.
- *Has anyone else ever loved you like Jesus?* A God who loves us when we were his enemy is a God we can trust when he calls us his friends.
- If he was willing to endure torture for you to save you, you can be sure he will never leave you alone.
- And when your days are dark, you can hold onto his nail-scarred hands.

**Conclusion (Music here)**

I love this Psalm from David; one of my favorites; **Psalm 131**. I have it memorized. I'll share it with you and then I'll close.

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

[2] But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

[3] O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

- My mind doesn't always grasp everything; and God tells me in Psalms like this that some things I may never understand. But I can rest in the affection I sense in his wounds.
- So ask your questions...
  - *Listen:* God is not afraid of your doubts. He's not up in heaven wringing his hands saying, "Do I exist? Did I really raise Jesus from the dead? I better check the tomb again. Did I really write that in the Bible?" Some of the sharpest minds and greatest saints in Christian history have called the Christian experience, "*Fides quarens intellectum.*" *Faith seeking understanding.*
  - Ask your questions. Bring him your doubts.
- His question back to you is whether you have the humility to believe and surrender to the revelation.

*Invitation:*

- *Have you felt his wounds?* Feel them now and say "My Lord and My God."
- *Say that to him now, and release your soul to him...*