

50 Days Ablaze! Sermon Series 2
First Mission Response – Easter, April 16, 2006
Mark 16:1-14
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“Learn” Sermon: “Learn How Faith Arises from Doubt”

Let’s pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we come to you in great joy; we come to you believing; and we come to you with many questions, and sometimes great uncertainty. We believe; help us in our unbelief. Now, Lord Jesus, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

He is risen!
He is risen indeed!
Alleluia!

People are gathering this day in Japan, in New Guinea, with Pastor Tim Nickel in Kyrgyzstan, Russia, with Pastor Unity Msami in Tanzania, in Greece. All across the surface of the earth, people are gathering in the hours of this day to shout that proclamation—He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is a day of jubilation! This is a day of celebration! The fragrance of victory is in the air. The sound of triumph is on our lips, out of our hearts. There are many of us who can barely stand to wait to say it. This past week I gave Holy Communion to one of our homebound members and her niece. Nellie is at a point now where she finds it difficult to hear and you have to shout louder than normal. It’s been difficult for Nellie to express herself lately in words. But when I said to Nellie that Easter is coming, she beamed and picked up her head like a child at Christmas and said, “He is risen!” Christians all over this world see this day as a day like no other. But how different the scene was that first Easter morning. Think not of that first Easter morning as we see it, but as the women would have seen it

It is the third day since the awful moments of the crucifixion. The battered, bloodied of Jesus Christ has been lying stone cold, dead in the tomb for three days. Rigor mortis is beginning to set in. The disciples have fled and are now hiding. They’re scared to their sandals. Judas has committed suicide. Despair and depression fill the air.

The Gospel of Mark spells it out for us wonderfully us. Open your pew Bibles, if you will, to Mark 16:1-8:

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the

tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed...

(You would be too. One angel in the Old Testament was recorded as having killed 50,000 different people. These angels are not the cute angels we wear on our lapels. These were mighty and fearsome.)

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."

And that is where the Gospel of Mark ends. Do you see the notation there in your Bibles? The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses don't record the next verses. And the Church freaked out over that. They said we can't end a gospel this way! They were afraid and bewildered and they didn't tell anybody? And so they added these words (not that they are untrue; these are the words we hear from the other gospels). But clearly the writer, Mark, wanted to give a certain impression of that day—that it was a day filled not immediately with joy, but with great fear and doubt and confusion. Even with what the Church added later, look at it:

*"When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he **rebuked** them [He admonished them] for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen." [Mark 16:9-14]*

Jesus is beginning to get ticked. He is alive, He's showing himself, and they won't buy it. They won't believe it, and finally He has to admonish them. Finally He needs to rebuke them and say, listen, this isn't right! There's something about this account of the resurrection I like. It's real. Know what I mean? It's got a ring of truth to it. This not to deny the other gospels that talk about great joy—that would happen, just not immediately. There is a ring of truth in this gospel lesson, because—don't you agree, when you really think about it—if it had been us, our immediate reaction would not have been one of joy, but one of disbelief...one of fear...one of doubt.

There is a ring of truth in this gospel lesson, because it sounds familiar. What I mean by that is this: Who here today has not had one of those moments...a moment of shock, or of pain, or of grief...a moment when you sense that the whole bottom of your life had dropped out?c Those moments when, like the women going to the tomb, you are numb with pain, and with

sadness, and with anger, and with fear, and with disappointment...and Easter seems millions of years away. Who of us here hasn't had a moment when our faith was not mingled with a whole lot of doubt—doubt if there's a God who cares, doubt as to what God is doing with us.

The Gospel of Mark presents me—at least me—with a perplexing question: Can faith and doubt to co-exist? Can you believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and yet still doubt certain things about His love for you? Can you believe that Jesus Christ is alive—that He was crucified and rose again—and yet still be uncertain? Can faith and doubt co-exist? Many have weighed in on that question that is posed to us, I believe, in the gospel lesson this day.

Paul Tillich, a theologian at the turn of the century wrote these words: *“Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”* Does that make you uncomfortable? It did me, initially. If you don't like Paul Tillich's quote, how about Martin Luther... *“Knowledge and doubt are inseparable to mankind. The only alternative to ‘knowledge with doubt’ is to have no knowledge at all. Only God and madmen have no doubts.”*

What about all this “most certainly true” stuff? Is it possible to go through a tough time, a difficult time...is it possible to stand at the graveside of a loved one and have faith co-existing with doubt? When I consider the Gospel for this day, I see a God who does not despise a faith that exists with doubt. Rather, He invites people to come to Him. What I see in the Gospel this day is a God who shows himself to doubting people, inviting them to use that doubt as a learning experience so that they can grow in the faith. If, in fact, anyone who is here this day in worship and is still questioning...still uncertain...I say to you “That's O.K.” In fact, out of this gospel lesson, I'm going to say that's more than O.K.—I'm going to say it's necessary. Because without questioning, without uncertainty, you don't grow! If you only accept what you've been taught without questioning it, doubting it, wrestling with it, the danger is that you wind up learning someone else's answers and, in many cases, those answers won't satisfy you.

Let me speak to the teenagers here for a minute. If all you do is learn the answers that Mom and Dad have been teaching you, and you go through no crisis of faith—no doubting, no second thoughts—you only learn the answers that Mom and Dad learned. And that's less than satisfactory. You'll hardly be “ablaze” if that's how you learn.

Is it possible for faith and doubt to co-exist? Consider two men in Scripture. Open your Bibles to the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9. (You know, I had a certain uncomfortableness delivering this message this day. I know you come here expecting to hear “Rah! Rah! Rah! Jesus is risen! Alleluia!” And here I am talking about doubts. But it's there in the Gospel.) Can faith and doubt co-exist? Look at Mark 9:20-24:

“So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.” Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

Are those your words? Have you ever wanted to cry out to the Lord, “I believe. Just help me in my unbelief”? I’m glad this statement’s here. I don’t know if you want to hear this from your pastor on Easter Sunday, but that’s my statement at times. Let me ask...have you ever had a moment when you thought it was perfectly natural and unquestionable to accept the thought that God exists and that God cares for you, and then days later something happens in your life...the bottom drops out...and you’re not sure that He’s there at all or that He cares. Has that ever happened with you? Have you ever felt like just walking out of church because it’s just empty, and it does nothing? Sunday after Sunday, after Sunday, after Sunday? You believe but you feel empty? Has somebody at work ever complained that Christians check their brains at the door when they walk into church and they leave their brains at church when they go out? You know, studies show that Christians are asked if they are expected to use their brains with the study of the Word, more and more Christians say “Not really.” I think that’s sad. We live today in this world in an age of great doubt, our world values having no absolute, no certainties. No one dare claim that they have a certainty! That’s the value of our world. We live in a world where, never mind that the thing is based in such fiction—the DaVinci Code sells books and will be a hit movie with Tom Hanks, even though it is so deeply rooted in lies and fiction—but it still fills us with that momentary doubt and uncertainty...what if? “Lord I believe; help my unbelief.” Can they exist together?

The second man—a man by the name of Thomas. I mention his name, you immediately think of “Doubting Thomas.” But give him a break!?! The first time we hear of Thomas is in John 11, when Lazarus has died and Jesus is going to go by Mary and Martha’s side. The disciples know to do this is certain death for Jesus. Thomas is the one with bold faith, who says, “*Let us go, so that we may die with Him.*” See, this is not a man of weak faith. He’s bold. Then, in John 14, when Jesus is talking about leaving the disciples to ascend back to heaven, and He says, “*You know where I’m going . . .*,” Thomas is the only one with the guts to say, “*We don’t know where you are going – how can we know the way?*” And had Thomas not raised that question of doubt, would we have ever been given the next verse: “*I am the way, the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father but through Me.*” And then you know the John 20 one, where Thomas is not with the disciples that first time Jesus appears after the resurrection, and the disciples tell Thomas, and he says what? Unless I see Him. . . unless I touch Him . . . unless I put my finger in His side, I ain’t believin! No way!

What do these two men teach us . . . what does the Gospel teach us this day about faith and doubt?

Number One: If you have doubt in your mind this day regarding Christ and the resurrection, or anything about God...and you struggle with that...and you want to overcome that...then learn from the man with the demon-possessed son and confess and admit your unbelief. Don’t be afraid to say Lord, I struggle with this...I’m not sure I believe this. Confess that. Admit it...and wrestle with the Lord in it...and you will be surprised how the Lord deals with you so lovingly as He did with the women and His disciples. This quote from Chuck Swindoll—he wrote a book called “Tough Stuff”—listen to what Swindoll says:

“Throughout any life that is lived realistically and reflectively, we come to impossible places where we feel we cannot cope. They may not seem like it but those are the healthiest places in my life, but also the hardest. When the bottom drops out, when the pain seems unbearable, when some unbelievable event occurs, doubt arrives unannounced. Don’t deny the doubt. Acknowledge it. Those times of doubting become schoolrooms of learning. As we work through these questions and these uncertainties, a new kind of faith is being forged.”

As we get into *50 Days Ablaze!*, the first word for today is *Learn*. Sometimes the best learning happens when we are the most uncertain, the most doubting—as long as we’re honest with that and search the Scriptures.

Secondly, what do we learn? Don’t let stubbornness or pride enter into your faith or into your doubts. I know some people who are uncertain, and I know some people who are doubting...but they become stubborn, and they become proud: “I’ll never believe this. I’ll never do this. No one will ever be able to prove it to me.” That stubbornness and that pride is something that becomes dangerous. It’s interesting to me in the gospel lesson today...it says that Jesus rebuked them for their persistent unbelief. I don’t picture Jesus getting ticked off after the Resurrection, but after a while—they were so stubborn about this—He said when are you going to let go of this? When are you going to accept what’s here? When are you going to allow the struggle to happen within you? There may be some of you this day who are doubting and uncertain, but it’s based more on stubbornness and pride because you don’t want to give in...you don’t want anybody to tell you something that you don’t want to accept...and that can be a dangerous place to be.

Number Three: If there is doubt in faith within your life, examine your faith. Put it under a “microscope.” Bring your doubts, bring your questions to the Word of God. Examine them in light of what Jesus claims. Don’t examine them in light of what other people are saying. Don’t examine them in light of Dan Brown’s book. Read *The Book* itself. I’m talking about the Bible. Read the Word of God and examine your uncertainties in light of God’s Word...because you know what I found? When the Word of God takes hold of me, it is unlike any other book I know, and it has a way of changing and transforming me. C. S. Lewis wrote these words:

“If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified, we were believing what clearly was not worth believing. But if doubt is answered, our faith grows stronger. It knows God more certainly and can enjoy God more deeply.”

How do you examine your faith? You look under the microscope of God’s Word...because I believe just as Thomas said, “I won’t believe unless I see it.” And when he saw Jesus, the visible Word of God—Jesus—enabled him to say, “My Lord and my God.” You know, it’s the Word of God that convinces me of the certainty of Christ. It is the Word of God that helps me to get rid of the doubt...the unbelieving. Not persuasive preaching! Not somebody else’s opinion! But the Word of God! The women came to the tomb with despair and

with disillusionment. They left not much different—with fear and doubt—but Jesus met them at every turn that week to come to assure them that death...and despair...and sin...and guilt...and fear...didn't have the last word! He did, and He would, and He will. He is the Victor! He has won! And anybody who is willing to surrender their doubts and their uncertainties to Him will be the victor as well. And He is willing to meet you this day in the same place—with all of your despair...with all of your uncertainty...with all of your doubts—He is willing to meet you there. Whatever your doubts are this day, I ask you to confess them to Him and admit them. Don't allow stubbornness or pride to stand between you and the truth He holds out. Then take your faith and examine it beneath the microscope of His Word, and let His Word then bring change to you. Jesus Christ—He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!