

**“Benefit of the Doubt”**

This past Easter weekend

We not only celebrated the anniversary of an event  
That took place more than 2000 years ago

That of the resurrection of Jesus . . .

We also recognized the anniversary of an event  
That took place 20-years-ago.

April 20, 1999 two high school boys  
Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold  
Stormed into Columbine High School

Killing 12 students and 1 teacher and injuring 21 others.

At the time, it was the deadliest shooting in a school  
In US history and inspired copycats  
For years afterwards.

This past Easter Sunday also saw  
Suicide bombers killing 359  
And injuring more than 500 in Sri Lanka.

Three of the targets were churches  
In the middle of their Easter celebrations.

It’s hard to celebrate the new life, Easter represents

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In the midst of death and destruction.  
But then again, what better time to celebrate Easter?

It was Anne Lamott, the Christian writer, who said  
“We're Easter people, living in a Good Friday world.”

More than a few times this year  
I have cried out to the Lord  
“Why?” “Why this?” or “Why them?”

These horrific events are enough  
To create doubt in a all-loving Creator.

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We are one week beyond the Easter Story.

Easter Sunday, the women had gone to the tomb  
Discovered it empty  
And encountered the Risen Lord.

Following a rather touching moment  
As the women grabbed the feet of Jesus  
And worshiped him

Jesus instructed them to return  
Tell the disciples what they had seen.

And tell them to go on to Galilee

**“Benefit of the Doubt”**

Where they will meet Him!

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This brings us to today’s lesson from Matthew.

In Matthew, Jesus’ words are the closing words

To the end of the story, his final statement!

It is the Great Commission

The call to make disciples

Baptizing them

And teaching them the ways of Jesus.

Every church has some form of it in their mission statement.

And by these words the church exponentially grew.

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The setting is a mountaintop in Galilee.

We don’t know the exact place or name of the mountain.

As the 11 disciples ascended the mountain

For Judas was no longer among them

They saw Jesus

They worshiped him

But some doubted.

It’s an interesting sentence isn’t it?

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That the eleven who followed Jesus for three years  
    Witnessed his tragic death  
        Witnessed his triumphant resurrection

And now standing before them  
    Jesus, himself, in flesh and blood  
        Interestingly, still have doubt.

But there it is . . .

The eleven saw him, worshiped him, and doubted.  
This verse 17 doesn't get a lot of attention  
    For obvious reasons.

If these followers of Jesus  
    Eyewitnesses to the Risen Christ himself  
        Carried some doubt concerning Jesus . . .

What about us?

No, better leave that one alone.

And for goodness sake . . . don't preach about it!

But that's exactly what I want to do.

This past summer

**“Benefit of the Doubt”**

I preached fully on Matthew 28:18-20  
In a sermon series about sharing faith.

So if you're curious  
Our website has the recorded message  
On Matthew 28:18-20, the Great Commission.

Today, I want to speak on the question  
Is faith the absence of doubt?

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I have a close relative whose faith is full of doubt.

Or maybe I should say, her doubts are full of faith.

She doubts God raised Jesus from the dead  
And doubts there is an afterlife.

However doubtful she is  
She is committed to the ways of Jesus.

She and her spouse attend church every Sunday.

They give more than 10% of their income  
As they have for years and years.

She loves to sing the great classic hymns.

Yet she is a doubter.

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Is there room for her in Christianity?

Of course there is.

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Blaise Pascal once said, *"In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't."*

Of the 11, we don't know who still had doubts.

We do know from John's gospel

The disciple Thomas doubted the others' testimony  
On seeing the Risen Christ.

Until later, that is,

When the Risen Christ came to him and said

**John 20: 27 “Put your finger here; see my hands,  
Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop  
doubting and believe.”**

All Thomas could squeak out was

**“My Lord and my God!”**

**John 20:29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have  
seen me, you have believed, blessed are those who  
have not seen and yet believed.”**

**“Benefit of the Doubt”**

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Following Jesus’ resurrection

The Bible does not account for all of the 11.

Tradition has them all serving Jesus in various capacities

From evangelism and mission work

To leadership in the Jerusalem church.

Many, if not most of them died a martyr’s death

Serving their Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite their doubt, they followed Jesus.

They continued to be disciples serving Christ.

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It was later, during the time of Pentecost

The Holy Spirit transformed and convicted

The gathered disciples of Christ.

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We are all in different places in our faith journey.

There are some here today

That question the existence of God.

And I’m glad they’re here!

There are some that have grown up in the church

## “Benefit of the Doubt”

Never questioning the fundamental truths  
Who now have left the faith.

I think there are some who need to walk away from God  
Perhaps even rejecting his existence  
Before rediscovering Him.

It is all right for faith to have some doubt.

It is all right to question Christianity’s claims.

It’s all right to express skepticism.

A healthy dose of doubt might be the incentive one needs  
To discover for themselves  
The way, the truth, and the life of Jesus.

Tim Keller, retired pastor of the Redeemer Church in NYC, said, *“A faith without some doubts is like a human body without antibodies. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic.”*

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The opposite of faith is not doubt.

The opposite of faith is unbelief.



## “Benefit of the Doubt”

The theologian Paul Tillich states, *“Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith but an element of faith.”*

Famed Christian author, Philip Yancey is another  
 Who also believes doubt an essential part of faith.

He writes

*Doubt is something almost every person experiences at some point, yet something that the church does not always handle well. I’m an advocate of doubt, because that’s why I became a Christian in the first place. I started doubting some of the crazy things my church taught me when I was growing up! (This was a most unhealthy church, I must say.)*

*I’m also impressed that the Bible includes so many examples of doubt. Evidently God has more tolerance of doubt than most churches. I want to encourage those who doubt, and also encourage the church to be a place that rewards rather than punishes honesty.”*

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There was reason for Matthew to tell us  
 That the I I saw Jesus  
 Worshiped Jesus  
 And doubted Jesus.

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But what we know is, despite the doubt that lingered  
The 11 disciples continued to follow Jesus.

One thing I have appreciated here at West Richmond  
Is the honesty I find in our discussions.

We have folks here who question, who doubt  
Who disbelieve some of Christianity’s claims.

But they’re here.

They’re involved.

They appreciate certain dynamics church offers . . .

A sense of belonging and community  
A family-like atmosphere

Where young and old and everyone in between  
Come together to share their lives with one another  
In a world so isolated, so lonely, so broken.

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There is an interesting phrase in English.

“To give someone the benefit of the doubt.”

**“Benefit of the Doubt”**

According to the online Cambridge Dictionary . . .

To give someone the benefit of the doubt is *“to decide that you will believe someone, even though you are not sure that what the person is saying is true.”*

The disciples gave Jesus the benefit of the doubt  
And followed him  
Continuing his work  
Peacefully, simply, together.

And my advice is the same.  
Give Jesus the benefit of the doubt.

Don't doubt your doubts.  
It's okay to have them.

Embrace your doubts.

Not as unbeliefs but as incentives  
That might prompt you  
To explore the claims of Christianity.

Meanwhile, follow the ways of Jesus  
And see if they aren't the better way  
To truth and to life.

**“Benefit of the Doubt”**

To follow Jesus is to know Jesus.

To know Jesus is to follow Jesus.

The world will be a better place

If we all gave Jesus the benefit of the doubt

And sought to live lives exemplary of His.