

## **The Hinge Question – April 3, 2016**

**John 20:19-31**

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Despite the snowy conditions we experienced yesterday, Spring is here. It's a time of year when many people are faced with answering big questions in their lives. Graduating seniors have to decide on which college to attend or to go to college at all. Couples in love consider if it's perhaps time to get married. Workers wonder if it's the right time to make a career change and move the family to another city. Rightly so, these can be difficult questions for us to answer.

I call these hinge questions, because everything that happens next hinges on our response. We find ourselves at a fork in the road. Do we travel left or right? Do we simply stand still? Do we move straight forward or try to go back? Think of those major choices you've faced or will face in your own lives – What career path will I follow? Which job offer will I take? Where will I live? Who will I marry or will I stay single? Will we have children? How many? Is it time to retire or should I work a few more years? Is it time to downsize? Do I remain here or move to be closer to kids and grandkids? However we proceed in deciding any of those questions will change our lives.

The question of Easter is one of those hinge questions. But Pastor, you might say, Easter isn't a question; it's an event." Ah, but it is a question. Certainly the first Easter was an event. But the question that comes out of that event is – what do you believe about Jesus Christ? This is a hinge question, because how you answer it will have an ultimate impact on your life.

Last week we encountered the empty tomb. It was early in the morning when the women came to anoint Jesus' body for burial, but they discovered that Jesus was not there. Later, in the evening of that first Easter is where our passage for today begins. While a week has passed for us, only a few hours have gone by for the disciples. We find them fearfully gathered in a locked room. They worried about being arrested. But they were more than afraid. They were also uncertain. The mystery of the empty tomb caused a great deal of wonderment and speculation. What had happened to Jesus' body?

Certainly they believed Jesus was special. His deeds had often astonished them. His profound teachings had confused them. But now Jesus was gone. The prospect of resurrection seemed a bit much. Obviously things didn't turn out very well with Jesus, so maybe it was time for them to get back to their previous lives. A dead man was a just dead man.

But suddenly Jesus appeared among them and greeted them. Then Jesus showed them his hands and the place where his side had been pierced by the spear, so they would know who he was. The scene is short and the details are sparse. All we know is that the disciples rejoiced at seeing him. They knew without a doubt who he was.

Jesus then gave them their assignment. He commissioned to go out into the world to do his work. And then he gave them the power of the Holy Spirit so they could do the work. By choosing to believe in the resurrection, the disciples' lives were changed. Everything they did and said from that point on would be influenced by their belief in Christ.

Of course, one of the disciples missed out. Thomas was away, and by the time he returned, Jesus was gone. His friends began to tell him about what happened. But Thomas would not be convinced.

Not unlike many of us, Thomas was a practical person. Eyewitness accounts weren't enough to sway him. He was a rational man, and he wanted empirical proof. He wanted to see with his own eyes the wounds on Jesus' body and touch with his own two hands the skin that was pierced by nail and sword.

Thomas is always being berated for his lack of faith. But his response is no different than when all the disciples refused to believe the story that the women had brought to them earlier in the day. We really shouldn't be surprised by Thomas' reaction. Do we not have our own doubts about what happened? Do we not have our own doubts when it comes to matters of faith? Or in fact, do we not have doubts about any life-changing choice or hinge question?

Will there not be times in the coming years where we begin to doubt the decisions we have made? Is it wrong to wonder about the "what ifs?" Any major decision once made can lead to down times or periods of second-guessing.

In the same way, is faith an all or nothing kind of deal? We come to faith in different ways, but doubt is still part of the equation. Sometimes faith comes quickly, after an epiphany-type revelation or a mountain-top kind of experience. But generally the journey toward faithfulness is more understated. A childhood and adolescence full of Sunday School and Bible stories surrounded by caring faith mentors, leads us to ponder the questions of what we believe. The question of faith is not a once and for all decision, it is a lifelong journey of twists and turns. There are periods where we can really feel God's presence in our lives, and other times where God seems far away. We question our faith, we give up our faith, we gain new faith. We believe we have all the answers; then new questions arise.

A week went by, and the disciples were all in the room together again, but this time Thomas was with them. Then, again, Jesus showed up. The doors were still shut, but in he came. He went right up to Thomas, and said, "Here I am, Thomas. These are my hands, this is my side, go ahead and touch them. Experience it for yourself." And Thomas believed. And Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Many believe that John uses this story to encourage and praise those future followers of Christ, who will never have the opportunity to experience Jesus in the flesh, like the early disciples did. And that being like Thomas is not admirable. That having blind faith without some kind of tangible proof is somehow better than needing to be convinced.

But I'm not so sure that's completely true. Jesus came back especially for Thomas. He didn't have to. I think he cared enough about Thomas to make a special extra visit. And to show that having questions or doubts isn't antithetical to having faith. After all, the other disciples didn't believe the story the women told. They needed to see Jesus in the flesh. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is a natural part of faith process. Let's go back to that idea of the hinge question. I think Thomas deep down wanted to believe, but he was afraid of going "all in." Thomas just needed that extra experience with Jesus to assuage his fears, and then he was ready to proclaim his total devotion. I think this story shows us that Jesus gets it. Faith is hard, and doubt is real.

We are two millennia removed from the events of the story. Yet still we come to church on Sunday, we sing the hymns and pray the prayers, we volunteer our time to serve and give our material wealth to support. While we may not have seen the resurrected Jesus in the flesh as those early witnesses, we have experienced the Risen Christ in our lives. We see him in the mission work done by through the members of his body. We see him alive in the world when love and goodness and kindness triumph over hatred and violence and anger. We see him in the small blessings that surround us. We experience him in the stories and teachings of the Bible. We experience him in acts of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The faith question is a hinge question, a question where everything hinges on how we answer it, because what we ultimately believe about God and Christ will impact not only how we see the world, but how we choose to live in it.