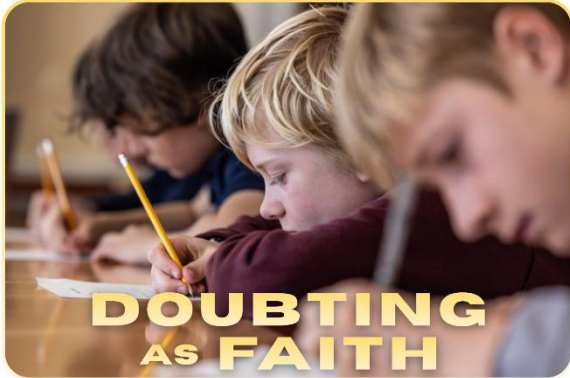


# A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: April 12, 2026



I WANT TO THANK ALL OF OUR CONFIRMANDS for leading us in worship today. It is no easy thing to be up here on this chancel in front of your peers and siblings, your parents and grandparents, Sunday school teachers and pastors. I don't think I could've done it as a thirteen year old.

It takes courage and perhaps even a little faith to be able to do so. Please note that many of the prayers and the liturgy for today were also written or chosen by this confirmation class, so not only are they leading us, they helped plan the service, too.

I know that Jeff and I, along with the rest of this congregation, are grateful for your commitment and thoughtful preparation for this day. So thank you.

In Confirmation Class, we talk about faith as a journey, rather than a destination. And we talk about it as a journey where everything is not yet mapped out.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr once said: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

We don't know where life will take us. And we don't know how our faith journeys will change or grow. But if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus, it *should* change and grow and look different then whence we started. So I invite you to take a deep breath in and out, and prepare ourselves for transformation.

## John 20:19-31

*19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'* <sup>20</sup>*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* <sup>21</sup>*Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* <sup>22</sup>*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'* <sup>24</sup>*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.* <sup>25</sup>*So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.'* But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT I LOVE ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE ANIMAL VIDEOS. I've always been a fan of animals. They're fascinating and often cute. And social media offers a virtual place where I can go to see everyone's cute videos in one place. I love watching baby pandas roll around and fall. I eagerly wait to see if your dog will put his paw into the hands-in pile.

A few months ago, I reposted an adorable video caught by a night-vision camera of 3 bear cubs jumping on a trampoline in someone's backyard. It was hilarious and so cute.

But then, our dear Jess Churchill, who is younger and more tech savvy than I am, sent me a message privately on Instagram that said, "Oh Joann, that's AI."

I was shook. I knew AI was creating images and videos that might not be real. But I thought they'd be more exaggerated or more obvious, showing things that were larger than life or beyond reality. But 3 baby bears, jumping on a trampoline. Why would someone even bother to fake that?!

And how could I have been so fooled?

Friends, we are living in times when we have to question, even the things we see with our very own eyes. So, being a critical thinker is more important than ever.

Some people call the disciple Thomas from our Bible story today, the "Patron Saint of Critical Thinking." He's actually better known as the Doubting Thomas.

But I think that this Thomas, from nearly 2000 years ago, without even realizing it, was setting an example for Christians and people of faith living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today, we are saturated by partisan (and not always factual) news. We are witnessing AI generated images and videos that seem so real. Our social media personas are curated to show a certain side of who we are, not necessarily the reality of our lives. And we are hearing from politicians and leaders who sometimes seem incapable of just telling the truth.

If anything, we need *more* Doubting Thomases in our world these days, *not less*. We need people willing to track down the truth, ask for evidence and demand proof before simply believing whatever they hear, read, or see.

Now, I know that those of you parenting teenagers who are constantly critical of what you say or doubtful of your advice, may find this very frustrating. I, too, sometimes wish my children would just trust me and do as I say. But I promise you, we want our kids to be critical thinkers, even if it starts with being critical of us.

As a pastor who has had the great privilege of walking with many confirmation classes, I will say that doubting and questioning as a form of faith is 100% legit. Grappling with, struggling with it, and doubting our faith is how we get good, faithful followers of Jesus who stand up to injustice, who dream of new ways to order our lives, and who question the powers that be that oppress and harm others.

We can't say, "We want you to be like Jesus," but only mean *some* of the ways of Jesus. Yes, of course, he was kind and generous and compassionate. But Jesus also questioned authority; flipped over tables; sat and ate with people that had a checkered history and a storied past.

In fact, the only story we have of Jesus as a *teenager* shows him debating the elders in the Temple as his parents frantically search for him for three days! I imagine he wasn't the easiest child or teen to raise.

And he certainly wasn't the most obedient young man in the synagogue. He healed on the sabbath and touched those deemed unclean.

Jesus also reinterpreted and reimagined what the scriptures of his day meant for those living in his time. Remember "An eye for an eye?" (Exodus 24:30) That was the standard practice laid out in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

But then this young upstart named Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well," (Matthew 5:38-40).

Your see, Jesus knew the faith of his ancestors. And he knew his scriptures well. But he wasn't afraid to question them, to challenge them, and to doubt whether this is really what God would want for us today.

So maybe, Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, learned from his teacher that doubting and questioning are okay. And when his buddy Peter or James or John posts a video of Jesus walking around in the upper room after he's been crucified, Thomas has the sense to pause and ask, wait, is this AI? Is that really Jesus? What are their sources? And from whom are they getting their information?

Good ole Thomas. The patron saint of critical thinking.

When we read a few verses ahead of today's scripture, though, we learn that *all* of the disciples doubted. And none of them were really able to believe in resurrection until they saw it for themselves. Mary Magdalene had already told them that Jesus was alive. But where are they and what are they doing at the start of the story? They are hiding behind locked doors because they are scared.

In fact, Thomas is the only one who was brave enough to leave the house and venture beyond those locked doors. The reason he's missing at Jesus' initial appearance, is presumably because he's the only one brave enough to leave the house.

Thomas is out and about, probably getting his terrified friends something to eat. And while he's gone, all the other disciples see Jesus. Thomas simply asks for that same experience, for that same kind of confirmation.

If nothing else, today's scripture passage normalizes doubt. It is common, *expected* even, that we would have doubts. After all, each and every one of the disciples doubted.

And doubt is not the enemy of faith. Rather doubting is a part of faith. Paul Tillich says, "the opposite of faith isn't doubt, the opposite of faith is certainty." Because certainty no longer *requires* faith. But doubt is an inherent element of faith.

It's that very unknowing, that requires us to take a leap of faith, towards something that we cannot fully understand, but that we try and hold onto anyway.

Our confirmands read their statements of faith to our session last month. These statements of faith were honest, profound, and at times, they sounded more like statements of doubt. They asked questions and expressed uncertainty.

But I believe a healthy community of faith can not only affirm what we believe but can also affirm that we all have doubts.

In fact, if you ever come across a church or a faith community that won't let you express your doubts or question what they call the "Truth," I suggest running the other way. Because what they're about isn't faith. It's about control. And it is far from biblical.

So perhaps, we are to create communities that are more like Thomas; communities that ask the questions and have a desire to continue to learn and grow and to be critical of what we see and hear.

After all, we worship a God who loves us unconditionally and invites us to struggle and wrestle with that which we don't understand. This is the same God who wrestled all night with Jacob in the wilderness. And God welcomes us to do the same.

Not because we're right or because we know better than God. But because God wants us to be honest and true and bring the fullness of who we are, doubts and all.

There are some things we will never know, that will always remain a mystery. But that's precisely where faith comes in.

Today, our confirmands will be presented and received. We even have the joy of a baptism this morning. But confirmation is not the destination; it is just the beginning of their faith journeys. They come with questions, uncertainties, and doubts. But they make a commitment to this church and to God any way.

Sometimes our actions precede our faith and understanding. Because sometimes what we *do* helps us learn and gain insight about what we believe.

Sometimes cooking that meal at the homeless shelter, praying with a friend through a difficult time, or advocating for just and compassionate laws help us *live* out our faith rather than just trying to believe in it.

All of us have doubts, and all of us have fears. But we can learn from our confirmands today, and step out and live out our faith any way. And *in* our doing, in our *living*, we may just see and experience Jesus.

Mother Theresa used to say, "I see Jesus in every human being." She said that as a means to explain why she lived her life serving those who lived in poverty. She didn't do it because she wanted to *be* like Jesus. But rather, because when she did it, she witnessed and saw Jesus in those whom she served. That's what Matthew 25 is all about – serving Jesus, seeing Jesus, and experiencing Jesus as we encounter others.

Glennon Doyle author and podcaster shares this in one of her books,

"I am a child of God, and so is everyone else ...

In each new person, I see an invitation to know a new side of God.

There are **as** many sides of (God) as there are people walking the earth.

I think that's why (s)he keeps making people.

He's not done telling us about herself yet."

*(Carry on Warrior: The Power of Embracing Your Messy, Beautiful Life. pg 176).*

Friends, as we welcome this new class of confirmands today, remember that you are a child of God, just as every one of these youth are children of God, and just as every one we meet today and every day forward is a child of God.

And I want you to know that your doubts are welcome here. You do not have to question alone.

In every step of our journey of faith, God promises to be with us.

And this community is with you, too. Thanks be to God, Amen.