



When the Unimaginable Happens
Sermon by Pastor Kathy Nolte
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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PASTOR NOLTE: So what's the deal with Thomas? Why do we call him the doubter? One time in scripture he has this moment when we doesn't believe, quite frankly, something that seems pretty much unbelievable, and for all of time in history we call him Thomas the doubter. When reality shows us, and we go back into Christian tradition and history, what we find is that these churches that are in Syria and in India, they all claim that Thomas was the apostle that came into that area and created those churches, built up those house churches. And, in fact, in the 15th century when the Portuguese went to India, what they found were Christian churches there. Not a lot of them, certainly, but there were churches that were already there. And when they asked them who was the one that founded these churches, they would lift up, well, Thomas. So as we look at this piece of scripture where we have this point that Thomas is questioning Jesus and we put that label of doubter onto him, maybe it's not about Thomas. Maybe it's about us. It's that doubt is a part of faith, and it's true that if you walk a faith life for any time at all, you will have times of faith, and for some people, there are great times of doubt. I remember years ago there was this person who came into my congregation, and from time to time he would come in and play an instrument for our worship search. Not a regular, it was somebody when we needed a fill-in would come in. And I remember at the end of one of our worship services, and it was just this person and myself in the space, in the sanctuary, all alone. And he came up and he said, "I don't believe that, Pastor, you know." And I said, "What?" And he explained about how he didn't believe in God and that he had grown up as a child going to church every single Sunday. And his dad was there and his mom was there and he noticed how his dad was this person who was important in the church life that everybody treated his dad with respect there. But when he got home, his dad was horrid to him. His dad would beat all the children. And there was this disconnect between what was happening at home and what was happening in the church place, this understanding that if God was allowing him to be someone who had all of this respect in a church, well then there couldn't be a God. I don't believe it, Pastor. We talked for a bit, and I have to admit, there's people out there that have had these experiences that just crash their

faith so completely. And not being a part of that young man's life anymore, I don't know if there's a point when the thread picked back up, but certainly his faith had unraveled. But most of the time when we talk about doubt as being a part of faith, it's not about just those moments when you lose the thread completely. It's about when things unravel. It's more like the young man who had been brought up in a place of faith and had been taught all along his life that God has a purpose for you. And so when he went to college, he had this sense of a purpose that he was exploring by taking a particular pathway in college in a particular degree program. And when he got out of it, he then went even further to graduate school and got more training because he knew that this was his purpose. He could sense God being with him, God saying yes, this is what you are and what you should do. Then he went out into the world and he got his dream job. And he was working at this dream job and, well, it just didn't feel like the dream and it didn't feel right. And something inside just felt like this was wrong. And he so he quit that job and felt like, well, maybe it's just not that job and went back in and got another job again, one that was wonderful. He was talking about the benefits and just how wonderful it was, and yet he still didn't feel like he was fulfilling this sense of purpose or calling. And he was doubting that God is in his life in that way. Like, there is a God in the universe doing all kinds of amazing things, like, out there, but here, wasn't sure about that part. Or remember the mother who's talking about that time in her daughter's life when everything seemed to be falling apart in high school, how the daughter seemed to be going and finding these friends that just weren't the right people, and she was doing things that weren't really good and healthy for her. And the mother just prayed so hard, prayed so hard for her daughter. And in the midst of it all, nothing was changing. And I know that God is out there, but is God listening here? Things were unravelling. We have this year when there's so much that feels like it's unravelling in our lives. Jobs that are being lost, health that is being fought and lost. There's so much that's unravelling, people's relationships, in the midst of it all. It's not that we necessarily think that there isn't a God in this world, but God out there, do you listen to us here? Does it matter when I pray? Does it matter when I go to church? Does it matter even when I show up to watch these videos? Does any of it matter? I think that Thomas is called the doubter not because of his time of doubt but because we need to know that we have an apostle that is for us when we have times of doubt. We need to claim an apostle, not just a disciple that's sort of one of the 5000. We need to have a name that says there was one who looked at Jesus's eyes and said I'm not sure I

believe this man. And we need to hear Jesus saying, okay, test it yourself. Poke me. See if it's real. We need to hear that story for ourselves. I'm reminded how often the 23rd Psalm is one that many of us in these times of deep doubt and prayer, that we lift up. And there's a good reason for that. Let's go through it. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in the green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. It starts off with this acknowledgment that we know that there's a God out there who's very personal, who wants us to have all that is good, green pastures, still waters, calmness and goodness, righteousness surrounding us. Then it goes on. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. I think the 23rd Psalm speaks to us because those who walk in the shadow of the valley, they're here with us often. It isn't just the valley of death. It's the valley of discouragement. It's the valley of relationships falling apart, jobs falling apart. It's the valley when we're depressed and lonely. It's part of our experiences, a part of the human experience. It's real. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. I never caught that before until a friend was talking to me the other day. We have to sit down at the table with our enemies. We sit down with those things that are bothering us, and we have to work them out. God's with us, but God also is with us as we face those things and we pick up our lives and pick up the threads one piece at a time, one day at a time, step by step. Thou anointest my head with oil and my cup runneth over. Did you know that one of the ways to get rid of lice -- and if you're a shepherd you're probably going to have to deal with lice and all kinds of bugs -- but one of the ways to get rid of lice is to pour oil all over your head into your hair and into your beard. When things are annoying, there's even God bringing about some salvation in the midst of that. It doesn't say that you're not going to be irritated by things. And so there's this assurance, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23, the Psalm for people who are going through the rough times, a Psalm that resonates in our soul so deeply. Why? Because there are times of doubt when life is just unravelling so rapidly, and we need words to hold onto. And Thomas, if we call you doubter, it's because we need to hold fast to your coattails and know, and know, that doubt does not unravel the entire tapestry, that those threads can be woven back in. Amen.