

February 15, 2015
Overwhelmed
Overwhelmed by Doubt!
John 20:24-29

Opening words: John H. Johnson once said, "*Dream small dreams. If you make them too big, you get overwhelmed and you don't do anything. If you make small goals and accomplish them, it gives you the confidence to go on to higher goals.*" I am not so sure how I feel about that quote. However, it does lead to an interesting question. When was the last time you were overwhelmed?

This is the final sermon in my six-part winter sermon series, *Overwhelmed!* We have been looking at things that overwhelm us in life. To date, we have looked at being overwhelmed by self-expectations, money, responsibility and loneliness. I came up with this list by asking the people in my life the question, what overwhelms you? On this Sunday before the season of Lent, I want to look at being overwhelmed by doubt. Our scripture lesson for today is John 20:24-29. Let me call this message *Overwhelmed by Doubt!*

John 20:24-29 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

In 1924, at the age of 22, Carl Rogers entered Union Theological Seminary in New York City. While there, he participated in a seminar organized to explore religious doubts. Rogers later said of the group, "The majority of members...in thinking their way through questions they had raised, thought themselves right out of religious work. I was one." He went on to become one of America's leading psychologists. He is not unique. I have never met a person who didn't occasionally doubt. If you have ever doubted, say, "**Amen!**"

What do these fourteen names have in common?

Mark Zuckerberg and Ted Turner

Steve Wozniak and Lance Armstrong

Bill Gates and Warren Buffett

Heidi Klum and George Clooney
Barry Manilow and Elton John
Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt
Bill Maher and Kathy Griffin

They are part of the 12% of Americans, according to a 2007 Pew survey, who call themselves humanists – they do not believe in anything at all. They have walked away from a Christian vocation. They have walked away from any kind of faith, including Christianity. There are other famous humanists, but I only had space for them. Can I be honest with you? I wish I had their money, but I'm glad I don't have their faith. Like you, I am part of the 88% who do believe. Jesus has changed my life. I may have a few questions, but my faith is sound. If you are glad you know Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

We are instructed today from the twentieth chapter of John. By that chapter, a great deal has happened, but only one thing really matters. Jesus has been resurrected from the dead! Two thousand years later we can see the significance of his resurrection, but it was hard for the disciples to comprehend a few days later. You really cannot blame them. They had been through so much. For three years, they had traveled with Jesus. They had heard his teachings, they had seen his miracles. They saw how the people responded to him. They thought they knew how it was going to end, but they were wrong. There would be no military revolution, only a death, Jesus's death. On the longest day of their lives, Holy Saturday, they tried to wrap their minds around his death. The death of a dream is never easy. Then, without warning, they begin to hear the rumors, Jesus was alive! In the reading prior to this section, we are told Jesus came to ten of the twelve disciples (20:20). Judas Iscariot had committed suicide and Thomas was absent. That leads us to our reading for today. The ten tried to tell Thomas what they had seen, but he didn't believe. Can you really blame him? You have to experience the resurrected Jesus for yourself. He did ten days later (20:26). Jesus walked through that locked door and confronted Thomas. Suddenly, he believed.

There is no other way to say it. It is a question of credibility. It wasn't that Thomas didn't trust his peers. The truth is, he knew them too well. He knew their flaws and he knew their weaknesses. He knew their passions. He knew they loved Jesus and longed for him to return. Their reports of a resurrected Jesus may have been a creation of a grieving heart. They were in denial. For this reason they weren't credible. The most credible person is Jesus the Master, himself. That is why everyone must experience the resurrected Jesus for themselves. Maybe that is why we are often overwhelmed by doubts? The resurrected Jesus has never come to us, personally. We understand this issue of credibility because it is important in our time. How many examples do you need?

It is a bad thing when the news reporter becomes the news story. You know the story. Brian Williams was a star at NBC. His evening news show was number one. According to the New York Times, it drew 9.3 million viewers every night. I was one.

He was one of the most trusted people in America. Then, it happened. He embellished a story about being shot down in a helicopter in Iraq. He recognized his mistake and apologized on the air. It was too late, the damage was done. Williams began to be attacked by the media, and few of his peers came to his aide. It was announced the other day that Williams has been suspended for six months without pay. (He makes \$2 million a year.) Mark Feldstein is a journalism professor at the University of Maryland. He said, *"I do not know how he can read the news with a straight face again and I do not know how the public will respond if he does."* For now, Lester Holt will replace him. Those closest to Williams say he is shattered. Don't tell me credibility isn't important.

The other day it was announced that the March 13th Bill Cosby show at Packard Music Hall in Warren was cancelled. It was not a big surprise, because Mr. Cosby has been battling a much-publicized wave of sexual allegations by a number of women, with new accusers continuing to step forward. It is not my place to pronounce him guilty or innocent. However, I will say this: his credibility is gone. That is amazing to me, because at one time Bill Cosby was the most trusted man in America. I can remember him selling Jello, and cars for Ford. I do not believe he is going to pick up any new national endorsements soon. Don't tell me credibility isn't important.

Every day I pray for the Ukraine. They are a divided country. The division can be felt in every community. The lightning rod in that country is Russia and Vladimir Putin. Generally, the people of western Ukraine hate the Russians and Putin. The people of eastern Ukraine support the Russians and Putin. The Crimea is a war zone and Putin says he has done nothing wrong. Does anyone here believe Vladimir Putin? Does anyone here trust Vladimir Putin? Does anyone here consider Vladimir Putin a modern day Adolph Hitler? To the western world, Vladimir Putin is a sinister figure. Don't tell me credibility isn't important. If you will admit that credibility is important, say, **"Amen!"** How credible is God to you? How far do you trust God?

The other day, I officiated at the funeral of a fifty-two year old man. Fifty-two is getting younger all the time. On Tuesday, I sat in the parlor with his loved ones. There was his widow, his mother, family members and close friends. Everyone was grieving and the words were painful. Everyone had a story or a thought. I was caught off guard when the widow looked at me and said, "Russ, I am mad at God. He was a good man. He loved his family. He helped his friends and neighbors. He never hurt anyone." I felt the need to respond. If you are in the ministry, then you must have a strong theology of suffering. This is mine. I said, "We live in God's creation, but we also live in Satan's playground." It is painfully true. Every day we play the part of Job. Satan does horrible things to us trying to get us to denounce our faith. I hate to ask you these three questions. Do you know of anyone who is mad at God? Have you ever been mad at God? Have you ever questioned God's ways? If you can relate to those questions, say, **"Amen!"**

Our Psalter lesson for today comes from Psalm 139. I do not know how much you know about the Psalms. There are 150 Psalms, divided into five books. Psalm 139 is found in the last one. The Psalms are songs without music. The notes have been lost, but the lyrics remain. That is fine for those of us who are musically challenged. I am more interested in the words than the tune. Each Psalm has a single theme. Most of the Psalms deal with prayer and praise. The theme of our Psalm is the presence of God. To understand Psalm 139, you have to look at verse seven. It is key because it summarizes the whole thing. It says:

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

The answer is nowhere. God has always been with us. God will always be with us. You have never really been alone a single second in your life because God has always been with you. That is an amazing thought; it is so comforting. This is the word of God. Do you believe it? Do you believe God is a credible source of information? Or, do you have your doubts?

One of the things I wanted to do this year was write a church-wide Lenten devotional. You know the process. Those who consented wrote a single devotion. They are being compiled into a booklet and will be distributed to the congregation. I exposed a lot of people's insecurities. People are more comfortable talking about fundraising than they are Jesus. People are more comfortable talking than they are writing. I was not looking for polished or professional. I was not looking for profound or inspirational. What I was looking for was sincere. I wanted to hear your stories. I wanted to hear how you wrestle with God as you live out the faith. I read every devotion and I was humbled. I read about sadness and death. I read about disappointments and your struggles. I read about joys and dreams. I read about your questions for God, but I never read a single doubting word. Everyone knew the truth found in Psalm 139, God was with them every step of the way! God was with you then and God is with us now. God will always be with us. If you believe that God will always be with us, say, **"Amen!"**

Catalina Island is 26 miles off the California coastline. In 1952, Florence Chadwick became the first woman to attempt to swim that crossing. She did not swim alone. She was flanked by small boats that would come to her aid if something went wrong. Florence swam for hours. After fifteen hours of swimming a thick fog set in. For one of the first times in her life, Florence began to doubt her ability. She began to believe she couldn't make it. At the sixteen hour mark, she gave up. As she sat in the boat, she asked how far she had swam. They told her 25 miles. She gave up with only one mile to go. Someone asked her, "Why did you quit?" She said the fog made it impossible to see the California coast. If she could have seen the coast then she would have continued. She tried again two months later. That time she was successful. Yes, the fog did return, but it didn't matter. The second time she had something she didn't have the first time, a mental picture of the coastline. This is the good news for today. You do not have to get into the water and swim. However, you do have to live the rest of your life!

Florence Chadwick was right! We need to do what she did. We need a mental picture. Not of the California coastline, but of heaven. It happens to everyone. The fog is going to roll into your life and you are going to struggle. You might have a few questions for God, but you are never going to walk away from God. Never forget! He has a mansion waiting for you in heaven! (John 14:2) C. S. Lewis once said, "*Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"