I have doubts. Not about everything and not all of the time, but I have some sometimes. For example, I doubt if I am doing everything necessary to be a good husband and father. Other times I doubt if I am doing everything I am supposed to do as a pastor. And now and then, I also doubt my capacity to live up to my faith and the decisions I make, “Am I making the right decision? Am I being wise? What am I missing?” and so on.

But my doubts aren’t just about me. I also doubt the kind of future my children will have, considering how insane and unsafe this world is becoming. What would the future hold for them and the next generation?

What about you, do you struggle with doubts as well? Doubt is indeed present in our lives and, in many ways, even in our faith. Even more so when there are unanswered questions to our concerns, when we see the hurt, brokenness, and evil things happening, we can’t help but question where God is in the midst of it. (Who doesn’t ask these things occasionally, right?)

Still, doubt does not mean hopelessness or unbelief. Many people think doubt is the opposite of faith, but it isn’t. Doubt is not refusing, rejecting, or denying faith but seeking understanding. Many people think doubt is unforgivable, but it isn’t. God doesn’t condemn us when we have questions about life, faith, or anything else. On the contrary, if we are not wondering and asking questions, we are not paying attention to what God is doing.

For this reason, I believe we are all on a journey to learn and understand, one that is marked with all kinds of questions and uncertainties. This is not a sign of weakness or failure but a natural part of the human experience when we care about something or someone.

So, what about you? Do you have doubts too? Any questions? Or do you know everything? Today we are going to learn the difference between doubt and unbelief.

For this, as we continue learning what happened after the resurrection of Jesus, there is a story about a disciple who doubted Jesus’ resurrection. His name is Thomas, often unfairly called “Doubting Thomas” because he dared to ask how Jesus was resurrected. Here is the story from John 20:24-29,

“But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.” 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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.”

This event happens a week after the resurrection (Easter). Thomas was one of the twelve disciples that Jesus called to follow him. The issue is that when Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time after his resurrection, Thomas was not with them, so he missed him. To this, he said, “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.”

With this statement, Thomas was not pretending to believe when he did not. He was not faking having the certainty the others had just to fit in. On the contrary, he had genuine concerns and was not ashamed to make them known. His doubt was not a rejection of Jesus but an honest inquiry because he cared.

This means that Thomas’s doubt did not arise from a willful rejection of the truth but from a desire for understanding. So, when Jesus appeared to him and invited him to touch his wounds, Thomas’s doubt was resolved, and he responded with a profound declaration of faith: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

Evidently, Thomas’ doubt ultimately led him to a more profound and personal faith in Jesus as he sought understanding. In this story, doubt did not mean a lack of belief. Rather, it represents a lack of knowledge or understanding with a willingness to learn and believe.

But doubt is often confused with unbelief, a completely different human experience. Unbelief is not concerned about learning or understanding. It is not concerned about “finding out.”

For example, in contrast to Thomas’ doubt, some of the people following Jesus did not believe him even when witnessing miracles. In John 6, there is the story of when Jesus miraculously feeds thousands of people with five loaves and two fish. Yet, some in the crowd still questioned his divine power and identity despite witnessing his miracles and teachings. And when Jesus called on them to believe in him, they hesitated and demanded another sign instead, saying, “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” (John 6:29) (Seriously? They just had a free lunch!)

The question implies that, even after having been fed miraculously, they do not believe him. But why not? Has Jesus done something wrong? Has he failed in his teaching? Have his miraculous signs fallen short? The answer is: of course not. The crowd’s unbelief is not due to a lack of evidence, as they have firsthand experienced Jesus’ works and teachings. Unlike Thomas, their doubt stemmed from a willful rejection of the truth. Their unbelief persisted, even when the evidence of Jesus’s divinity was laid before them. This situation reveals that, unlike doubt, unbelief towards Christ is not rooted in insufficient knowledge or evidence. Instead, it stems from the human tendency to willfully reject the truth, even when confronted with clear evidence of Jesus’ divinity and message.

Can you see the difference between doubt and unbelief? Doubt seeks to understand, while unbelief rejects the truth. This is Thomas, a man seeking understanding. The resurrection of Jesus pushed the limits of what he understood. When he asked for proof, he was not giving up on his faith but wanted to make sense of what was happening. On the other hand, while doubt can be a pathway to deeper faith and understanding, unbelief represents a resistance to the truth, even in the face of evidence. It is, by nature, antagonistic and cynical.

Now, I believe most people are doubters but confuse their doubt with unbelief because they have been told that doubt is sinful. I know of people who were criticized and judged for having questions and not complying blindly with dogma. They have been labeled “faithless” for trying to understand their faith, and as a result, they think their struggle with doubts is a lack of faith and end up believing they are “faithfulness.” But that is not true.  (In my opinion, blind faith is an excuse for ignorance.)

For example, imagine a son telling his dad that he is a bad person because children at his school mock him and call him names for being smarter than them. Heartbreaking. This child internalized what other kids said about him and rejected his own goodness. What does a dad do? He brings him closer, listens to him, and reminds him how much he is loved and how good he is. And then, he spends time teaching him how sometimes people are afraid of what they perceive as a threat and behave in harmful ways against it. Can you imagine if a dad said, “That is your fault. Why can’t you be normal, like them?”

Sadly, that is what many have said about Thomas—or many of us here. But that is not right nor true. Consider how besides Thomas, many other people in the Bible doubted God not because they rejected him but because they did not understand what God was doing. Remember Abraham and Sarah and how they doubted God’s promise that they would have a child. Or Job and how he doubted that God really loved him in his great suffering. Or the disciples who wouldn’t take the women’s word for it when they reported that the tomb where they all had laid Jesus a couple of days earlier was now empty.

There is no doubt (pun intended) that the Bible is full of stories of good and faithful people who had doubts. The difference between them and some of those in the crowds following Jesus is that they did not reject the truth of God because they did not understand.

So, doubt is not the same as unbelief. Doubt can be a powerful catalyst for growth and understanding. Doubt can prompt us to examine the reasons behind our uncertainties and learn from them (we call that wisdom). Doubt pushes the limits and exposes our vulnerability to encourage us to be honest about what we know and don’t know. I dare to say those who are always so sure of themselves know very little.

What does all this mean to us? The issue is not that we seek to know and understand but rather how we choose to address and deal with our questions. Many people reject God when they do not get the answers they want. Many people reject God because God does not meet their expectations. But if you are like Thomas, with a faith that seeks understanding, don’t hesitate to ask your questions. Engage in the process of your own growth. And when you come to the limits of what you know, don’t give up because you don’t understand anymore; instead, open yourself to new understanding. It is in this process of seeking understanding that we are prepared for the next chapter of our lives.

Here is the invitation and good news: In the middle of your doubts, don’t neglect to see and acknowledge the evidence of God’s love and grace in your life. Just because you have questions or are confused about your faith does not mean you are faithless. Don’t give up on God just because you don’t have the answers to your questions. Don’t reject the truth of God you already know because there is something you don’t understand. Instead, refine your faith, pray, and get closer to Jesus. Ask the questions. Be curious about life, God, and faith. And get ready for the next chapter in your life because God is already there and is real.