

**No Fooling!**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**April 8, 2018**

*John 20:19-31*

OK, so this morning's sermon is going to be a participatory one! Come on, this will be fun. You hardly ever get a chance to talk back. We're going to start off with a little quiz... you might want to bust out a pen or pencil for this, take notes... which of these statements is untrue?

1. In Japan, letting a sumo wrestler make your baby cry is considered good luck.
2. Before settling on the Seven Dwarfs we know today, Disney considered Chesty, Tubby, Burpy, Deafy, Hickey, Wheezy, and Awful.
3. The 50-star American flag was designed by an Ohio high school student for a class project... his teacher originally gave him a B-.
4. Barry Manilow did not write his hit "I Write the Songs." He did, however, write State Farm's "Like a Good Neighbor" jingle. And "I am stuck on Band-Aids, 'cause Band-Aid's stuck on me."
5. There's a basketball court located above the Supreme Court, it's known as "The Highest Court in the Land"
6. How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? The world may never know. But on average, a Licking Machine made at Purdue needed 364.<sup>1</sup>

OK, you got your pick for the false statement? Let's vote... which do you think is too strange to believe?

How many for the Sumo wrestler making a baby cry? And the original dwarf names? Our flag designed by a high school student? Barry Manilow not writing the songs, but the jingles? Highest court in the land? 364 licks to the center?

It seems like \_\_\_\_\_ won. Well, I played a little trick on you all, sorry about that. Every single one of these outrageous statements I shared with you are true. Strange, huh? Maybe some of you are going to hop on the Google this afternoon and try to prove me wrong, and that's OK!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thefactsite.com/2016/06/100-strange-but-true-facts.html>

***Which facts are hardest for you to believe? (wait for them to give some answers)***

For me, the facts that can't be proven are the most difficult. Some of you have heard me speak about being in Jerusalem during Holy Week. What do you think the most revered day of Holy Week might be in the Holy Land? It was yesterday! Orthodox tradition holds that the Holy Fire happens annually on the day preceding Orthodox Pascha (Orthodox Easter – which is today, according to the Julian calendar they follow).

What happens is the Patriarch goes inside the dark stone tomb with nothing but an unlit candle in his hand. Suddenly, a blue light appears which forms a column of fire. The patriarch lights his candle and emerges from the tomb carrying the flame of Holy Fire, which are then used to light the candles of all the clergy and pilgrims in attendance (candles just like these). The fire is also said to spontaneously light other lamps and candles around the church, before it is passed from Jerusalem to other Cristian Communities in the Middle East and around the world. Easter, for most Jerusalemites is less about the empty tomb and more about the light.

***What would it take to get you to believe, what kind of proof do you need? (wait for them to give some answers)***

Even though I left my apartment at 6:30 am for a noon event, I got nowhere near the Holy Sepulcher last year. Which meant that I completely missed my opportunity to frisk the Patriarch on his way in, just to see if his pockets held a BIC lighter! In the end, maybe it was just as well. There were thousands of pilgrims there from so many far away, exotic places. Many of them had spent their life's savings on being there for the Holy Fire. I would probably feel guilty if I took one of their places, especially if my main reason was to disprove their faith.

***Would you believe your friends if they told you one of these things, or would you need to see it for yourself? (wait for them to give some answers)***

I give a lot of credit to people who have shared incredible stories with me, the ones that are difficult to believe at face value. Some of them we heard during Lent, in our courageous faith testimonials. I am more likely to believe a friend's personal account, because I trust that they are telling the truth. But most of the time, I'm not hearing these amazing stories from my

friends... I'm hearing about them on the news, or seeing a story on social media, and I am compelled to fact check. Like Thomas, I really need to see things to believe. Like on that Holy Fire Saturday, if I could just check the tomb out beforehand, and make sure there were no fire starting tools hidden away... if I could personally check the pockets of the Patriarch... maybe I could suspend my disbelief.

***How you experienced something so amazing that others did not believe you? (wait for them to give some answers)***

When I was young, I would get very high fevers. It was a bit of a medical mystery as to why this would happen. One day, shortly after my grandfather (with whom I was very close) passed away, I spiked a fever of 105 degrees during my afternoon nap. My mother came to wake me and couldn't really get me back to a responsive state, I was sweaty and babbling something that she couldn't understand and thought I might have had a seizure.

She rushed me to the hospital, where I was given fluids and a cold ice bath. When it was over, she asked if I knew what I was saying. I told her, quite confidently, that I was talking to my grandfather. My mom had a tough time believing me, but I remember that the event gave me a deep sense of peace. And that was the first time I knew that the bond of love is stronger than death.

Here's the thing... I don't blame my mother for not believing a four-year old's fever induced dream – it's a pretty strange story. Doubt is healthy, especially when it leads us down paths of discovery. To be fair, Thomas does not ask for anything that all the others did not get. They all got to see and hear the Risen Christ, Thomas simply says he needs the same level of proof.

***So here's some good news for today:***

To be faithful, you don't have to have any of the Big Questions figured out. In John's Gospel, belief isn't just something you do with your mind by just accepting a bunch of facts. Have you ever had a parent, a spouse, or a friend tell you, I believe in you? What they mean is they love you. And they know you love them. And they have confidence in you, because of the relationship.

In John's Gospel, that's what it means to believe in Jesus. It's about loving Jesus and allowing yourself (like those disciples in the upper room) to be deputized into his work of redemption and Kingdom-building.

Some people can sign on to the Christian faith without having to see anything. Others actually need a hands-on experience—something that they can see and touch and feel and hold onto. We all learn differently. We all fall in love differently. We also all come to faith differently.

**Here's a challenge to our Doubting Thomases:** Be skeptical enough to doubt your doubts. I know you have a wonderful, vulnerable, and sometimes volatile mix of curiosity and caution. Be cautious that you are not consumed by your doubts. Be curious in the direction your doubts lead you. Don't be afraid to talk honestly about them. Keep asking the Big Questions.

Jesus handpicked Thomas to be his disciple, knowing that he was prone to wonder, question and doubt. And I believe Jesus still chooses Doubting Thomases. And they're as valuable as anyone else in this church.

In fact, I'll come right out and say our Doubting Thomases are a real asset. Because they keep us honest. They challenge us to stretch our thinking. They're the ones who can smell baloney from a mile away. They're not going to let us be superficial or let us settle for easy answers or cheap grace. They keep us grounded and give us our reality checks. They are some of the most loyal, trustworthy, and truthful people you will ever know. We need them.

So Doubting Thomases—stay with us. Keep us uncomfortable when we need to be uncomfortable. Keep challenging us not to leave our brains outside the church doors. But let us embrace you. Let us love you just the way you are. And keep doing life with us.

**And to my True Believers, here's a challenge for you:** Don't discount or abandon our Doubting Thomases. Learn from what the other disciples did for Thomas in our story today, during his time of doubt: Embrace them. Encourage them. And walk with them.

When Jesus showed Thomas his wounds, he was really showing him how much he loved him. Thomas believed, but only after he saw Jesus taking his doubts seriously. As you go forth from here, may you be vulnerable for the Doubting Thomases you encounter. Perhaps they'll catch a glimpse of Jesus in your care for them. No fooling! Amen.