Sermon Title: Dealing with Doubt  
Text: Matthew 11:1-6  
Main idea: Explore doubt in the Christian life--and see how we can live with or through it.

At the heart of Christianity--at the very center--at the crucial core of what it means to be a Christian, we find faith. Belief. Its a mental and emotional and intellectual answer of “yes” to a question about something that happened over 2000 years ago with a man named Jesus. Faith means staking your life. Your future. Your hopes. Your time. Your resources. Staking it all on that “yes.” I believe Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

For me, that “yes” came at a children’s camp, after my 4th grade year. I had grown up in a Christian home, but at that camp I felt God’s tug on my heart. This was the time to say “yes” to Jesus. Think back. When was it for you? When was your yes to Christ when you put your trust in him? For some of you is was just a few years ago, and you remember it like it was yesterday. For others it was decades ago; half a century ago. And maybe that moment has faded into that pre-memory time of childhood. But of course with events like that, time goes by. Life changes. Circumstances change. Priorities change. Opinions change. Peaks and valleys of life greet us. Vocal skeptics mock faith. And doubts can start to creep in.

So how do you feel about doubts? Do you have them from time to time? Do you ignore them, plow ahead? Do they frighten you? Some preachers have called doubting a sin. So do you feel like doubts are somehow disqualifying you from Christ? Do you look your doubts in the eye and wrestle with them and work through them and see them as an opportunity for growth?

Let me start my expressing my belief--and I can’t prove this, because its a universal statement. But I believe everybody doubts from time to time. You may come to me later, and say, “Pastor. Not me. Not even for a minute.” And that may be true. But my experience, and from talking to people through the years, from reading about the great Christians who have gone before. It looks to me like doubt is a part of faith.

By its very nature, faith requires a leap. It requires a step we can’t prove, mathematically and logically. If it did--if that were the case, then the only question is whether you were smart enough to grasp the logical steps. That’s not how God has set things up. We are to trust him. From the simplest to the brightest. And I obviously think there are excellent reasons to believe. Our faith has a firm foundation. And in days ahead we’ll talk about some of the elements of that foundation.

But today I’d like us to look at doubt. And some reasons we face it. And some strategies for strengthening our faith. And we have a most unlikely doubter in our passage today. Most sermons on doubt center on one person. Doubting...Thomas. But we’re going to look at someone else today in Matthew 11--at an experience of doubt and some of the causes and how to push through. So turn there with me.
Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. “And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”

-Matthew 11:2–6

Now if there was anyone in the Bible who seemed doubt-proof, it would be John the Baptist. He’s stands in the tradition of the prophets. Men of iron. Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel. The prophets told it like it was. It didn’t matter who they were talking to--whether an angry mob or the king on the throne. They spoke God’s message to power. And they often paid the price. Kings and princes tend to surround themselves with yes-men. And don’t tend to react well to opposition or to the truth. And when we see the prophets wading into hostile environments and telling plainly the word of God, its hard to imagine doubt ever being a part of the equation for them.

Let’s look back at the introduction to John in Matthew 3. We find there John’s simple message, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This is the time! And we have that famous description of John with his odd clothing and his even stranger diet--wearing camel-hair and eating locusts. He’s a wild figure. And the people are streaming out. And when the religious establishment gets there, the people with some power in the religious realm, he lets them have it. Look at 3:7

-But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.” -Matthew 3:7–9

That’s quite a sermon. He starts by insulting them, and then he kicks all the props out from under them--the things they depended on. Nobody talked to them like that. And I’d love to see the shock and outrage on their faces.

Doubt...from John? No way. He tells it like it is, straight from God.

If you noticed in Matthew 11, though, John is in prison. In Matthew 14:3 we learn why.

-For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful
for you to have her.” Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet.

-Matthew 14:3–5

Remember how prophets tell the truth to power? John had the audacity to confront the King about his personal life.

The background to this was evidently a bit of a scandal and a seedy affair. Herod was on his way to Rome and stopped to see his brother along the Mediterranean coast. Many of you have had family gatherings and reunions this week. Well Herod stops in and falls in love with his sister-in-law. Since he was the king, she agreed to marry him on his way back from Rome—a kind of shotgun wedding—if Herod would divorce his current wife. So this was quite a scandal and soap opera. And you thought you had family drama this week! And you can imagine that people talked about this. That’s just too easy pickin’s for John the Baptist who is calling people to a higher standard of living! And Herod sure isn’t used to being criticized, so he throws John in jail and will eventually have him killed.

So in Matthew 11, John is still in prison. The days are going past. One after another, all looking the same. The word of God burning in his heart, bursting to get out. “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”—and he’s stuck in prison. And in the midst of this suffering and frustration he sends his disciples to Jesus, “Are you the one, or should we look for another?”

And my first reaction is, “Huh?” Come on John, you’re the one who leaped in your mother’s womb when the pregnant Mary visited. At the start of Jesus’ ministry, John would say with certainly, “Jesus, my cousin, is the light.” He even sent some of his disciples to go become Jesus’ disciples. John was there, baptizing Jesus when when the heavens were torn, God’s voice thundered. The Spirit descended. So why in the world is he asking this, now? “Is there another?” No way.

But I think suffering and hardship can be a real source of doubt for us. And really this doesn’t just apply to Christian faith. Whenever you’ve set your heart in a certain direction; toward a certain goal; joining a certain cause; following a certain leader; often you don’t give a second thought when things go smoothly. And you’re rolling along. But once hardships come. Obstacles. Trouble. Then you start to question.

Maybe you’ve experienced this in business. The trusted leader with the long track record casts a counterintuitive direction or goal. And at first you think, “I wouldn’t do it that way, but he knows more than I do.” But what happens when the market share ticks down. Belts are tightened. He says “Trust me.” More sacrifices are called for. Maybe a round of layoffs; hours get longer as they try to squeeze more out of who is left. And what happens? Doubts sprout.

Think about some of the great, early explorers. Magellan, the first man to sail around the world. He was guided by an unwavering belief that it was possible. He had
inspired and convinced his ragtag group of men that they could do it. Unfortunately, he had underestimated something. He had a very strong faith—but the object of his faith wasn’t quite right. You see, everyone at the time believed that the sea on the other side of the New World was very small. Schoner’s Globe, the best at the time, had Japan only a few hundred miles west of Mexico. And so Magellan left the straight under South America and entered the Pacific Ocean with frayed rigging and relatively meager supplies; and he didn’t have any idea that he was entering the greatest, most expansive feature on the planet. Over 12,000 miles across. Every bit of the land on the earth could be dumped in the Pacific Ocean with room to spare on every side! And during the months that followed, the men ate the food; they caught the rats on the ship and ate them. They cooked the leather straps from the rigging and ate them. 19 died of starvation; many suffered from terrible sickness and couldn’t even stand up.¹ Do you think they doubted that vision and the leadership of Magellan? Absolutely!

Suffering and struggle have the ability and power to make most any doubt fundamental beliefs. And sometimes this is the source of our doubts—when life doesn’t seem to be unfolding in the right direction, and we don’t see it getting any better.

In some famous words, the Psalmist expresses this so powerfully in Psalm 42: As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?
-Psalms 42:1–5

Sometimes our doubts are caused by sufferings—by the storm in our life. But we need to remember that though our circumstances of life change, that doesn’t change the reality of God and of what he has done through Christ. That never changes. Its still solid and sure for us.

I think we can see another source of doubts in this passage. In 11:2 John asks this question when he “heard of the works of Christ.” When he heard of the healing, of the calling of disciples and sending them out, when he heard of the demons being cast out. When he heard of all of these things he asked, “Are you the one or shall we look for someone else?”

Now when I read about the works of Jesus—these miracles of his life: feeding the 5,000, calming the storm, bringing the little girl back to life, and the rest, I see signs that “wow, this is the Son of God.” But for John, these spark the doubts in his mind. And I think this goes back to John’s initial preaching again. Back in Matthew 3, look at what John expected the Messiah to do: This is in 3:10

¹ William Manchester, A World Lit Only by Fire, 266.
“The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”
-Matthew 3:11–12

The gist of this message is that you’d better straighten out now, because when the Messiah cranks up, he’s going to take you behind the woodshed and straighten you out! He’s coming with with the axe...with fire. He’s got the winnowing fork. He’ll be burning up the chaff.

It's kind of end times language here. Judgement is coming. So John is sitting in prison waiting for the fire and the winnowing fork--sorting things out. Christ is going to lay the axe to Herod's wicked ways, and bust those prison doors open. But its not happening. Instead Jesus is busy with the least of the these.

So a part of John's doubt here comes from having the wrong expectations for Jesus. And I think this can happen to us today, too. If John, the greatest of the prophets--working from a vision of God--can't see the full breadth of what God was doing with Christ, I think we can miss some things too.

There is always the temptation to craft Jesus into another image--into our own image. And that creates certain expectations. And so sometimes today people cast Jesus as a self-help Lord, who is just about maximizing our potential and making us feel good. Happiness and fun are such high values in our culture that sometimes we expect Jesus to be all about our best life; and feeling good. And when we try and try that path and it doesn’t happen....we doubt.

Or sometimes we expect Jesus to be our political Lord. To be the national ruler backed by the military and police and tax power of the state. And when that doesn’t happen, we doubt. “But wait, Jesus, you’re not following this plan.”

Sometimes we doubt because Jesus’ agenda doesn’t seem to match our agenda. And I think that’s what has happened with John. The plans aren’t matching up. John wants works of judgement from the Messiah, and Jesus is doing acts of mercy. And Jesus answers John’s doubts with this resume of actions. Look at 11:4 again

Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. “And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”
-Matthew 11:4–6
Jesus was Messiah through his acts of mercy and compassion and loving the overlooked and bringing the kingdom to earth through these actions. And when we confess Jesus is Lord, we submit ourselves to this Kingdom. And sometimes when we doubt we need to make sure our expectations for him fit with His agenda and what he did—not demanding that he follow our agenda. So the wrong expectation can cause doubts.

There are certainly other sources for doubt beyond what we see here. Unanswered prayer can be a source of doubt—that’s related to what John has experienced. Sometimes misconceptions can be a source of doubt. Sometimes believers and nonbelievers alike seem to suggest that faith and science don’t fit—that we must choose one or the other. I think that’s a serious mistake. Many of the leaders in the scientific community are Christians and are men and women of faith. We don’t have to choose…but sometimes these misconceptions cause doubt. And there are other reasons.

So what do we do when we face doubts—whether the source is from these kinds of things or from others?

One thing we need to do is keep and maintain a certain discipline to faith. We need to reflect on and hold the truths of scripture in our mind every day. CS Lewis in Mere Christianity emphasized this point. Our moods change, based on all kinds of things in life. And if we allow our moods to rule us, we’ll be like a drunk staggering down the sidewalk veering from one side to another. We need to be reminded what we believe. And the discipline of lived, daily faith, in prayer and scripture; nurtures belief and strength and remembrance of what it is we believe. We need that discipline even in times of doubt.

Worship and fellowship of the church helps us in times of doubt. I read from Psalm 42 earlier—where are you God?? “Why have you forgotten me?” And the Psalmist works through that doubt through worship. Through staying connected with God.

And something else for us to see in this passage is that doubt does not disqualify us from faith and the Christian life. In Matthew 11, right after these questions and doubts from John, Jesus describes him in some pretty high language.

*Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!*  
-Matthew 11:11

That’s high praise. Yes, John has a moment of doubt, but that doesn’t disqualify him in some way. Having doubts isn’t a sin. It doesn’t cancel our faith. And even Thomas, forever connected with doubt because of his reaction to news of the resurrection—Jesus met his doubts and commissioned him right along with the others for his work. He grew through doubts and his faith. And tradition holds that Thomas carried the gospel farther
than any other disciple—preaching and telling the good news of Jesus all the way to
India.

Doubt doesn’t disqualify us from faith.

So don’t fear your doubts. Don’t ignore them. And don’t let them drag you away from
God and Christ and his church by making you think you’re not worthy.

But keep your life and faith turned toward the object of our faith. Because the ultimate
question isn’t how strong or weak is your faith. The ultimate issue is how strong and
sure is your Lord.

Pastor Tim Keller put it well

*The faith that changes the life and connects to God is best conveyed by the word
"trust." Imagine you are on a high cliff and you lose your footing and begin to fall. Just
beside you as you fall is a branch sticking out of the very edge of the cliff. It is your only
hope and it is more than strong enough to support your weight. How can it save you? If
your mind is filled with intellectual certainty that the branch can support you, but you
don’t actually reach out and grab it, you are lost. If your mind is instead filled with doubts
and uncertainty that the branch can hold you, but you reach out and grab it anyway, you
will be saved. Why? It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that
actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a
strong branch.*

*This means you don’t have to wait for all doubts and fears to go away to take hold of
Christ. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that you have to banish all misgivings in order
to meet God. That would turn your faith into one more way to be your own Savior.
Working on the quality and purity of your commitment would become a way to merit
salvation and put God in your debt. It is not the depth and purity of your heart but the
work of Jesus Christ on our behalf that saves us.*