

Learning to Doubt our Doubts

1 Peter 1:3-9 & John 20: 19-31

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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1 Peter 1:3-9 (NIV)

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31 (NIV)

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴ Now Thomas (called 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 it."

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."

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Learning to Doubt our Doubts

A few years ago there was a contest to judge the funniest joke in the world. The winning joke went like this: Two men were out hunting in the woods. Suddenly one man clutches his chest, gasps for breath, and drops to the ground. His friend immediately gets out his cell phone and dials 911. He tells the emergency operator, "My friend just died. What should I do?" The operator says, "Take it easy sir. First, make sure that he's dead." There are a few seconds of silence followed by a gun shot. The man gets back on the phone and says, "Okay, what's next?"

Well, that's one way to make certain someone's dead. Certainty is very difficult to attain in this world. There always seems to be room for doubt. However, doubt can be disheartening. So some wise people have taken doubt to its logical conclusion and begun to doubt their doubts. And through this they have found their way to a most satisfying life.

Such a man was the author Robert Louis Stevenson. Like many young people in his early years Stevenson rebelled against his upbringing. He was raised in Scotland in a very strict Calvinist home. As a college student he quickly shed his rigid upbringing, which he called "the deadliest gag and wet blanket that can be laid on a man," and adopted a thoroughly bohemian lifestyle. During that period in his life he called himself a "youthful atheist."

As he became older, however, Robert Louis Stevenson began to have "doubts about his doubts." He came to see that for all its claim to wisdom, the world had no satisfying answers to the deepest questions of life. Later Robert Louis Stevenson would write, "There is a God who is manifest for those who care to look for Him."

In the later years of his life Stevenson was a man of deep and profound faith. Toward the end of his life he described his religious outlook as a "cast iron faith."

Our Scripture Lesson from John's Gospel is about the world's most famous doubter. You already know his name.

The news of Jesus' resurrection spread quickly among His disciples. You can imagine the quickened pulse and the rapid, excited speech of those who had encountered the risen Christ as they shared their experience with others. You can also imagine the difficulty that those who heard their story had in believing them.

The first recipients of the good news of Easter were His male disciples and, typically, they considered it the idle nonsense of distraught and hysterical women and did not believe it. But as more and more of the disciples and followers of Jesus encountered the risen Christ the stories gained credibility.

The most famous holdout was a disciple named Thomas, also called the Twin. "Unless I see the print of the nails in His hands," said Thomas, "and place my fingers in the print of the nails, and unless I can put my hand in His side, I will not believe."

Many of us have had times in our lives when we could identify with Thomas. We too have rebelled. We too have doubted. But here is something you need to know:

DOUBT IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOLS THAT GOD USES TO PRODUCE MIGHTY MEN AND WOMEN OF FAITH.

I worry about someone who says to me, “I have never doubted for one moment my faith in God.” My friend, are you alive? Do you have a brain? Do you ever use it? I am convinced that God has deliberately placed many obstacles to faith in our world. If God meant for us to walk with utter certainty, why does God not reveal Himself more clearly?

Woody Allen once said that he would have no difficulty believing in God. All God would have to do would be to deposit \$1,000,000 in a secret Swiss bank account in Woody’s name.

We might not go that far. But many of us do wish God would give us an understandable answer to such questions as why good people suffer? It would be so much easier to believe then. And why didn’t God give us a guidebook that is not open to as many diverse interpretations as the Bible? Why doesn’t God just speak to us in a clear voice at the close of the service and reveal Himself so that, like those early disciples, we could leave here and tell our friends, “I have seen the Lord.”

It seems clear to me that God intends for us to struggle with the great questions of life. It may be that such a struggle is essential to a strong, mature faith. Never to have doubted is never to have taken the walk of faith seriously.

Do you remember Christian in John Bunyan’s classic portrayal of the life of faith which he titled, *Pilgrim’s Progress*? Christian’s journey to the Celestial City is not at all smooth and easy. Rather, his way is filled with discouragements and detours.

He becomes bogged down in the Slough of Despond and lost in Bypass Meadow. He spends some time in Doubting Castle as well as in Vanity Fair.

Bunyan is trying to say to us through the use of allegory that faith was never intended to be easily attained. This world was intended to be a training school to produce strong souls. God uses obstacles to train us — to make us strong. Doubt is one of those obstacles.

Let me use an analogy from the world of commercial fishing. Years ago seafood companies had a perplexing problem with the shipment of codfish to consumers who lived inland. Shippers discovered that frozen codfish loses its flavor in the shipping process. Shipping live codfish is no better. In the holding tanks they become soft and mushy and later tasteless.

So somebody came up with the idea of throwing some catfish into each of the tanks of live cod. Catfish and codfish are natural enemies. In a quest for survival, the codfish are kept in constant motion as they seek to escape the catfish. Thereby these cod are kept in peak condition from the ocean to your dinner table.

In a sense, doubt and frustration and other such obstacles are the catfish that God has placed in our tank to keep us swimming, to keep us at our best. There is far more hope for the honest doubter than for the person who says, "Of course, I believe," and never really struggles with the meaning and the misery of life.

That wonderful writer Frederick Buechner, put it this way, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep faith alive and moving." Doubt is one of God's most effective tools for producing mighty men and women of faith.

HOWEVER, IN ORDER TO EXPERIENCE THE TRUE JOY THAT GOD INTENDS FOR EACH OF HIS CHILDREN, THERE MUST COME A TIME WHEN WE BEGIN TO DOUBT OUR DOUBTS.

Doubting our faith is easy, but doubting our doubts is far more profitable.

In Pilgrim's Progress there is another character named Mr. Ready-to-Halt. Mr. Ready-to-Halt was so hung up on his doubts that he went all the way to the Celestial City on crutches. He got there, but it was a torturous journey with very little joy.

Much of the doubt that we experience in young adulthood is a need to rebel against our upbringing. Again, I suspect this is part of the plan of God. If parents and children didn't disagree on something, offspring would never leave home.

Jesus did not condemn the prodigal for leaving. All of us must do it at sometime. That is part of the maturing process. However, one lesson that we learn from the prodigal is that we don't want to spend a lifetime in a pigpen either. Spiritual maturity comes when we are ready to doubt our doubts.

J. Wallace Hamilton once told a story about a Russian girl who was brought up as an atheist. She had taken a government examination and, like all students, was worried about some of the answers she had given.

One particular question on the exam had bothered her. The question was this: "What is the inscription on the Samaritan Wall?" She had written the prescribed answer: "Religion is the opiate of the people."

This, of course, was the famous anti-religion declaration of the author of communism, Karl Marx. But the girl wasn't sure of her answer, so she walked seven miles to the Samaritan Wall to check it out and, sure enough, there it was: "Religion is the opiate of the people."

Greatly relieved, she forgot for a moment her upbringing, and exclaimed, "Thank God! I had it right." Well, there are times when even an atheist must thank somebody!

Communist governments, whether in Russia or China or Cuba or anywhere else on earth, have discovered after generations of propaganda that it is very difficult to purge people of their belief in God. There is something within the human heart that is ever reaching outward and upward. There is something within our very nature that senses an incompleteness to life.

We see through the glass darkly, but somehow we sense that the room into which we are seeking to peer is not empty. This world is far too wonderful to have come about by chance. There is within us a hunger that only a relationship with the Divine can satisfy. It is very difficult for most of us not to "doubt our doubts." But there is a final thing to be said.

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH CAN ONLY BE ANALYZED FROM THE INSIDE.

Here is where those who have made a god of the scientific method are going to have a problem. You cannot find God with the most powerful telescope ever built. You cannot find Him with a slide rule, or a test tube or an enormous computer. There is only one way to find God and that is to take a step of faith, entrust your life to Him, and enter into a daily walk with Him as Savior and Lord of your life. I cannot prove to you the existence of God, but you can prove Him to yourself.

Let's use an analogy. Could I prove to you that love exists? A scientist could attach electrodes to the skin of a person in love and measure the pulse, the respiration and the blood pressure of a person in the presence of their beloved. But that would not prove love. Too much caffeine that morning at breakfast might cause the same bodily reactions.

The only way you and I can ever prove love is to have experienced what it is to love and to be loved.

So it is with faith. There are only two ways that the existence of a loving God can be proved. The first is by the testimony of others. We can say with utter certainty that there have been millions of persons who have experienced God as a reality in their lives. That is one proof — though it will not satisfy the skeptic.

The most conclusive evidence of the existence of God is to experience Him yourself. As the old song says, "You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart."

The richest man in the world, Croesus, once asked the wisest man in the world, Thales, "What is God?" The philosopher asked for a day in which to deliberate, and then for another, and then for

another, and another, and another — and at length confessed that he was not able to answer, that the longer he deliberated, the more difficult it was for him to frame an answer.

Tertullian, the early Church Father, eagerly seized upon this incident and said it was an example of the world's ignorance of God outside of Christ. "There," he exclaimed, "is the wisest man in the world, and he cannot tell you who God is. But the most ignorant [workman] among the Christians knows God, and is able to make Him known unto others."

Tertullian was making this very point. Christian faith must be experienced from the inside. Faith grows as you walk daily with the Master. It is unlikely that Thomas the doubter would ever have experienced the faith if he had not remained among the other believers. And his sense of loss would have been profound. He would never have experienced the joy and the relief he experienced when he fell to his knees at the feet of Jesus and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"

What happened to Thomas after his experience with the risen Christ? His later career is wrapped in mystery and legend. An apocryphal book, called *The Legend of Thomas*, claims to give his history. It says that when the disciples divided up the world to conquer it for Jesus, Thomas received India. And there in India Thomas died for the faith that he once had doubted.

Indeed, in South India today you will find churches called the Thomist Church of South India which claim that Thomas was their founder. I have stood in one of their churches which claims to have been founded in 52 A.D. Thomas dropped his doubts at the pierced feet of Jesus and became one of those by whose testimony we have the faith today.

Thomas was a doubter. He had to see for himself. Jesus did not condemn him for that. However, Jesus did say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Doubt is an obstacle that, when overcome, can cause us to have a deeper, richer, more meaningful faith. In the struggle for meaning the wise person learns to doubt their doubts. The way to prove faith is to surrender yourself to the Lordship of Christ, walk in Jesus way and experience His love for yourself. God bless and amen.

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