

Never Stop Doubting – or Searching

The Story of 'Doubting Thomas'

John 20:19-31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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When was the last time you had a spiritual yearning – a desire and passion to connect not only with others in a sense of authentic community and service, but also with what you understand and define as God? Let me also ask, when was the last time you had spiritual doubt – a struggle with what it is you believe about the nature and character of God, and how you connect with that Sacred Presence?

It seems that spiritual yearning and spiritual doubt are somehow connected in an intertwined relationship. In fact, one most likely leads to the other, and visa versa, in a dance of questioning and searching, doubting and connecting. Some Christian traditions seem to teach and indicate that this is a bad thing, that 'true faith' means certainty in one's beliefs, and an almost absolutist approach to a life of faith. Many of us have past connections to those traditions.

I now believe that is not only an erroneous approach but also a very dangerous one, one that can lead to spiritual arrogance, or worse, to spiritual abuse. I hear it when someone starts a monologue with, "I speak the truth in love." But 9 times out of 10 that simply means *that* person's truth, not "the" truth. In other words, their opinion, not necessarily God's.

In contrast, what progressive Christianity seeks to do is allow and even encourage a sense of **spiritual restlessness**, a quest for deeper fulfillment and an experience of the Sacred Presence that dwells beyond, among, and within all of creation.

These two profoundly different approaches to living a life of faith reveals the distinction between believing we have already arrived at a spiritual destination (or can do so), versus recognizing that we are on a never-ending spiritual journey. And as with any journey in life, there's an inherent element of doubt about where we're heading, or sometimes if we're even on the right path. **Questions, even doubt, about what you were taught growing up**, whether it was from churches you attended or even from your own parents, are perceived as spiritual weakness in some religious traditions. In the evolving tradition of College Hill, however, **we see it as an indication and a sign of an authentic, engaged and enlived faith.** Doubt, therefore, is something that we can actually celebrate instead of fear.

That extends, of course, to both our spiritual life and to the intellectual side of theology and biblical interpretation. I know that many of us here have questions and doubts about the biblical stories of the crucifixion and the resurrection, especially in how they have been interpreted and engrained in traditional orthodox understanding. I usually incorporate that struggle within my Easter sermon itself, but chose not to this year as a way to fulfill the statement, "Promote what you love instead of bashing what you hate." This morning's Gospel reading, however, from John – commonly known as the story of Doubting Thomas – brings the topics of questioning and doubt, searching and connecting back into the forefront of our hearts, minds and spirits.

The author of the Gospel of John shares what is known as a post-resurrection story. Jesus appears to his close circle of disciples, without Thomas being present. They had gathered behind the locked doors of a house, perhaps the upper room where they had gathered a few days earlier before Jesus' execution. When Thomas arrives later after Jesus has left, and is told about this encounter he emphatically states, "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" (John 20:25). Jesus appears to the disciples again a week later, and this time with Thomas present. After a greeting of peace, Jesus invites Thomas to touch his hands and his side and simply states, "Do not doubt but believe." And then Jesus adds, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v. 29).

What was John's point in sharing this story, which only appears in his gospel? That depends on who you ask. In her 2003 book ***Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas***, which we are now reading and discussing in our Book Study Group, scholar **Elaine Pagels** proposes that the author of Thomas was a contemporary of the author John, but came from a different early Christian faith community. (She was in town, by the way, just over a week ago, speaking at the President's Lecture Series at the University of Tulsa and several of our folks attended). Pagels reveals that while John and Thomas agree on many important elements of their understanding of Jesus, they also diverge in profoundly different ways. It is now thought that both of these ways were well known in the ancient church.

Pagels believes that John's gospel was written not only to clarify what he was *for* but also what he was *against* – which primarily was the theological understanding presented in the Gospel of Thomas, which was not included in the canon we call the Bible. One quick example from Pagel's book [bold and italics, mine].

John and Thomas give similar accounts of what Jesus taught privately [to his disciples]. **Both, for instance, identified Jesus not as God's human agent, as presented in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but instead characterized Jesus as God's own light in human form.**

But then, John and Thomas take this teaching in sharply different directions. John calls Jesus the 'light of all humanity,' and believes that Jesus alone brings divine light to a world otherwise sunk into darkness. **John says that we can experience God only through the divine light embodied in Jesus.**

But certain passages in **Thomas'** gospel draw a quite different conclusion: that the **divine light Jesus embodied is shared by humanity, since we are all made 'in the image of God.'**

Interestingly, Thomas' teaching is the path taken by most of the later Christian mystics, some who influenced what is known as Celtic spirituality – that **the 'image of God,' the light of God, is at the core, yet hidden within everyone, although most people remain unaware of its presence.** Alas, as we all know, **it was John's less-inclusive view that prevailed and influenced Christian thought and orthodoxy ever since.**

What are the implications in these divergent interpretations and understandings? When it comes to a spiritual quest, a strict following of John's understanding of how to encounter the light of God is *only* in and through Jesus. Thomas, on the other hand, indicates that a spiritual journey also involves looking within *ourselves*, that the capacity

to discover truth is within us. Thirteen hundred years later, English mystic **Julian of Norwich** explained this in a profound way: **“We are not only made by God, we are made of God.”**

Pagels concludes, “John takes this teaching to mean something so different from Thomas that I wondered whether John could have written his gospel to refute what Thomas teaches.” That is the premise which guides her fascinating book.

Now, in fairness to John, there may have been other reasons he told the story of Doubting Thomas than to trash someone whose theology didn't agree with his. Here are a few of important things to note. First of all, many biblical scholars believe that the gospel writer added this story because he was referring metaphorically to his own Christian community some 60 years or so after Jesus' death. By that time, **those in the early Christian movement had not seen or touched Jesus directly. Yet, they were being encouraged to believe anyway, that the experience of Jesus' continuing presence was still very real.**

Here's my favorite part. Within the story itself, notice that after Thomas told the other disciples of his doubt, they did not exclude him. No one drives him away, telling him he can't come back until he's memorized and believes every word in the Apostles' Creed (nevermind the fact that it wasn't written until hundreds of years later after orthodoxy kicked in).

In this biblical story, which contains basically the same meaning if taken as a literal historical event or as a metaphorical one, neither the disciples nor Jesus were condemning in their judgment of Thomas' position of doubt. But also note that Thomas is not hostile in his questioning. To his credit, he doesn't storm out and decide to start his own church – or denomination. No, to the very end, **Thomas is included within the circle, despite his questions, doubt and skepticism.**

Know that the same is true for any and all who worship here at College Hill. For we need to constantly remind ourselves that **belief and doubt are not mutually exclusive, but dwell together in a healthy and vibrant faith.** As I've shared with you before, Christian author Frederick Buechner cleverly and humorously states that doubts are the “ants in the pants” of faith. So as it turns out, **we should admire Thomas. His great virtue is that he absolutely refused to say that he believed when he had doubts. There is an uncompromising honesty and authenticity about Thomas that we should emulate. He would never quiet his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. Neither should we.**

Is it not both reassuring and empowering to have a biblical story that speaks of our own doubts, our own searching for answers, our own faith journey, and our quest to connect with the Sacred Presence in our midst? It is indeed a very positive sign that so many people, perhaps yourself, find themselves being led into what developmental experts call a **“searching faith.”** This important step in faith development allows us to question what we have been told (and sometimes demanded) to believe about the Bible and God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and all the rest.

Not unlike the disciple Thomas, many of us are discovering that **a bit of doubt goes a long way in actually strengthening our faith; that there is a benefit when doubt is introduced into well-constructed theological beliefs.** This has been the experience of most who attend our Adult Church School class, regardless of the topic. We even allow ourselves to question one another's positions and beliefs.

Our continued goal as a congregation, therefore, is to **work not on “right belief” (orthodoxy) but on right relationships, including a spiritual and experiential connection with the Divine.** May your faith always be a searching faith, one that you can share openly and without fear of judgment with one another here in this community of faith. Amen.