

Never Stop Searching – or Doubting

The Story of ‘Doubting Thomas’

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

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Back in the summer of 1987, 28 years ago, I accompanied the Senior High Youth Group at my home church in The Woodlands, TX, (just north of Houston) as an adult sponsor to the Senior High Youth Celebration at Mo-Ranch Presbyterian conference center located on the Guadalupe River in the heart of the Hill Country of central Texas. The events of that that week played a major role in the initial process of my discerning a call to enter the ministry. I began seminary 2 years later in 1989.

The keynote speaker for that particular youth conference incorporated a song into his theme presentation that most of us had not heard before. The song was from the the Irish rock band **U2**, entitled “**I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,**” from their album *The Joshua Tree*. It went on to be a number-one song later that year.

The lyrics to this song, written and sung by the group’s lead singer, Bono, express a **spiritual yearning**. However, that yearning for a spiritual connection also reflected the theme of **spiritual doubt**. The song, which has a noticable gospel influence, mixed with a traditional Celtic theme of relating faith to being on a journey, had quite an impact on the youth at that conference. Here was a major rock band that made a distinct reference to Jesus in the lyrics, “I believe in the kingdom come... you broke the bonds and you loosed the chains, carried the cross of my shame... you know I believe it.” But then it adds, “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Bono later said that the song was “an anthem of doubt more than faith.” It speaks of the a restless spirit, the need for deeper fulfillment, and the sometimes futile search that corresponds to a setback in the cycle of faith. What senior high student couldn’t relate to that? What progressive Christian can’t relate to that?

It’s ironic that where I was at in my own journey of faith back in 1987 led me to conclude that I *had* found what I was looking for. It was my Christian faith, one that was filled not with doubt but with absolutes. So I felt somewhat sad for Bono and U2, that even though they sang about how they believed, it wasn’t enough. That, my friends, is the difference between someone who is on a spiritual journey and someone who thought they had already arrived at the destination.

It took the intellectual and spiritual shock of a seminary education to help me realize that there is no such thing as a spiritual destination, that it is *always* a journey. And as with any journey in life, there’s an element of doubt about where one is heading, or if we’re even on the right path. **I stand here this day, behind this pulpit as your pastor, and confess that I still haven’t found what I am looking for. Though I once thought that was a statement of spiritual weakness, I now claim it as a vital part of the journey of faith itself.** Doubt, therefore, is something that I now celebrate, not fear. Well, not fear as much, anyway.

As I've been stating in recent sermons, **exploring the richness of the Celtic spiritual tradition is a major part of my latest search for spiritual growth, renewal and enlightenment.** It is a path that many in this congregation are also on. When I learned that I was being blessed with a 6-week **sabbatical** (which by the way begins in just two weeks from tomorrow), I realized that I wanted to spend a major portion of that time attending to the searching process in my own journey of faith. That's why there will be a 10-day spiritual tour of Ireland, followed by a week on the ancient Celtic island of Iona off the western coast of Scotland.

A **spiritual quest** carries with it a lot of expectations, especially for those of us who feel the internal pressure of a potential life-changing experience. So I have to keep reminding myself that **the experience will be what it will be**, that ultimately nothing can really be forced. Yet, with this tempered and perhaps more realistic expectation comes **the hope that I will learn more about how to explore the realm of the spiritual, after years of exploring the intellectual side of progressive theology and biblical interpretation.** Therefore, I will remain open to the unexpected.

I enter into this sabbatical not only with what I can gain from it personally, but also what this remarkable congregation can gain. Gain that comes not only from what I experience and share, but also from your own sabbatical from me for a brief period of time. **So I encourage you, during my absence, to tend to your own spiritual journey, especially as it pertains to being an important part this particular community of faith.**

I realize that I've basically said what I wanted to share with you this morning and haven't yet addressed the gospel reading for this morning, the familiar story known as Doubting Thomas. So here are just a few more brief reflections, and hopefully a connection to what I have already shared.

The author of the Gospel of John shares what is known as a post-resurrection story. Jesus appears to disciples, minus Thomas, who 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 was told about this encounter he stated, "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, 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).

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 to the Christian community some 60 years or so after Jesus' death. The early church had not seen or touched Jesus directly, but they were encouraged to believe anyway, that Jesus was still present with them.

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).

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. **To the very end, Thomas is included in the circle, despite his questioning and doubt. 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 live together. In fact, doubt and a sense of certainty spark each other. 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 did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. He would never quiet his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. Neither should we.** It is reassuring and empowering to have a biblical story that speaks of our own doubts, our own searching for answers, our own faith journey. 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 to believe about the Bible and God. 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.

Our continued goal as a congregation, therefore, is to work not so much on “right belief” but on right relationships, including a spiritual and experiential connection with God, the Divine, the Sacred in our midst. So may our faith always be a searching faith. In fact, perhaps one of the most powerful motivations in our own spiritual quest is to be able to declare, “I still haven't found what I'm looking for.” And it's a blessing that we can share our own journey of searching together.

Amen.