

Sermon: April 11, 2021 – John 20: 19-31 and Acts 4: 32-35
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Each year, on this first Sunday after Easter, the apostle Thomas pushes me to examine his actions; and each year, a different aspect stands out. Some years I feel drawn to soften the “doubting Thomas” moniker that has been attached to him, for he only asked for the same evidence that the other disciples had received one week earlier. Some years I want to lift him up for his role as, in the poetic words of Malcolm Guite, the “courageous master of the awkward question.” In recent years, the rise of alternative truths and the ignoring of actual evidence in forming one’s worldview raises its uncomfortable head when we hear Thomas’ demand for evidence that meets his specific criteria. And some years I need my faith, not my doubts, to be given greater permission and endorsement, and the challenge of Thomas is perhaps less welcome.

Watch at <https://youtu.be/1st5BAzAYCI>

Today I’d like to invite “doubting Thomas” to lead us into a cursory exploration of the world of belief and faith and doubt. First off, as a progressive, liberal denomination, within the United Church of Canada, I can confidently say that asking hard questions is a critical part of our beliefs. Rather than approaching the Bible as word-for-word dictated by God, we use tools like historical-critical scholarship to ask questions of the Bible, such as: when was this written? By whom? For what audience? Does the author have a particular agenda in writing this? What were the political, social, cultural and even literary realities when this was written?

Now, already I have crossed over into territory that some branches of Christianity would call doubt, heresy or blasphemy. But for me, the questions are asked not in a spirit of skepticism, but as a tool to help me take scripture with the seriousness it deserves. Wondering, disagreeing, arguing or debating are all part of what it means to be in relationship with sacred text. To ask questions of scripture, or to ask questions of the Church, is to remain engaged with something that matters enough to be taken seriously. (cf. a quote attributed to Karl Barth: “I take the Bible too seriously to read it literally.”)

Doubt often gets set in opposition to Faith, as if the two were opposites. But here I harken back to Paul Tillich, whose little masterpiece of a book entitled *Dynamics of Faith* was such an eye-opener for me when I first encountered it 40 years ago. Tillich argued that doubt was an intrinsic part of faith, for without an element of doubt, we would have certitude, not faith. Tillich wrote “If doubt appears, it should not be considered as the negation of faith, but as an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith... Serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of the concern, its unconditional character.” Doubt is one of the tools that helps us finite beings try to make sense of things that are infinite, that realm where grace is every bit as present as linear, sequential logic.

I stand with Tillich in saying that if you have faith, you by definition also have doubt. But what if your doubts are not just at the academic or intellectual level, wondering about the veracity of a scripture or doctrine or action of the Church? What about doubts that arise not from our thoughts, but from our experiences – in particular, heartbreaking ones?

In today’s gospel reading, for example, it’s not suggested that Thomas and the other disciples had theoretical or theological differences on the topic of Jesus. Thomas, heartbroken at Jesus’ death just like the other disciples, could not bring himself to believe in the risen Christ without hands-on proof. Some have suggested that the particular shape of Thomas’ heartbreak is why he wasn’t with the others when the risen Christ appeared a week earlier to all the rest.

Over the years of pastoral ministry, I’ve encountered scores of people who talked with me about the other kind of doubt – the kind that spurs questions – but I’ve also walked with a number of

people whose faith was simply overwhelmed by hard things in life. A betrayal, a loss of career or prestige, a difficult death, a community tragedy, or, right now, a year without physical contact with family. These types of experiences may well challenge not just one's daily living, but the way one pictures their relationship with God... indeed, whether there is a loving, caring God at all. Whether it gets labelled a crisis of faith, a loss of belief, or a deep-seated doubt, these kinds of experiences can cut us to the core, as they did the apostle Thomas.

There are no easy answers to this type of doubt, but I will repeat something I said on Easter Sunday: even in our hardest, most sorrowful and disheartened times, Christ keeps showing up. Thomas was missing from the group the first week, Christ came back the next week. Plan A for my life doesn't work out, God's loving care for me will help me find Plan B. Life events knock me down, trusted friends bear the light of Christ by their very presence. I hope it does not sound trite to say so, but my life experiences, and many of yours, have taught me that God's desire to stay in relationship with me has reached out to me and stayed present to me when my thoughts and my hopes and my ability to even consider believing in God have been broken.

Faith and belief and doubt are at times things I figure out in my head, but they are also things that get impacted by my experiences of daily life and the life of the world, for faith and belief and doubt are not static; they are dynamic, active, changeable. But the other thing about what we believe or do not believe, is that accepting the name "Christian" involves a lot more than belief.

Diana Butler Bass is among the authors who are seeing a shift in how young adults attach themselves to a Church. For generations, we assumed that joining a Church began with training about belief, and becoming acculturated to the way that Church folks behave, and then one was eligible to belong. But now, Diana proposes that the order has changed: it begins with a feeling that you belong, that you have been welcomed, then you engage with the community in the kinds of behaviours that Jesus engaged in, like serving others and standing with those who have been marginalized; and from participating in the life of the community, belief will begin to take shape. What's key here, is understanding how important it is in our walk of faith, as individuals and as Churches, to never lose sight of those Christ-like behaviours. And this, leads us directly to our second reading, from the book of Acts, about the way that the earliest Christians shaped their lives together.

In the early days of the Church, people from a phenomenally wide socio-economic range were drawn to the teachings and promises of Jesus. Women and men, from household slaves to the economic elite, were drawn to the gospel of love. Some members of the early house churches would be highly intellectual, others would never have had the opportunity to learn to read or write. Some would be well-aware of the Hebrew Scriptures, others would have been raised with Greco-Roman mythologies. But what they had in common, was a commitment to community: remembering Jesus and his commitment to the human needs of the poor and the relational needs of the excluded, by making sure that everyone's needs were met. Those earliest Christian gatherings were committed to what we might very well call in our day, a guaranteed living income – a place where the resources of all were deployed to support the dignity of all. And, building on long-held traditions within religious communities, that commitment to make sure that everybody had enough within the faith community, also reached beyond that group, within safe parameters, to help anyone who was in deep need.

So whether you were one of the disciples in the first week that Jesus appeared, who said "yes, I believe" right away... or if you were one of the doubters, folks like Thomas who required additional evidence... whether your belief was kind of academic, or has been forged by difficult life experiences... there was a next step, and it was the same step for everyone. Whether you were quick or slow to come to faith, whether you had a towering faith or really substantial doubts, to be a Christian was to share your possessions, to hold the greater common good

above your own. And yes, the greater common good is still more important than our personal privileges. To express a Christian identity, whether your faith was strong or shaky, was to take the next step, to practice what you preach.

Pete Rollins, a provocative theologian from Northern Ireland, writes this: “Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ.... I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system.

“However there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.”

For the first disciples, resolving all the questions of belief vs unbelief, was something that could happen in community after they had made the decision to share, and serve. Right from the start, showing the love of Christ Jesus in tangible ways was the lead edge of Christianity, the surest statement of faith. It's not to say that the questions of belief were or are unimportant, but they must not impede loving action. Our questions of faith and doubt, get worked out day by day with one another, as we ask ourselves who Jesus would have us be, in relation to the needs of our neighbours and the needs of the world.

Are doubts permitted? Of course they are. Is a vibrant faith permitted? Of course it is. Will the doubts that arise from tragedy be held gently by God? My experience says yes. And however we work that out, as individuals and as the Church, the world that Christ came to embrace and transform by the power of love, awaits our actions. Amen.

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