

Resurrecting Our Faith Through Doubt

Sermon on John 20:19-31

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In the course of my lifetime of believing *and* doubting, this character Thomas' reviews have really changed. As Marcus Borg wrote in his book "Jesus", "while I was growing up, the only thing worse than being a 'doubting Thomas' was to be a 'Judas.' We were taught to believe, not be sceptical or inquisitive. Well, in this year's new biblical commentary "Feasting on the Word" I read: "Thomas. We love him. He is the incredulous nonbeliever who hides inside every believing Christian - the questioner in us that resists easy answers to hard questions of faith."

Thomas, perhaps more than any other biblical character save Jesus, really helped resurrect my faith. Doubt AND faith, questioning AND believing. May our children learn that these pairs are complementary - not opposites. For many of us, the good news of our emerging, progressive Christian theology is that our Thomases need no longer hide inside! They can actually be our guides. We can receive our Thomas' questioning as legitimate 'questing' for truth. That's how Jesus responded to Thomas' unbelief. Jesus came and offered Thomas the particular evidence that he needed to trust in the improbable resurrection. In many of our spiritual journeys, faith follows doubt's lead. And God comes to each of us, right where we are at!

Each year, I host our newcomers group - to which you are invited, starting May 11th. I call it "What in the World do we Believe?" because it is the blessing of this church that our 'beliefs' are not dictated by doctrine. In this group, we often experience people's palpable relief, when we share around the circle the things about God or Jesus or the Bible that we don't really believe or can't believe. Once folks hear that it's OK not to accept the their old Sunday School or catechism teachings wholesale, they begin to formulate the long-suppressed questions that blocked their adult faith development. Doubts discussed can become signposts toward the discovery of a deeper, personal, honest-to-God faith. And sometimes, when one person shares their

actual understanding or experience of God, we feel the Spirit sweep in among us and lift us all up!

When our scripture is read in a non-judgmental tone, I hear in Thomas' encounter with the risen Christ, that we can ask about what we can't believe, and together, we will receive the answers that we need! We are no longer wedded to theological certainties that contradict our capacity for critical thinking.

We no longer need to choose between God and our God-given brains. This was the false dichotomy that caused the exodus from the church in the questioning 1960's. What a sad choice much of my generation was given: to unquestioningly proclaim a supernatural God, as incredible to us as Santa Claus after the age of seven, or to acknowledge no God at all. Is it any wonder that the churches emptied and that most of the boomer generation still hasn't look in and discovered that there is a more credible Christian God to come home to?

Sam Keen is one of the spiritual guides I read in the '90s. In his "Hymns to an Unknown God," Keen wrote about his childhood Christian faith, his adolescent doubts and his attempt to banish his doubts by studying at Harvard Divinity School. There he was taught by theologian Paul Tillich and mystic Howard Thurman, "two giants who showed me how to think with passion and stretched my mind to fit the reach of my spirit." In the midst of his studies, Keen met and married his wife Heather, who he tells us "was converted to Christianity by the kindness and powerful example of his mother." Through Keen's mother, the young couple was invited to have dinner with Dr. Donald Barnhouse, one of the most intellectually respected fundamentalist Christians at that time.

Keen tells us that: "During dinner I voiced many of my doubts and tried to share some of the ideas I had gleaned from Tillich, only to be informed that 'Harvard and its theology has never saved a sinner.' Heather, bless her inquiring heart, weighed in with her most agonizing questions, to which Dr. Barnhouse always gave proof-text [Bible quoting] answers. Finally, with all the sincerity and pain of being unable to

silence doubts, Heather asked: ‘How can you know? How can you be so sure?’ Barnhouse replied by appealing to the Bible to prove that the Bible was an authority to which we should submit our wayward minds. With genius born of frustration, Heather then uttered what could well be an epitaph for fundamentalism: ‘I wish I could be as certain of *anything* as you are of *everything!*’”

Alas, there hasn’t been an epitaph for fundamentalism yet. But in today’s world of fundamentalist power - both Muslim and Christian - we are all too aware that claiming certainty about ‘our God’ has dangerous consequences...for the world, but also for our lives and for our personal life of faith. Because exploring the Mystery beyond our grasp is at the centre of any living faith, those who cling to certainty tend to sacrifice honesty with themselves - and their authenticity with others.

Have you seen the much Academy-awarded film “Doubt?” It stars Meryl Streep as a nun and school principal, faced with a moral judgement call. Her unswerving certainty about a priest’s immorality serves to raise our questions and doubts. I don’t want to spoil such a fine, provocative movie, but let us say that faith can break on a vine that is too brittle with certainty. Life events tend to test absolutist belief and judgement, until it either cracks, or softens and bends to a humbler pose. Young people like moral certainty, clear answers and boundaries between right and wrong. But once we reach a certain age, we discover that there is very little about life that is ethically black or white. Real faith matures in our compassionate responses to the many moral shades of gray.

God is the encompassing all, a mystery beyond our comprehension, so naturally when we try to grasp God, we will experience uncertainty. As Tillich wrote, our faith journeys may naturally “oscillate between ecstatic confidence and despairing doubt.” If our response to doubt is fear - panic that we might not have ‘our’ God in ‘our’ grasp - then we may shut down our questioning, unruly brains and banish our unacceptable feelings. And thus, alas, so many Christians have shut out the God who comes to us with just the evidence we need. As Jesus came to Thomas. As God came to me - and to many of you too.

Most of you know that my childhood Catholic devotion collapsed under the weight of my adolescent questioning - questions that could not be answered because it never occurred to me that I could ask them out loud. I held fiercely to the atheist conclusions I came to as a proudly rational 14-year-old. Until at the age of 23, God wafted into my dance class and lifted me into an unexplainable experience of ecstatic unity. Such joyful peace!

Thus began my spiritual quest - a hunger for more of that awesome God connection. My questioning curiosity led me to kundalini yoga and chanting with the Sikhs, Buddhist meditation, solstice celebrations and reading the likes of Ram Dass. It wasn't until I was 37 that God brought me home to Christian community - to a church much changed since my teens. In response to my own tentative questions about what I had to believe in order to belong to this United Church, the Minister asked "Do you think you have to leave your brains at the door to come to church?" Not any more!

God comes to each of us in God's time, comes to us with just the right response to our hunger or desperation, to our honest doubts and uncertainties. Thomas had to wait a tortured week for Jesus to show. Most of us wait for years. But throughout the history of Christianity, our biblical tradition and our shared community testimony assures us God comes to the questers and the questioners, often in times of crisis. And our Holy encounters are marked by that indescribable presence of Peace.

Jesus said "Peace be with you" - doubting Thomases and questioning Christians! Let us share in our quests to understand and see more of the God who shows up for us - that Peace and Presence which - once recognized - is and always will be our only certainty.
Amen.