

Doubt Is a Gift

John 20:19-31

Doubt is one of my spiritual gifts. You see, I was raised in an atmosphere where “doubting”, “suspicion”, “questioning” was the norm rather than just unquestioningly believing what was being told at face value. If an offering did not seem to fit what seemed to be “common sense”, I was not ready to accept it at face value...I would doubt it!...I haven't changed. I'm still a doubter! (Did you ever play the card game “I Doubt It”? I was a master at that game!)

Poor Thomas and his one dimensional reputation. The one time he doesn't show up for a meeting, he misses the “big reveal” – and forever after he is known as the “doubter.” We don't know why he wasn't there that first night after Jesus mysteriously disappeared from the tomb. However, we do know the rest of the disciples were locked in a room, fearing for their lives. Then, without opening the door, Jesus appeared among them. First, Jesus tried to calm their fears, saying, “Peace to you.” But then, unasked by the disciples, Jesus showed them his wounded hands and side.

So why is it so strange that Thomas, who isn't there that night, would ask to see Jesus' hands and side? Why shouldn't he get the same visual and physical confirmation that the rest of the disciples got?

In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene runs to tell the disciples that the tomb is empty, but they don't believe her; it doesn't make sense...they doubt her. Only Peter and “the other disciple” run back with Mary to the tomb. When they see that Jesus is indeed gone, they return to their safe hiding place. It is only after Mary is alone that she sees Jesus at the tomb. Once she catches her breath, she goes to tell the other disciples. Do they believe her now? Or do they still doubt her?

Thomas is also known as Thomas Didymus, Thomas the twin. There is no tradition of him actually having a twin so some scholars suggest that Thomas' twin is us, the readers. Anyone who reads the story is related to Thomas...through doubt.

However, like all of us, Thomas is actually more complicated than simply his doubts. For example, in another scripture reference (John 11:16) he is the one who encourages the other disciples to follow Jesus so that they all “might die with him”. In John 14:5, Thomas is serious about wanting to follow Jesus, all the way. While in John 21:1-2, Thomas’ name appears as one of the disciples who are present when Jesus performs the miracle of the 153 fish (throw your nets on the other side of the boat).

Tradition has it that Thomas traveled to southern India and spread the faith there. Known as the Saint Thomas Christians, they are one of the oldest Christian communities in the world.

And of course there is the Gospel of Thomas, one of the gnostic gospels. The Gospel of Thomas is a series of Jesus’ sayings, some of which sound very much like - or identical to – the sayings of Jesus in the New Testament gospels.

While Thomas’ life is larger than the one incident where he requests/demands proof of Jesus being resurrected, it is Thomas’ “gift of doubt” that we remember,...and that so many of us share.

We often think of doubt and belief as opposites, as two ends of a spectrum. In order to be a true believer, one must deny doubt. But what if following in the Jesus way is less about irrefutable proof and belief and more about doubt and faith? What if belief and doubt are not the dichotomy we should focus on. Or maybe it is not a dichotomy at all.

I appreciate that our “Hymnal: A Worship Book” has a large section called Faith Journey. And one of the subsections in Faith Journey is “Doubt/Faith.” (hymns 551-572) The section is not called Doubt or Faith; not called Belief or Doubt. It is Doubt/Faith. It’s as if doubt and faith are two sides of a single thing, as if there is not really all that much distance between them - as if we can’t truly have one without the other.

The gift of doubt/faith is that it keeps us engaged. If we *believe* then the conversation sort of stops there. You know that old bumper sticker “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” ...End of discussion.

But doubt/faith means we keep talking or are at least open to continuing the conversation, whether that conversation is with oneself, or God, or Jesus, or Spirit, or Jesus’ followers, or other people who live with doubt/faith. Choosing a life of doubt/faith means that we are seeking the blessing that Jesus speaks of at the end of this passage. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Or we might say *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have doubt/faith.*

The gospel of John understands the complexities of faith and doubt: seeing and believing, seeing and not believing, seeing what you want to believe. Jesus heals a man who was born blind and yet the religious leaders want absolute proof that the man was ever blind in the first place (John 9). They don’t want to hear about his experience of now being able to see or about the person who healed him. They want his experience to fit their beliefs.

It is not explicitly stated in the scripture but we might observe, we might recognize a connection between power and belief. Those who have power often declare what should be believed and set the perimeters for what is believable. This is how systemic injustice functions and gets perpetuated. Those without power are not to be believed, especially when their experiences contradict what the powerful declare to be true.

This was how it worked in Jesus’ day and it remains true today: those in power attempt to define what is true for the rest of us. This is why the gift of doubt is so important, and why we need a hermeneutic of suspicion, why we need a discovery or study of the biblical truths and the values of suspicion - the values of doubt...However, we need this study of the value of doubt not when just approaching the Bible.

Are we to unquestioningly believe police departments when they describe shootings of unarmed citizens as justified? Or do we believe, without challenge, that it is fair for professional women soccer players to be paid a fraction of what their male colleagues are paid? Does faithfulness demand that we believe religious institutions when they say they did not know their leaders/priests/pastors have been abusive?...Do we believe? Or do we doubt?

While Thomas doubts, he wants to believe, he wants to see for himself. A week later, in the locked room of disciples, Jesus presents himself again with “Peace to you.” This time the instructions are particularly to Thomas: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas’ doubt leads him to touch the wounds. He cries out, “My Lord and My God.” Does this mean he believes?

I believe that doubt is a gift. While some are given the gift of belief, some of the rest of us have been given the gift of doubt. Amen

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