

Good Doubt – John 20:19-31 – April 8, 2018

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Back while I was in college and not long after I had become a follower of Jesus Christ, I wanted to learn as much about God and Christianity as I could. I had many questions, having not grown up in the church, and the college campus minister patiently answered them the best he could and according to what he believed. As I was attempting to understand the concept of human sin, I found myself reading the Book of Genesis. I found the stories confusing, especially the one about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

As I understood it, the first two humans were completely innocent, without sin. Life was going pretty well in Paradise. They could do what they wanted, but God told them to avoid eating the fruit of one particular tree. It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But then along came the crafty serpent who took advantage of the woman's innocence and tricked her into eating the fruit and giving it to her male companion. Their eyes were suddenly opened and understanding dawned on them. God, angry with their disobedience, kicked them from the garden and sent them on their way.

To me, the story was not logical. I wondered, how could God punish the humans for a supposedly sinful act, when they didn't even understand the concept of sin in the first place – they didn't yet understand good and evil. Up until then, everything in the garden was perfect. They had absolutely no comprehension of the consequences of doing something wrong, because they didn't understand what "wrong" was. So in my mind, I reasoned that God was being unduly harsh on the innocent couple. How could they be found guilty for something done in innocence?

I brought this question to the campus minister. His response was one of the first indications that my sojourn with the Southern Baptists was not going to last. He said to me, there are some things we are not meant to question. Some things we simply have to believe because the Bible says it.

Today's lesson from John's Gospel deals with the subject of doubt. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines doubt as: uncertainty of belief or opinion that often interferes with decision-making, a state of affairs giving rise to uncertainty, hesitation, or suspense, or a lack of confidence. Thomas displayed doubt when he refused to believe what his friends told him about seeing Jesus alive. The facts did not add up to him, and without seeing it for himself, he was not going to change his opinion on the matter.

This story about Thomas and Jesus shows up in the lectionary readings every year on the Sunday following Easter. The truth of Easter is astounding. Its message defies rational thought and contradicts everything we understand about life and death. Even the very first disciples, Jesus' closest friends, refused to believe the story that the women brought back from the empty tomb. I always think that Thomas gets unduly criticized for his lack of belief. The other disciples didn't believe the story until Jesus showed up, so why should they expect Thomas to be the exception?

The church has a poor history of dealing with doubt. Those who questioned the traditions of the church were thrown out or labeled heretics, and over the centuries, many have been killed for their doubt. Even today, there is a stigma within the church, especially in the more conservative circles, against questioning anything that the bible says. If the bible says it, that means it's so. And that apparently goes for what the bible doesn't say. I had one Sunday School teacher state that all angels were male. I was surprised by her assertion, so I asked how she knew that, she said, the bible never mentions a female angel.

Yet while some in the church often take a negative view of doubt, other disciplines recognize the benefits of doubt. An article in Psychology Today extols the virtues of doubt. Expressing doubt is necessary for scientific discovery. Human understanding will stagnate if we refuse to examine and re-evaluate what we think we know. Refusing to acknowledge doubt is a sign of ignorance. Blind faith is not faith at all. It is submission to an authority unchallenged. When cracks begin to appear in the façade of this type of "all or nothing" faith, the shallow roots of their belief are often ripped out, and these are the people who often leave the church completely.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/caveman-logic/201609/why-little-doubt-is-good-you>

Doubt keeps our minds alert and open to alternate possibilities. It is not the opposite of faith, but is in fact, a necessary part of faith. We in the Reformed Tradition are always open to adjusting what we know and believe based upon new insights and understandings from scripture and the workings of God's Holy Spirit. Doubt moves us forward, to seek new ways of drawing closer to and understanding God and how to live out the mission of Christ in the world.

Theologian and writer Philip Yancey is a strong proponent of doubt within Christianity. It allowed him to challenge unhealthy teachings in his childhood church and move into a deeper understanding of faith. On his website, he points out that burying our doubts does not solve them. Doubt or uncertainty is a feeling, and when feelings are suppressed, they

tend to reexhibit themselves in more toxic ways later on. By embracing our own doubts, Yancey believes that we have a better chance of reaching those people who live in what he calls the "borderlands of belief." These are people who have an inkling that there is more "out there" than just what we can see and experience, but they don't know how to make sense of this. <https://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/faith-and-doubt>

When people ask themselves the question "Is this all there is?" the door opens to delving into the world of the spiritual. In seeking to know something beyond ourselves, we have to keep our minds open to new understandings. If we simply take it on faith that we're better off not knowing, better off not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, our faith stagnates. We become locked into our childhood faith built on authoritarian views and values. But a growing faith that beckons us to a closer relationship to God in Jesus Christ, embraces doubt as a means to challenging what we think we already know.

When Jesus came to the upper room a second time so that Thomas could see him in the flesh, I don't think that Jesus was angry or disappointed with him. Having lived as one of us, God understands us much better than we understand ourselves. We have for so long in the church seen doubt as a deterrent to faith. But it is human to doubt, and if anyone understands our humanity, it is Jesus. Let us be willing to experience our doubts and bring them to him when they come.