

"Faithful Doubt"
John 20:19-31

"Do not doubt but believe." How does one argue with Jesus, but are doubt and belief necessarily antithetical? Is "faithful doubt" an oxymoron? Maybe, just maybe, doubt is an aid to belief? One of the oft quoted sayings from the writings of Frederick Buechner is "doubts are ants in the pants of faith – they keep it awake and moving."ⁱ

Some of you may have been introduced to the Myers-Briggs personality inventory at your place of work. It analyzes differences in human behavior which grow out of basic preferences we all have in four areas:

- where we like to focus our attention;
- the way we like to take in information;
- the way we like to decide;
- the kind of lifestyle we adopt.

The way we like to take in information has to do with the way we perceive the world around us. The way each of us likes to do that may be found on a continuum between *sensing* at one extreme and *intuiting* at the other extreme. It's not a matter of one way being right and the other wrong. It's a matter of our preference.

Sensing types collect data through the 5 senses: touch, hearing, sight, taste and smell. What is real is what can be perceived with those 5 senses. They know something to be true when they have all the facts.

Intuitive types, on the other hand, collect data through a "6th" sense, or "intuition." Such people trust insights, hunches and premonitions even more than sense data. They often can't tell you how they know what they know."

My God-given preference is to be a sensing type, almost to the extreme. I don't intuit things very well. I leave that up to my wife! Thomas is my kind of guy! **"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."**

I appreciate our Lord's tolerance of we sensing types. Jesus doesn't put us down. There's no "O Tom, what does it take to get through to you!" At first read it sounds as if Jesus chastises Thomas. **"Do not doubt but believe."** But Jesus clearly wants Thomas to believe. Knowing that Thomas is a sensing type Jesus invites him to touch. **"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."**

Even though Jesus is accepting of Thomas' ways of collecting data, he asks him point blank, **"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."** To believe before I see is not my normal preference, but in matters of faith, even I have discovered it is the better way. Indeed, faith is the opposite of "seeing is believing." **"Faith,"** says the scripture, **"is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen."**ⁱⁱ

However, the better way may not be always what we need and in his encounter with Thomas, Jesus is most accommodating. Doubt which refuses to believe, no matter what the evidence may say, is unfaithful. Doubt which seeks to believe something because you really believe it, not just because someone told you to believe it, is faithful doubt.

In her book, *Called to Question*, Benedictine sister Joan Chittister tells about her conversion from religion to spirituality. The only child of a Roman Catholic mother and a Presbyterian step-father, Joan had an unusual interest in religion for a young girl. It troubled her that her good and faithful step-father was judged by some to be undeserving of heaven because he was a Protestant. "Early on I knew that life was not really the way the church said it was," she writes. But she pushed her questions away.

I went from church to church, smelling the cool, damp air of their high vaulted caverns. I lit candle in every candle stand along the way. Then I dropped on my knees at the marble altar rails next to each flickering bank of flames to draw God's attention to the petition they represented. Most of all, I studied my catechism. Correction: No, I did not "study" it ... I swallowed it whole. I memorized every word of it ... I would recount every feast day. I could recite every gift of the Holy Spirit. I could list every capital sin.

She entered the convent at sixteen. She fulfilled all the requirements, followed all the rules, took all the vows. She became active in the Civil Rights and women's movements, wrote over two dozen books, traveled widely on the lecture circuit, taught courses on spirituality, and accumulated many honorary degrees. But a moment came when something shifted.

She describes the ensuing journey as one "from the certainties of dogma to that long, slow personal journey into God ... I began my own wrestling match with God, which no catechism, no creed, could mediate. From then on .. I would have to dare to ask the questions no one had ever wanted me to ask." She adopted what she called a "spirituality of search" in which openness to other ideas is not considered an infidelity, but rather the beginning of spiritual maturity.ⁱⁱⁱ I believe we are all called to question, not because we are unbelieving doubters but because we want to believe more really, more passionately.

There is almost universal agreement that the late Henri Nouwen reached a high level of spiritual maturity. One of my favorite passages from his writings reads:

...In religious education, revelation and affirmation are of great importance. The fact that so many students do not care for religious instruction is largely related to the fact that their own life experience is hardly touched. There are just as many ways to be a Christian as there are Christians, and it seems that more important than the imposition of any doctrine or precoded idea is to offer the students the place where they can reveal their great human potentials to love, to give, and to create, and where they can find the affirmation that gives them the courage to continue their search without fear.

Only when we have come in touch with our own life experiences and have learned to listen to our inner cravings for liberation and new life can we realize that Jesus did not just speak, but that he reached out to us in our most personal needs. The Gospel doesn't just contain ideas worth remembering. It is a message responding to our individual human condition. The Church is not an institution forcing us to follow its rules. It is a community of people inviting us to still our hunger and thirst at its tables. Doctrines are not alien formulations which we must adhere to but the documentation of the most profound human experiences which, transcending time and place, are handed over from generation to generation as a light in our darkness.^{iv}

I think that's what St. Paul meant when he wrote to the Philippians to **“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”**^v

Many times people have asked me, “What do we Presbyterians believe about this or that?” I usually shrug my shoulders and say, “It depends upon which Presbyterian you ask!” That is a baneful suggestion for those who think we should all think and believe in the same way and walk in lock-step fashion; it is a blessing for those who experience a lively faith because they have learned to think things through for themselves. It is a blessing for them to sing as our choir did earlier:

My faith has found a resting place, not in device nor creed.
I trust the ever living One, His wounds for me shall plead.
I need no other argument, I need no other plea.
It is enough that Jesus died and that He died for me.^{vi}

Alfred Lord Tennyson had this radical thought: “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” George MacDonald in a similar vein, “Doubt is the hammer that breaks the windows clouded with human fancies, and lets in the pure light.” Thomas, to his credit, refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There was an uncompromising honesty about him: he refused to deny his doubts.

As I see it, the reason why so many Christians don't exhibit a lively faith, or why church life can seem so deadly, is because too many Christians are not as honest, nor do they care enough to struggle with whatever issue is at hand, “working out their own salvation,” as Paul would say, or “wrestling with God,” as Sister Jean would say. They are quite content with a second-hand faith, regurgitating only what others have told them to believe. In our day, the so-called successful churches are those that pre-package neat answers to all the questions of faith and life. When we don't think for ourselves, our faith is more of a sideline issue in our life. Did not Jesus say that we should love God with our mind as well as with our heart and soul?^{vii}

Sometimes, yea many times, we sensing types just can't think things through to make sense. That's when we have to stretch toward the other side of the continuum and “intuit” or believe something without any evidence.

You probably remember the story from April, 2006, when two young women were

involved in a fatal car crash that left one of them dead and the other severely injured. What brought the story to national attention was the case of mistaken identity – the young woman everyone thought had died, Whitney Cerak, actually lived, and Laura Van Ryns whom everyone thought had survived, had actually died in the accident. It took 5 weeks before the mixup was discovered, during which time the Van Ryns kept vigil in the hospital for a daughter that wasn't theirs and the Ceraks buried a daughter that wasn't theirs either. It is a gut wrenching story.

Matt Lauer interviewed both families on the *Today Show* this past week. At one point he asked Whitney the question that just won't go away – “Did you ever question the reality of God or why God would allow something like this to happen?” Why do we need to have an answer to that question? Would knowing the answer make life feel better for us? Gratefully, both families are deeply grounded in Christian faith and appeared to be most content in trusting God, even though they did not know the answer. Time and again they witnessed to God's presence in their lives which they credit with pulling them through the ordeal. When you can affirm that presence, when you believe that Jesus Christ is alive, only then are you likely to sing with conviction that “though the wrong seems off so strong, God is the ruler yet!”^{viii}

Still, it's good when we can see with our own eyes and we can know beyond the shadow of a doubt. A woman writes, “Five years ago I had emergency surgery. My sister, a professor with final exams to give, was getting married in less than a week. Yet she drove from New York City to Massachusetts in a snowstorm to see me in the hospital. No phone call would reassure her that I was alive. She had to see me with her own eyes. Sometimes the demand to see is not doubt. Sometimes it is even love.”^{ix}

How can we love Jesus without being honest about our doubts? Praise God that Thomas loved Jesus enough to want to see for himself. **“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”**^x

i. *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 20

ii. Hebrews 11:1

iii. This reference to Joan Chittister comes from a sermon preached by The Rev. Deacon Eyleen Farmer on June 11, 2006 at the Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis.

iv. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975)p. 62

v. Philippians 2:12

vi. From the choir's anthem for the day, *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place* by Edmunds

vii. Mark 12:30

viii. From "This Is My Father's World," by Maltbie Babcock, Hymn 298, Presbyterian Hymnal, 1990.

ix. Amy Hunter, The Show-Me Disciple, *Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002

x. Mark 9:24