

“The Benefit of the Doubt” / John 20:19-31 / 15 April 2012

Doubting Thomas. Of all the ragtag band of bearded misfits who inhabit the pages of our holy book, of all the dreamers, and the stargazers, and the peasants, and the kings and queens, and the soldiers, and prophets, there are only few that I appreciate as much as good old “Doubting” Thomas. I’m grateful for his doubt because I am certain that doubts are not the enemy of faith. On the contrary, there is no real faith apart from those persistent questions, those uncertainties, those moments of real disbelief. Faith, by definition, is not certainty. And any real faith needs doubt, for at the heart of every doubt is an underlying belief. It’s just a belief other than the one you’re trying to believe. Besides, have you ever met a person who never doubted?

When we were living in a little town up in the great North Woods of Pennsylvania and our children were little more than toddlers, we had some difficulty finding baby sitters for them. There were a few in-home daycares in that little town, places that usually smelled of cigarette smoke, where a local mother would keep anyone’s kids all day by planting them in front of the TV to watch *Sponge Bob*—a cartoon that I especially hated. But they were seedy places, and every time we had to drop our children there on our way to work, we felt as if we were damaging them somehow. They never seemed to mind it, but we did. And so, we spent many unhappy hours in that little town trying to cajole people we liked into coming to our house to take care of our kids while we went off to our respective jobs. But unlike here in the South Hills, there were only few wives or single women of good repute who had their weekdays free to watch someone else’s children. Finding childcare was a constant struggle.

Enter Miss Tish. When the 60-something wife of the new interim Baptist pastor showed up at a clergy dinner, I could have thought she drifted from the sky on a magic umbrella, just like Mary Poppins. She was a godsend. She was from Massachusetts, and her friends and grandchildren were far away. She loved kids, but since she was not an outdoorsy person, she had nothing to fill the long, empty days in a small town among the trees. Sitting there at the clergy dinner, I made some scathing reference to my least least-favorite cartoon—*Sponge Bob*. Miss Tish groaned across the table. Michelle and I glanced at each other sideways. “This sweet, lonely lady is a pastor’s wife. She’s misses her grandchildren. AND she despises *Sponge Bob* as much as I do!” Miss Tish was married to the Baptist minister, but she was a Roman Catholic, and so we said to each other, “Ah, what an open-minded person she must be!” Within days, Miss Tish was coming to our house daily to keep our kids. Not only did Miss Tish NOT sit the children in front of the TV; she baked cookies with them, and played “princess” with them, and encouraged them to use their imaginations. It was a relief and a blessing.

Until one day Chloe said something to me about going to hell...and burning there forever and ever. Until one day when I came home from work, and the children informed me that they’d spent the morning at the Catholic church lying on the floor of a chapel in front of Jesus’ body. Another day, I came home from work, and Chloe was so excited to show me the little picture she had drawn. It was a crayon drawing of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing beside an open grave, with a devil running away in fear, and Chloe hiding in Mary’s skirts. The local Catholic priest, a fellow I liked very much, began to complain about this new lady in his church who was criticizing him for not taking a hard enough stand against this group or that group. She especially wanted him to organize a kind of parade down the main street of town, and he wanted no part of it.

I think the last straw was when Miss Tish told me in passing that her son was getting married out on the West Coast, but she did not need any time off because she was not going to the wedding. I protested, “You have to go to your son’s wedding.” And she said to me, as if she expected me to agree, “I won’t go because I disapprove of his lifestyle. My son is straight, but he’s invited some of his gay friends. I told him, ‘It’s them or me,’ and he chose them, so I will not be going.” The things about hell, and Mary, and lying prostrate before the communion wafer—all these things we took in stride because a good baby sitter is hard to come by. I had asked Tish to stop talking to the kids about religion, which made for an awkward moment. We instructed the kids that Miss Tish believed things that we didn’t believe. But Michelle thought it was harmless, that exposure to a variety of beliefs was actually good for them. And yet, when I discovered that she was the kind of woman who would skip her own son’s wedding just to avoid coming into contact with homosexuals, well, it was really as much as I could take.

Or I should say, it was as much as she could take. I did not lose my cool with her, but I stood there silently asking myself, “This woman told a four-year-old and a five-year-old about hell. She indoctrinates my children with a brand of Catholicism that embarrasses the local priest. Is it really enough that she dislikes *Sponge Bob* as much as I do? Would she teach my children hatred?” When Tish saw me silently holding this debate with myself, she understood that I didn’t approve of her decision, and she said a hasty good-bye. And we never saw her again. Against my best judgment, we called her the following week to work out her baby-sitting schedule, but she had her husband tell us over the phone that she was busy. The same thing happened the following week, too. And the week after that, well, we moved to Pittsburgh.

Now I was grateful to Tish for being so good with my kids, for baking cookies with them, and playing with them, and apparently loving them. In some ways, I think, she was trying to make them into her surrogate grandchildren. But her faith was so filled with hard, jagged certainties that it ruined my trust in her. I don’t know if Tish never experienced any doubts in her life of faith, or if she simply stifled those doubts and steamrolled them with her forceful brand of religion. But either way, I think that I’d sooner entrust my children’s moral upbringing to a skeptic like Doubting Thomas.

Thomas wasn’t there when the risen Lord appeared to the other disciples, as they were hiding out in the upper room. When they told him that they had seen Jesus alive, he understandably doubted. He said, “Unless I see him for myself, unless I touch him, I will not believe.” Thomas has been getting treated like a lowlife infidel ever since. Growing up in Sunday school I always heard that Thomas was more or less a bad guy. We were always told, “Don’t be like Thomas, full of doubts. Believe! Just believe.” But just a few weeks ago we talked about how you cannot manufacture belief. What are we going to do with Thomas, the guy who won’t “just believe”?

Well, I don’t know where Thomas was when the others had a vision of the resurrected Jesus. Maybe he was out at some atheists’ convention, or campaigning to take the phrase “under God” out of the pledge of allegiance. He could have been drifting away from the pack, losing his faith, now that Jesus was dead. And yet, I respect Thomas for his skepticism. I admire Thomas for insisting on a personal, firsthand experience of the living Christ before declaring that he believes. I mean, the others got a firsthand experience, and what but a personal, firsthand experience of the living Christ has ever been enough to make anyone believe in him?

You and I are drawn to certainties because if we have the certainties figured out, then the world feels like a safer place. If I know without any doubt that one plus one always equals two, then I know what the number one is good for, and I know where the number two comes from. And if I hate the number two, and if I don't want to see the number two wondering around the property, then I better keep those ones from bumping into each other. That's why it's nice to have a lot of cold, hard certainties in the life of faith. If I can live with at least a moderate number of certainties, then I can flatter myself that I'm in control of things. I know the laws that govern the universe, and I can use them to my own advantage. If I have it all figured out, then I know how to act at all times. As a pastor, with nothing but certainties (which many pastors have in spades) then I'll know all the right words to say in the face of tragedy and loss. I have God memorized like a mathematical equation, and I know how to use God, too. The trouble with that understanding of faith is...that it's not faith. That kind of faith is probably the most common brand on the market, but it's no faith at all; it's more an attempt to be in control. Real faith is not so much a bundle of sharp, useful certainties. Real faith isn't about having all the answers; it's about living faithfully in the midst of uncertainties.

I once knew a missionary, when I was living overseas, who was approached by new African converts asking questions about what's real. We all have such questions, and they end up taking the form of inquiries about God, or life in general, or the afterlife. To his credit, this guy admitted that he didn't have all the answers, but he did have a nice little book where he could find the answers. It was a paperback book about so thick, written by the conservative Presbyterian scholar R.C. Sproul, and it was entitled *Now That's a Good Question*. People came to this missionary with questions, and he would look up the answers just as a pharmacist might look up a prescription, or a medical doctor might look up a course of treatment for an infection. "Why is God invisible? Hmm, now that's a good question. Let's look it up; there's got to be a reasonable explanation. Oh, look, here it is. It says that God has to stay invisible so that we will walk by faith and not by sight." As far as I know that missionary's still over there using that book. It's actually not a bad book. That kind of writing is called "apologetics," and it has its place, for there certainly are certainties.

But personally, I no longer see the life of faith as a quest for rock solid answers. More than intellectual certainties, I find that faith is about relationships: to God, to other people, to the church and the world. Instead of doubt-free truths, I see the life of faith more and more as a journey from bondage into freedom, a return from exile to home, from alienation to rootedness, connectedness, groundedness in God, our soul's true and only home. There's mystery; there's wonder; there's peace for the soul who can live with uncertainty. Faith isn't about having all the answers. Having all the answers is a self-serving bid for control. Having all the answers is our grasping human attempt to be God. No, living faithfully amid the uncertainties; that's what we're called to do. Better, like Thomas, to own our doubts and uncertainties, for it is only in owning them that Thomas experienced the living Christ for himself. And the same is true for us.

Religious theorist James Fowler documented five stages of faith development. That's to say, for some people—presumably like Miss Tish—faith is simple, direct, and all very easily laid out in black and white. But the more mature your faith becomes, the less simple it becomes, and the less it can be reduced to black and white rules. Fowler

notes that, ironically, when you transition from one stage of faith to another, from a simpler to a more complex, you often think that your faith is dying. But it's growing.

Socrates once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." I don't think he's 100% correct. Mushrooms and ferns cling to life, and they propagate their species without living well-examined lives. Their lives are reasonably worthwhile. And yet, it is also true that doubts are the means by which our life is examined. With doubts, we examine our faith, sharpening it, shaping it, making it more truly our own.

How many people in our pews are pretending not to doubt? How many people in our pews—and pulpits—are afraid to admit that sometimes they struggle with the harder questions about God and faith? How many of them don't want to face the doubts because they cherish their faith and fear that the doubts will destroy it? If, as we discussed a few weeks ago, your faith is a matter of "trusting" God more than a matter of "understanding" God, then doubts will never harm it. Doubts are an invitation for you to plunge deeper into the life of faith, as you transition from one stage of faith development to the next. Most people stop thinking about God right about the time they get confirmed into the church at age sixteen. Imagine if all your development stopped at that age! Imagine if your understanding of the opposite sex stopped when you were sixteen, or your ability to drive a car or navigate hardships! Doubts call you forward to maturity and development. Besides, have you ever met a person who has never had a doubt? Does their faith appeal to you? Or does it frighten you?

And most importantly, what do we say to a world beset with doubts about the Christian faith, doubts about the church? A Sunday school teacher was walking around her classroom watching as the children diligently drew pictures. She saw that little Angela was drawing a most unusual picture, and she asked, "Angela, what are you drawing, sweetheart?" Without looking up the girl replied, "God." The teacher cautioned her, "But sweetie, no one really knows what God looks like." Again, without looking up from her drawing, Angela replied, "They will in a minute." I think if modern people fail to trust the church, it's in part because we long ago stripped all the mystery and the majesty from God. We made our maps of the Deity, staked claims on those maps, and set about creating political ideologies to protect those claims. If people have doubts about the church, it's probably almost entirely because of the church's long history of involvement in oppressive politics—not only in North America, but around the world. The world is surely losing faith in the church; the cover of *Newsweek* magazine several years ago declared "The decline and fall of Christian America." But isn't it the world's doubts themselves that give us the opportunity to remake ourselves according to the vision of our Founder? Isn't it our institutional decline that causes us to rethink the structures, and the strictures, and the unnecessary stuff we've accumulated down through the centuries? The world's doubts will purify the church—making us stronger if smaller. Besides, I think John's whole point in telling us the strange story of Doubting Thomas is to say that the life of faith is largely about community. Thomas began to lose his faith as he drifted away from the pack. And he only found it by returning. Our world is looking for meaningful ways to be in community, and if we offer that, we'll be doing our job.

And what about doubts in your own life? Doubts are not the enemy of faith. Doubts are faith's teacher and shaper. Besides, have you ever known a person who never lived with a little bit of doubt? God give us all the courage and the forthrightness to be a little more like Doubting Thomas. Amen.