

# A Faith With Room For Doubt

## The Story of 'Doubting Thomas'

John 20:19-31  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
March 30, 2008

### **Question: Does being a faithful Christian rely upon agreeing with and consenting to traditional biblical interpretations and historic (and sometimes ancient) church doctrines?**

An enormous number of Christians and Christian organizations in our day and time insist that the answer to that question must be "yes." However, there's an ever-increasing number of people, including good Christian folks, that have said if the answer to that question *must* be "yes," then they have chosen to not have anything to do with the church or organized religion.

In order to approach this delicate subject, there's no better Scripture passage than today's Gospel Lesson, known as the story of 'Doubting Thomas.' We will look at that in more detail in just a moment.

**Many Christians, perhaps yourself, were raised to believe that if you doubted the literal historical accuracy or traditional interpretation of Scripture then you were not being faithful. Many Christians, perhaps yourself, were trained to not question what the church taught, because the Church knew the "right" answers.** That, by the way, is the very definition of the term "orthodoxy" – which literally means, "right belief."

But for nearly 150 years now, the battle over what is "fundamental" and "essential" to Christian belief and practice has been raging, especially between what has been labeled as the conservative and liberal wings of the church.

The conservatives feel that liberals have allowed skepticism and doubt to cloud their faith. The liberals counter that the conservatives aren't using their God-given gift of rational and scholarly thought when it comes to matters of revising what they believe to be out-dated biblical interpretations and church doctrines.

Some progressive Presbyterians are also fond of reminding their more traditionalist brothers and sisters in the faith of the official mantra of Presbyterianism: **"the church reformed and always reforming."** Also referenced is a historic line contained in our Presbyterian *Book of Order* that reminds us, **"God alone is the Lord of the conscious."**

Along these lines, a recent Authoritative Interpretation adopted by our denomination's General Assembly in 2006, states that when it comes to ordination, we are indeed allowed to declare a "scruple" - a disagreement –

with traditional theological thought. This was supposed to ease some of our recent tension.

Unfortunately, however, the divide between these two sides of the same coin of Christianity is as far apart as ever. Divisiveness, rather than loving our neighbor, seems to be the order of the day.

This ever-widening chasm is leading some Presbyterian congregations, like Kirk of the Hill here in Tulsa, for instance, to split away from our denomination. It is happening in other denominations as well, especially in the Episcopal Church.

Speaking personally, I have a lot of passion toward all of this because I have found myself on both sides of that theological coin at different points in my own journey of faith. I would venture to guess that that might be true for some of you as well.

But I have discovered a great truth concerning the difference between having doubts about theological positions, and having faith in God. And that truth is this: **Having doubts with the written and interpreted words about God and Jesus Christ is not the same thing as having doubts concerning the reality and integral experience of God and Jesus Christ.**

In other words, **more important than exactly what it is that you believe, is that you believe.** Does that make sense? The author of the Gospel of John even stated that that was the primary purpose for writing his gospel – to bring people to belief. Which brings us back to today's biblical text from John 20.

For some reason Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them during the evening of Easter Sunday. Thomas refused to take the other disciples' word for it and wanted to see and touch Jesus for himself. (Let's not forget, however, that the other disciples didn't believe Mary's word for it at first either when she first told them about the empty tomb.)

In order to be convinced, Thomas set forth conditions for his belief – that he must touch and see Jesus for himself. So a week later, when the disciples (including Thomas) were together again, Jesus appears once more and meets Thomas' conditions. Jesus allows Thomas to touch and see for himself.

It's important to note that there was no criticism or reprimand in Jesus' words to Thomas. Instead, Jesus responds with the words, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

Basically, the author of John is telling the church in his day: You can no longer see Jesus in person, but that's okay. Your faith is no less important or less strong than those that did see and touch Jesus. **This passage reveals that seeing the resurrected Christ is not what makes us a Christian. Rather, experiencing the resurrected Christ, which one does through the presence of the Holy Spirit, is what makes us a Christian.**

In returning to the issue of faith and doubt, let's look a little closer at one particular verse from today's gospel lesson. Most English translations use the word "doubt" in verse 27: "Do not doubt, but believe." This is why this story is known as "Doubting Thomas."

This seems to indicate that doubt *is* the opposite of believing. In looking at the original Greek, however, we learn that the Greek word that is usually used for “doubt” isn’t used here. Instead, **a more literal translation of verse 27 reads, “Do not be unbelieving but believing.” This may appear subtle, but having doubts with what you believe is not the same thing as blatant unbelief.**

What Jesus is trying to do is to encourage Thomas to move from a position of unbelief to belief. This story, then, does not so much focus on doubt and skepticism as it does on the very grounds of faith itself! Thomas is at a crossroads in his life. Will he choose to believe or not? The author of the Gospel of John indicates that **each one of us also stands at that same crossroads – to believe or not believe.**

**And when it comes down to the basics, the essentials, what is it that we are really asked to believe? I think the answer to that question is: Not church doctrine in and of itself, as some continue to insist, but simply that Jesus reveals the true nature and character and purposes of God.**

This biblical text suggests, then, that people are and can be at different stages and places in their faith development. Unfortunately, many churches have what may be described as a litmus test of what you *must* believe in order to be a member of their congregation. These churches are not very open or inclusive, and many are not afraid to claim that that’s the way they prefer it.

**But experts in the area of faith development reveal that in order for our faith to become real to each one of us, we must go through a stage called Searching Faith.** This involves looking at all we have been taught about the Bible, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the role of the church, etc., and asking the question, **“Is this really what I believe?”**

In the Bible, Thomas is our best example of this. He does not blindly accept what others tell him, but needs to find certainty for himself. John Westerhoff III, in a monumental book on the stages of faith development entitled, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, comments:

It appears, regretfully, that many adults in the church have never had the benefit of an environment that encouraged searching faith. And so they are often frightened or disturbed by [those] who are struggling to enlarge their [faith development].

Some persons are forced out of the church during this [searching] stage and, sadly, some never return; others remain in searching faith the rest of their lives... And surely they need to be encouraged to remain within the faith community during their intellectual struggle, experimentation, and first endeavors at commitment [page 97].

Needless to say, it is my sincere hope that this congregation will always be open and inclusive enough to allow you, and each other, to question and

search. In only my second week here as your new pastor, I can already confirm that this is indeed my understanding of the kind of congregation this is.

**This biblical story actually encourages the church, then, to be a safe place where all members of the faith community are allowed to ask questions and be at different places in their faith development.** To be perfectly honest, the more I study scripture the more I question. **I have learned to not associate any sense of doubt as being synonymous with a lack of faith.** In fact, I have often thought that it takes more faith in order to question what the church has told us to believe and do throughout the ages.

I want to close with a couple of quotes concerning these important issues. The first is from renowned New Testament commentator William Barclay, who wrote almost 60 years ago concerning the story of Thomas:

There is more ultimate faith in the person who [questions and] insists on being sure than the person who glibly repeats the things that he or she has never thought out, and which he or she does not really believe. It is doubt like that which in the end arrives at certainty... Thomas doubted in order to become sure.

Many of us progressive Christians are doing the very same thing today. And from the brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Paul Tillich, "The old faith must die, eaten away by doubts, but only so that a new and deeper faith may be born." And to give a final answer to the question of whether there is room for doubt in the life of faith, Tillich responds, **"Serious doubt is confirmation of faith."**

That being said, perhaps there are many of us, then, who are in a deeper place of faith than we realize. So I encourage you, when you come to church, to bring your questions and doubts along with you. For as a welcoming and inclusive congregation, **there is always a place for you**, wherever you may be along the path of your journey of faith.

Amen.