

A Searching Faith

The Story of 'Doubting Thomas'

John 21:19-31

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Without any intentional pre-planning on my part, I've noticed that there has been quite an **overarching theme** in my sermons over the past month. While it's one that is always near the surface, it really reared its head lately. I guess I would summarize that theme this way: **Being a faithful Christian does not rely upon agreeing with and consenting to traditional biblical interpretations and historic (a.k.a. ancient) church doctrine.**

Several weeks ago we looked at the **Ten Commandments**, seeing how that particular ancient culture played a large role in how those laws came to be written down – especially in the “thou shall not covet” one that named wives among a list of property owned by a neighbor.

Then we took a critical look at the still very-common understanding of the substitutionary theory of **Atonement**, that states that God *required* the shed blood of a human sacrifice as a prerequisite for salvation, forgiveness, and being made right with God.

On Palm/Passion Sunday we explored those **expectations** that each of us have of God, of others, and of ourselves – paying close attention to the tendency we all have to use those expectations to judge others, including God.

And last week, of course, was Easter. Using the words of Bishop John Shelby Spong, we addressed how the event known as the **Resurrection** could be seen as a powerfully real event without having to believe that it was necessarily a literal, historical event.

After the Easter service, a couple of long-time members of this congregation came up to me in the Narthex and shared something that I and many others have experienced after hearing Spong's words for the first time. One said that she heard what she herself had believed for a very long time – and that it was both refreshing and affirming to hear those words from a noted biblical scholar and theologian.

But no matter what it is you believe about all these issues that have been addressed from the pulpit lately, perhaps one of the most important outcomes is that it has gotten you to **take a good close look at what it is you believe at this particular point in your journey of life and faith.**

Not only that, it's important to know that **it is perfectly fine for you to disagree with me** or each other when it comes to a theological perspective or belief. **For there is something of much greater importance and significance than**

having us all think alike. And that is that we grow in meaningful relationship with each other and with God.

Interestingly, this overarching theme of being able to question biblical interpretations and church doctrines while maintaining relationship fits in beautifully with today's post-resurrection story commonly known as 'Doubting Thomas.' For another way of framing all of this is to say **it is okay to doubt**. And I'm talking about the kind of doubting where there is no judgment placed by me or anyone else in the process.

This is modeled to us by no other than Jesus himself in his interaction with his disciple, Thomas. Added to that, Thomas and the other disciples are to be credited for not letting doubt determine who's in or who's out of the company of God's people.

In the unfolding story of Thomas' doubt concerning Jesus' return, he is never excluded from or by the others. No one drives him away, telling him he can't come back until he's memorized and believes every word in the Apostles' Creed – even though they're not the ones who wrote it in the first place.

Nor is Thomas hostile in his questioning. To his credit, he doesn't storm out and start his own church. To the very end, **Thomas is included in the circle despite his questioning and doubt. The same is true for any and all who worship here at College Hill.** For we need to constantly remind ourselves that belief and doubt live together. In fact, doubt and certainty spark each other. Christian author Frederick Buechner cleverly and humorously states that doubts are the "ants in the pants" of faith.

So as it turns out, we should admire Thomas. His great virtue, as far as I am concerned, is that **he absolutely refused to say that he believed when he did not believe.** There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. **He would never quiet his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. Neither should we.**

One of the primary revelations found in this story, then, is that both faith and doubt witness to the unbelievable good news of resurrection; both faith and doubt respect the great mystery of Easter and testify to its power and magnitude to embrace both. But as we affirmed last Sunday, with almost 200 people in worship, Easter can be both a drawing card and a stumbling block to faith.

Yet, in these ongoing days of the Easter season **we are called by today's biblical text to keep company and faith with one another; to honor one another's questions and answers; and to let Easter's great consuming mystery have its way with us.**

Since today's gospel story is always the assigned lectionary passage for the week after Easter, and since I took a fairly in depth look at the details of this biblical story in my sermon last year, I want to head in a different direction this morning. [But first, this important commercial message. You can find that sermon from last year, and every other sermon I've preached here at College Hill, on our church website – www.collegehilltulsa.org. And now back to our regularly scheduled sermon.]

After the service of worship this morning, our **Book Club** will be reviewing and discussing the current bestseller ***The Shack***, by Wm. Paul Young. I read this book last month while I was away high up in the hills outside the Smokey Mountain National Park near Gatlinburg, Tennessee. A bit to my surprise, I was deeply moved by this fictional story of a man named Mack, who was trapped in what he called *The Great Sadness* after the kidnapping and murder of his young daughter.

Mack returns years later to the very shack, located in a remote mountain location, where there was evidence that it was where the murder took place.

While there, he has a remarkable vision. In this vision, he comes face to face with his many of his pre-conceived ideas concerning the nature and character of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; theological issues such as forgiveness, grace, and love; relationship issues between parents and children; and our tendency to play judge and jury.

A remarkable and surprising thing is happening throughout the world as people are reading this book, which has sold over 7 million copies and has been translated into many languages.

Many are discovering that this book is helping them in profound ways to start to come to terms with what might be described as *The Great Sadness* in their own life. Written as an allegorical narrative, many are finding themselves in this story, therefore causing (or allowing) them to reflect deeply upon their own lives and pre-conceived beliefs about God.

In a positive way, doubt (not unlike with the disciple Thomas) is being introduced into people's theological worldview, causing them to reevaluate many of their currently held beliefs. Therefore, I encourage you to read this book to see what effect, if any, it has on you.

Without giving too much away, let me briefly share just a few things revealed in Mack's vision. Mack finds himself in the presence of a large beaming African-American woman, a Middle Eastern man dressed like a laborer, and a small, distinctively Asian woman, all living in the shack together. They represent God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Mack finds the African-American woman in the kitchen preparing dinner and says to God, "I think it'd be easier to have this conversation if you weren't wearing a dress." To which she responds, "This is a good place to start. I often find that getting head issues out of the way first makes the heart stuff easier to work on later."

She continues, "Mack, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning. To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with a flowing beard, like Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings novels, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes." Mack was embarrassed to admit to himself that all his visuals for God were very white and very male.

And thus the book starts to deal with one religious stereotype after another, continuing with some very unflattering comments about the damage done by organized religion throughout the ages.

One remarkable outcome of the popularity of this book, as evidenced by the crowd of several thousand who heard the author, Paul Young, speak here in Tulsa just 2 1/2 weeks ago (including 6 of us from College Hill) is that many conservative evangelical Christians are allowing this book to challenge many of their pre-conceived notions about God. And that is no small feat.

Many are actually being lead into what developmental experts call a “searching faith.” This important step in faith development allows us to question what we have been told to believe about the Bible and God. And in the process, many are finding that their relationships with others who believe differently are actually growing and deepening.

Not unlike the disciple Thomas, many are discovering that a **bit of doubt goes a long way in actually strengthening a person’s faith**; that there is a benefit when doubt is introduced into well-constructed theological beliefs.

Many of us who label themselves as ‘progressive Christians’ have realized this for some time. Yet, we are not immune from our own preconceived, or in some cases newly-conceived, notions of God either.

So may our continued goal as a congregation be to work not so much on “right belief” but on right relationships, which are marked by mutual respect, openness, forbearance and forgiveness - in other words, continuing the work of Christ. And may our faith always be a searching faith.

Amen.