

“I Don’t Believe It!”

A meditation based on Psalm 145:10-18; Ephesians 3:14-21; Mark 9:14-24

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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A man was on trial for murder in Oklahoma. There was strong evidence of his guilt, but no one had discovered the body.

In his closing arguments, the defense lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, decided to play a trick. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced. “I have a surprise for you all. Within a minute, the person presumed to be dead will walk into this room.” He then turned and looked confidently towards the courtroom door. All eyes followed his, and the jury waited, stunned and expectantly.

A minute later, the lawyer resumed. “Actually, I didn’t mean what I just said. But you all watched the door with such anticipation that it is reasonable to assume that you doubt whether anyone was killed. I therefore insist that you return a verdict of not guilty.”

The jury, now confused, returned to deliberate. A few minutes later the jury returned with a pronouncement of a guilty verdict.

“But why?” asked the defense lawyer. “You must have had some doubt; I saw you all staring at the door.”

“Oh, we did look,” replied the jury spokesperson. “But your client didn’t.”

Doubts. We all have them, if we are honest with ourselves. Some of us have theological doubts or uncertainties about God’s Word. Others ask how we can trust the miracles of God when they clearly contradict the laws of science. Still others are more concerned with the larger, more mundane questions of the universe. Why does God allow suffering to continue? Why doesn’t God answer my prayers? Where is God?

Doubts. They can be nagging. They can be overwhelming. They can threaten to sap our faith of its very vitality.

The first thing we can console ourselves with is that doubt is normal; it is natural. Almost all of scripture’s giants of faith doubted at some point in their lives. Even Christ asked the question, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Which is not to say he did not have faith in God. But he did have doubts.

Writers in the Western world have traditionally had mixed feelings about the value of doubts. One can find many quotations defending the merits of doubt:

- “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” (Paul Tillich)
- “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*)
- “Doubt is but another element of faith.” (St. Augustine)
- “Who knows most, doubts most.” (Robert Browning)
- “Never be afraid of doubt, if only you have the disposition to believe.” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)
- “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” (René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*)
- “Doubt is the origin of wisdom.” (René Descartes)
- “To believe with certainty we must begin with doubting.” (Polish proverb)

And perhaps, best of all:

- “Why didn’t someone tell me that I can become a Christian and settle the doubts afterward?” (William Rainey Harper)

On the other hand, there many others who freely denounce doubt in no uncertain terms:

- “For right is right, since God is God, and right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty, to falter would be sin.” (Frederick William Faber, hymn writer/theologian)

And Christianity is not the only religion that traditionally has felt that doubt may be a bad thing. Mohammed confidently opened the Koran with these words, “There is no doubt in this book.” (*Surah 2*)

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In our last reading for this morning, we learned the moving story of a father who, in desperation to help his son possessed for many years by an evil spirit, is willing to try almost anything. He first makes his way to the disciples, who apparently are totally incapable of healing his son. Authority to cast out evil spirits had previously been granted to the disciples when Jesus sent out the Twelve to preach in Galilee (Matt. 10:1), but in today’s story they are helpless.

The father now rushes towards Jesus and pours out his story of trouble and disappointment. He tells of long years of suffering and then, unable to endure it any longer, exclaims “But *if* you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus then replies to him, “If *you* are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes.” With a burst of tears, and realizing his own weakness and lack of faith, the father casts himself on Christ’s mercy with the cry, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

The father doesn't believe, but he *wants* to believe. He is not sure whether Jesus can heal his son. He is confused about what to believe, what not to believe. He has just witnessed the disciples' inability to do anything to help, and his doubts have been confirmed. They have tried to cast out the spirit in Jesus' name, but to no avail. Why should the results be different when Jesus does the same?

Then, miraculously, Jesus heals his son! Not because the father has great faith, but *in spite of* his obvious doubts. To paraphrase another text, "Where doubt abounds, God's grace does much more abound." (Rom. 5:20)

Doubt can actually be a good thing to have. If I go into a store to make a purchase, I probably will go up to the cash register and give the cashier my credit card. What happens next? In many cases (maybe not often enough!) the cashier will ask to see my I.D. He or she will then look at my driver's license, take another look at my smiling image ("Yes, that's me..."), and if she doesn't doubt that I am the rightful owner of the credit card, will then proceed to swipe my card. Reasonable doubt is a good and necessary practice.

If we don't ask the questions, we will never have the answers! And if we don't doubt, we will never know which questions to ask...! And God knows that. I believe God has given us minds with which to think and reason, and God expects us to use them critically. Honest doubt is good. And our God is big enough not to be offended if we challenge or question some of the difficult ideas we find in scripture.

Throughout the Bible we read of those who sincerely doubted. Abraham and Sarah doubted God's promise to them. Job doubted God's justice in what he saw as God's punishment of him. The disciple we somewhat unfairly call "Doubting Thomas" would not believe until he actually saw Christ in person.

In church history Luther doubted, as did Wesley, and today we can thank God for their doubts. The abolitionist Wilberforce doubted the very words of scripture, which seemed in many passages to allow God's people to keep their own slaves indefinitely (as long as they were not Israelite slaves, Lev. 25:44-46 etc.). "I know what the Bible says," he mused, "but I cannot believe it means what it appears to mean, in the light of the gospel of grace."

We can thank God for the doubts of great scientists of the day such as Galileo, who doubted the words of the Church. Where would we be today without these champions of doubt, urging us to think new thoughts and dream new visions for God's world?

However, we also need to learn to "doubt our doubts" as well as our faith. We need to learn to think critically with the capacity God has given each one of us. Those who insist that they have never had doubts about their faith have probably either never been thinking, or they are perhaps being dishonest with themselves! As Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth puts it, "To be without questions is not a sign of

faith, but of lack of depth.” “We ask questions,” he says, “not because we doubt, but because we believe.”

And then there is the question of sincere doubt vs. dishonest doubt. We may recall the story of the Rich Young Ruler who came to Christ with an apparently sincere question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18-43) This man, unfortunately, was hoping to keep God at bay with the questions he kept asking. He really didn’t want to know the answers.

God’s truth can bear investigation. The truth will set us free! Let us not be afraid of honest questions and doubts. In real life, however, those answers are not always so easy to come by. We have to weigh the pros and the cons. Answers to life’s questions are seldom cut-and-dried. The evidence is not always totally clear.

Welcome to the real world! If we were to make decisions based on a 99% likelihood that we had made the right choice, it wouldn’t be so hard to determine what was truth. If we even felt we were 90% likely to be correct, it wouldn’t be so difficult. But what if the choice comes down to two opposing choices that we feel are 49 and 51% likely to be right? Which one do we then decide on? Like Wilberforce we may be left with a decision that is probably — though not certainly — correct! There are few absolute certainties in life. And so we are often left with doubts remaining. Life would be so much easier if everything were black and white; no grays in between.

In the end we may have to learn to live by what we believe, not by what we doubt. “Lord, I *do* believe; help my unbelief!” If you do not believe that God is personal, but you do believe that God is a Force — then believe that! If you cannot believe that Christ is divine, but you do believe that he was a wonderful person and a good example — then believe that! Open your life to the mystery of the divine, and accept what you are able to grasp. Your vision may change with time, but live faithfully in the moment with what you now believe.

If life provided all the answers, there would be no sense of mystery left. What is faith, if it is not concerned with the mysterious, the unknown, and the unknowable? As the writer Madeleine L’Engle puts it, “The questions worth asking are not answerable... The mystery is tremendous, and the fascination that keeps me returning to the questions affirms that they are worth asking, and that any God worth believing in is the God not only of the immensities of the galaxies ... but also the God of love who cares about the sufferings of us human beings and is here, with us, for us, in our pain and in our joy.”

Or as Albert Einstein described it in his 1932 Berlin speech to the German League of Human Rights, “The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious... He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious. To me it

suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that there is.”

In the year 2001, numerous letters written by Mother Teresa of Kolkata (Calcutta) during the 1950s and 1960s were made public during the Vatican’s process of gathering her paperwork for sainthood proceedings. What shocked the world was the dark, even despairing, tone of these writings.

Although known for her generally cheerful spirit, the Teresa revealed in her letters shows the torment exacted by her continual, deep spiritual pain. In more than 40 letters, many of which had never before been published, she bemoans the “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness” and “torture” she was undergoing. She compares her experience to hell and at one point says it drove her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. She writes, “In my soul, I can’t tell you how dark it is, how painful, how terrible — I feel like refusing God.” It was, one might say, the “dark night” of her soul, a darkness that frequently coexists with — perhaps even strengthens — one’s faith.

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

And *this* I believe!