

Follow Your Doubts
John 20:19-31

Religious people are generally uncomfortable with doubt. Among many Christians there is a fear of not believing or of not believing strongly enough. In church literature and sometimes in preaching the idea is conveyed that doubt blocks God's blessings in life. Because doubt is a natural part of the human thought process the church does not condemn it outright, but it views doubt with suspicion.

Most Christians, I find, want the comfort of firm belief. We find unwavering faith in other areas. Sports fans, members of political parties, and celebrity watchers believe in the persons, teams, or concepts they have adopted. They freely give allegiance, time, and money to these objects of their faith. They seldom doubt. At the beginning of the football season, for example, almost every fan feels strongly that his team will win the national championship. Doubt that for a moment and you are not among the faithful.

That attitude eases into our religious faith. We feel that we must believe. In fact, we develop rationalizations to cover issues we are not so certain about. I cite a common example. We say that we believe in God's control over everything that happens. A personal tragedy such as a critical illness or a common tragedy such as a tornado occurs. What do we think and what do we say? We suppose that we should believe in a God of love and a God in control. So what do you make of the pain that comes. We resort to our coping statements. You've heard them. A person will say, "Maybe we don't know why this happened now; someday we will understand." Or, the response might be, "God has his reasons." Or, the worst of all, "It's just God's will and we have to accept it."

In comments such as these and the many others that you and I encounter I sense a fear to ask questions or to doubt some of our assumptions about God. Religion tends to back away from hard questions. That's one reason why religion is losing ground in so many places. Along my pilgrimage I have learned to be comfortable with doubt. Somewhere I came to realize that God gave me a mind to think as well as a heart to love, and that has been one of my greatest blessings. The freedom to ask

questions and even to doubt has strengthened my faith in ways that I could not have imagined.

So it is that I have developed a genuine fondness for the disciple Thomas. Because he responded to the news of the resurrection with that skeptical remark, “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,” he has been branded with the epithet “doubting Thomas.” Thomas is the patron saint of doubters.

Many Bible students put Thomas into a certain category and pay him scant attention. There are actually several reasons why I have come to like Thomas so much. One is the courage he demonstrated in expressing his doubt. The other disciples had doubted also. When the women, according to Luke, came to the followers of Jesus with the news of the empty tomb, they “did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense” (24:11). But Thomas stood alone on his convictions; you have to admire that.

Another reason I like Thomas has to do with a collection of the sayings of Jesus under his name. No one can say for certain how much the disciple Thomas had to do with *The Gospel of Thomas*, but he is associated with it. The sayings in this collection hint of the closeness of the spirit of Jesus with our spirits and the possibilities that are ours in him. If Thomas had anything to do with gathering and preserving these teachings, I am deeply grateful to him.

Also, I like the mystery of Thomas’ name. *Thomas* is a Semitic name; the Greek equivalent is *Didymus*. Both words mean “twin.” Who was Thomas’ twin? There is no mention of a sister or brother. There is an ancient tradition that Thomas’ twin was Jesus. They were not seen as twins by birth but by attitude. They were “kindred spirits.” Was that name given to this man in the same way that Simon came to be called Peter? Perhaps.

The chief reason I admire Thomas as much or more than any of the other disciples is the personality you can construct from the few references to him in John's gospel. He is mentioned four times. When Jesus decided, against the advice of his followers, to go to Jerusalem, Thomas said, either through frustration or courageous commitment, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16). In the upper room when Jesus said that he was going to provide a place for those around him, Thomas asked the question on everyone's mind, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (14:5) John's third reference to Thomas is the story of his doubt. The fourth is the scene at the Sea of Galilee. Thomas is named immediately after Peter as meeting Jesus on the beach. Convinced, committed, and completely open, Thomas was ready for the next step in his walk with his Lord.

I think Thomas grew through his doubt. Maybe he stands today as a reminder to us to ask, to seek, and to knock as we follow Christ. No one should be afraid of doubt. It is a pathway to discovery. Doubt is even a part of who we are. A Jewish story depicts the creative activity of God. It describes the creation of the earth, the heavens, the seasons, and the animals. On the sixth day of creation, according to the story, God woke up with the idea that he would like to create mankind. God knew that that would be a risky venture, so he asked for the advice of two angels, Truth and Love. Truth argued against the creation of humanity, feeling that human beings would lie and kill in their pursuit of truth. Love said that human beings would be capable of self-sacrifice and acts of compassion. God decided to go with Love and to create humankind.

Man was touched with both a deep yearning for love and a deep yearning for truth. But God realized that there could be no absolute truth on earth. Truth was shattered into fragments all over the earth. A part of being human would be to search forever for truth within oneself and in the world. Life would be an ongoing act of creating, revealing, and discovering. The Hebrew sages who told this story understood that we are meant to yearn for truth and that, because we never have complete truth, we must doubt and decide.

Doubt is in our nature. Indulge me as I share several examples from my own faith pilgrimage where doubt, sometimes extending over a long period of time, has brought me to a much stronger trust in God. I grew up in a fundamentalist church environment. I was taught that certain beliefs made a person a Christian and that hell was created for persons who deviated from those beliefs.

My first problems with that came in high school and college when I studied science and history. The idea of evolutionary development simply made more sense to me than the notion that God created the world in seven twenty-four hour days. My doubts led me beyond the narrow view of creationism or its modern equivalent, “intelligent design,” to a point of absolute wonder and amazement toward “God the Father Almighty, who made the heavens and the earth.”

Next, in my study of the Bible I realized that the idea of “Biblical infallibility” on which I had been nurtured was simply false. Once my doubts about what I had been taught about the Bible had to be dealt with, once I came to see that the Bible is a book written by human beings about their relationship with God and about their discoveries, once I understood that the Bible was put together for certain purposes by certain groups, and once I saw that you study the Bible critically, the grandeur of the Bible opened before me. The words on the pages came to life.

And that “hell” I mentioned prepared for unbelievers? I struggled with that concept for decades. I feared hell for my self, then for my loved ones, then for the suffering millions who have never heard of Christianity. I doubted that what I had been taught was true. I prayed and searched, and then I discovered that “hell” is what we create for ourselves; that God’s grace and love have no place for the punishment we used to describe; that through the resurrection Christ has defeated sin, death, and hell; that “as in Adam all died, so in Christ are all made alive.” At one time in my life I was afraid of God. Now I can love God.

All along my journey I have grown through my doubts. Thomas set the pattern. If you look at his words and his deeds, you find that he was cynical, frustrated, skeptical. But he stayed with Jesus. He knew something authentic was there. I think Thomas wanted to believe that Jesus was alive. But he insisted on following his doubts. With good reason! You don't stake your life and your commitment on hearsay.

I think Christianity today needs a good healthy dose of doubt. It seems that Christians are either complacent or that they are trying to shout louder than others around them to prove their claims. What makes us alive is discovery. And that comes when we follow our doubts.

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