

April 28, 2019
John 20: 19-31
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Creekside COB

“Mosaic of Doubt and Faith”

An impoverished church in Tennessee had scrimped and saved to come up with money for a new pastor’s salary. They had little left to improve their one-room meetinghouse, so they had a contest inviting members to contribute some sort of framed picture. The winning entry went to a young girl who found a picture she liked in a magazine. It was a close-up photo of the face of a bulldog. Below the framed photo they hung a hand-painted sign: “Get a good grip on your faith and don’t turn loose.”

The story of Jesus’ appearance to Thomas after the resurrection is familiar to all of us. Because Thomas wasn’t going to take someone else’s word that Jesus was alive, he became labeled Doubting Thomas. But other gospel stories of Thomas don’t match that label. When Jesus learned of Lazarus’ illness, the disciples begged him not to go to Jerusalem, because Jewish leaders were fuming about him. But Jesus wanted to go, and it was Brave Thomas who said, “Let’s go with him even if we have to die with him.” And you remember that in John 14, Jesus referred to his Father’s house with many rooms. When Jesus said, “You know the way to the place where I am going,” it was Honest Thomas who said, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas’ faith cannot be based on one incident.

I’d like to ask you some questions to ponder. Think a minute — have your faith or spiritual understandings changed since childhood? What specific ideas have changed? How did that change occur? Who influenced your thinking? Did doubt played a role in how your faith grew and/or changed?

Personally, I think doubt is a good thing, and if you don't agree, I'm going to try convincing you otherwise!

I did some reading prior to preparing this sermon. I found two books about doubt and faith that happened to be on my Kindle, so let me acknowledge them right up front.

The first is by William Barclay called "Insights on Easter."¹ William Barclay wrote a set of New Testament commentaries that I find insightful and fun to read. The second is "Faith, doubt and other lines I've crossed" by Jay Bakker.² Jay is the son of Jim and Tammy Fay Bakker whose PTL scandal 30 years ago rocked the Christian world. Growing up in the shadow of that scandal, Jay went through some rocky dark times that have informed his ideas of doubt and faith, and who God is.*

****(Just as a side note, Kindle does not list page numbers from the book, so references include chapter titles.)***

William Barclay noted that Thomas had two great virtues. One, he refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he was uncertain about. "There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. . . . Second, when he was sure, he went the whole way. My Lord and my God! " Barclay concludes that "when people fight their way through their doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, they have attained a certainty that those who unthinkingly accept things can never reach."³

I found two quotes from Paul Tillich, a German American existentialist theologian that emphasizes the connection between faith and doubt.

- *Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.***
- *Serious doubt is confirmation of faith.***

Jay Bakker says, "If history tells us anything, it's that our faith has been used to justify terrible things. Yet it has also been a force for love and acceptance and equality. It all depends on how you read it, what you expect from it, and how willing you are to embrace

¹ William Barclay, *Insights: Easter. What the Bible tells us about the Easter story.* Saint Andrew Press, 2003.

² Jay Bakker, *Faith, doubt, and other lines I've crossed.* Jericho Books, 1976.

³ Barclay, chapter, "The doubter convinced."

change.”⁴ I take that to mean some faith can be deadly, but real faith is life giving. And maybe doubt plays a role in which faith develops.

The dictionary defines *doubt* as questioning, wavering, hesitating. Several gospel stories refer to doubt. For example, when Jesus invited Peter to walk on water, Peter hesitated and started to sink. Jesus responded, “Why did you doubt? Your lack of faith made you sink.” When Jesus visited his hometown, the unbelief of the people kept him from doing any miracles there. When the disciples had trouble healing people, Jesus compared their faith to a tiny mustard seed.

It’s possible that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus’ own faith wavered in light of the pain and humiliation he faced. “Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want.” And the gospels of Matthew and Mark quote Jesus on the cross saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In his moment of greatest suffering, Jesus experienced the human feeling of doubt. Bakker says, “If Jesus is wavering, then maybe doubt and suffering are holy, sacred.”

Paul Tillich adds, “Doubt is overcome not by repression but by courage. Courage does not deny that there is doubt . . . Courage does not need the safety of an unquestionable conviction.”⁵

I think Jesus could have added a new beatitude in Matthew 5. “Blessed are those who doubt, for they are filled with faith.”

Bakker makes an unsettling comment. “The more I studied the Bible, the more I understood it, the more I examined my faith and the faith of others, the more everything turned gray.”⁶ Wait a minute! What was that? Shouldn’t that say, the more I studied the Bible, the more things got clearer and I understood God better? OK, let’s stop here and make this a teachable moment. “When you think you have a handle on God,” Bakker says, “You start to create a structure around your idea of God, and you start to lose sight of why God matters.”⁷

⁴ Bakker, “chapter on *“Doubting faith.”*”

⁵ Bakker, *ibid.*

⁶ Bakker, *ibid.*

⁷ Bakker, *ibid.*

This idea is upheld by other theologians as well. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do.”⁸ Leonard Sweet adds, “When faith becomes all about beliefs and works instead of relationships, then what we’re really in love with is our own thoughts and opinions and doing — not an image of God, but an image of ourselves.”⁹ I like this quote from Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Having a God of resurrection means that the story is seldom over when we think it is.”¹⁰ “The Bible, in all of its messiness, contradictions, and variations, is a story of evolving faith.”

The apostle Paul tells us to seek the mind of Christ. God is bigger than our minds can comprehend. There is more of God’s character and intent than we can fathom, so we need to hold our views lightly and reverently and humbly. That’s not the same as disbelief or being wishy-washy. We just haven’t arrived at the end of theology. In the meantime we try to follow Jesus, share what we know, and help people find grace and peace in their lives.

Stop here a minute and think about the people who first taught you faith. Did they have a novelist’s gift for vividly retelling Bible stories, or a journalist’s way of relating all the details, or a detective’s ability to assemble the corroborating evidence? Those things are not likely what convinced you Jesus Christ is Lord.

No, it was something very personal. Something about the way their Christian faith was integrated with who they were. That something was relationship — the living relationship they had with the risen Lord. There was something about their life that made them witnesses to Jesus: simply by knowing them, you could come to know something about God.¹¹

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An altar in the world: a geography of faith*, Harper-Collins, 2009, p. 7.

⁹ Leonard Sweet, *The well-played life: why pleasing God doesn’t have to be such hard work*, Tyndale, 2014, p. 43.

¹⁰ Nadia Bolz-Weber, excerpted from “Sermon on empty tombs and the suddenness of dawn,” April 9, 2014, www.patheos.com

¹¹ Anonymous quote, www.homileticonline.com

Bakker says, “Doubt keeps me sane. Rather than making me like a wave tossed by the sea, it allows me to go on . . . I find it divine to doubt. But that doesn’t mean doubt is not hard and scary. It can shake your foundations . . . We need both faith and doubt. . . That’s why we have one another, why we have community. Together we can seek the unknown God. . . Together we can be people of doubt and people of faith.”¹²

Maybe faith and doubt create a mosaic — our many faith experiences, our questions and hesitations-- all bonded together, producing something promising and strong.

The slogan in our beginning story said, “Get a good grip on your faith and don’t turn loose.” But maybe we’re not meant to be the bulldog. Maybe it’s not our grip that’s important. Maybe the important thing is that God hangs onto us, even in the midst of doubt. God hangs on to us!

¹² Bakker, *ibid.*