

John 20:19-31  
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“Doubts”

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The Seal for Harvard University pictures the word VE-RI-TAS, spread out over three books. In Roman mythology, Veritas was the goddess of truth. It was believed that she hid in the bottom of a holy well because she was so elusive. What’s interesting is that originally the Harvard Seal design showed two books open and the third overturned. This symbolized how not all Truth is available through human reason, logic, and sensory perception. Certain things could only be discerned by God and the Holy Spirit. But, in the second half of the 19th century, President Charles Eliot officially brought the current design into use as the seal of Harvard; his big change: he flipped over the third book.

What does that mean?

You students of history will remember the enlightenment period and the rise of the Scientific method – which is a set of steps that begins with a question, after which a hypothesis is proposed and tested, until the question is answered—the goal of the enlightenment was every question answered, every problem solved. This gradually grew into a belief that through science and logic we can know and conquer everything.

But, Science is naturally skeptical and seemingly couched in doubt as it continues to evolve. While the goal of much science may be to come to know the solution, THE answer; we are keenly aware theories are challenged, even disproven. Great minds open cracks in previously held scientific “truth.” While science may wish to reduce doubt as much as possible, doubt still remains.

I would argue the same is true in the church. One of the great disservices of the church over the last 2000 years has been our pervasive attempts to suppress a follower’s doubts.

In our story today, we find ourselves just hours after the women and disciples discovered the empty tomb. All the disciples are in an upper room behind a locked door, huddled in fear that the authorities will accuse them and execute them as followers of Jesus. In that self-made prison Jesus passes through the locked door of the room, and the fearfully locked door of their hearts... and offers them God’s peace.

Later they tell Thomas who was not with them, and he doubts them, he wants to see for himself. A week later they are all in the upper room, Jesus passes through the locked door again, and offers Thomas his hands and his side.

With all of our efforts to eliminate doubt from Christianity. Doubt remains! In fact I want to commend to your consideration today that doubt is a building block of faith.

Questions and doubts come from an inquisitive and creative place within each of us. They occur because something we hear or learn doesn't fit into our "World as we know it." What we have heard doesn't compute and I suggest that when we share our doubts we "lean in" toward the source of them, instead of away from the source. So if being a disciple means anything, it means constantly leaning in toward the God who loves us, and calls us, and gifts us to build the kingdom of peace here on earth. Doubts become a place of wonderful insight and creative imagination, of passion building.

We in the United Church of Christ have been trying for 60 years to counteract the voices who have tried to suppress doubt in the church. We in the United Church of Christ, sometimes called the Untied Church of Christ; sometimes called, Utterly Confused Christians. We, with our "Comma" because God is Still Speaking, nothing is set, nothing except God's love is fully clear. We are a lot like Thomas. He is the "show-me" doubter who lives inside many of us. He is the questioner who resists easy answers to the challenging questions of faith.

In the UCC we have used our doubts as stepping stones to stronger, more passionate faith. Doubt has the power to move us beyond a faith that lives in our head, to fanning flames of faith in our heart. We find ourselves wide eyed for an experience of God, of Spirit, of connection. When doubt plays its part Faith truly becomes a journey. A Holy Adventure without GPS coordinates and waypoints.

Let me get back in the bible for a moment... look at Abraham, Sarah and Laban called at the drop of the hat to leave their home, their homeland, and their life and respond to God's call. Look at Moses, tending sheep, he finds himself curious about a burning bush that never turns to ashes, and he hears God's difficult, exciting call. Look at Sarah promised a child when she was in her 90's and she laughs, but that child is born. Look at Samuel who heard the Lord calling three times and didn't know it was God. And Mary who took time to ponder this "good news" that came to her. Look at our Savior born in a humble manger in a messy barnyard. They all had moments of doubt. But these doubts helped them lean in toward God, not away.

The mystery contained within these stories of faith would lose much power if it didn't move us to doubt and question. I commend to you that the opposite of doubt is not confidence, but apathy. A faith that is so second nature it has no effect on our life. A faith that has no impact on our decisions, our vote, the way we treat people, the way we share our time and money. It is tragic when these stories become so second nature we develop pad answers devoid of amazement, wonderment, and questions.

The women were headed to the tomb the morning our story begins, they had no idea how to roll back the stone, and it was rolled back. Their first thought had to be -- How? Who? They went in to the tomb to anoint Jesus body, the body was gone. They had to think, "What?" "Where?" "When?" The resounding answer is the ultimate mystery and the foundation of our faith... "He is risen!" "HE IS RISEN!"

Today I invite you to join me in saying a bold “Thank you” to Thomas -- because I wonder what sort of faith we would have if we didn’t allow a mysterious God to provoke our minds, to stoke the passion of our hearts, and to launch us on a unexpected adventures with nothing more than the assurance of God’s love and presence.

John shares this story, not because it is about Thomas, but because it is about God and it is about us. This story is told to give permission to our doubts, and to make space for the creativity and imagination which arise from them; and, to affirm the wondrous and mysterious, power of the risen Christ. He Is Risen Indeed.

Amen