

“Everything Is Holy: Our Doubt”
John 20:19-29

In his book *Tempered Resilience*, Presbyterian Pastor and writer Todd Bolsinger tells the story of a time he faced a very tough situation to illustrate a point he was making about our need to deal with our reactivity and to stay open to where God might be leading us. He writes, “I knew something was wrong when the bishop’s assistant approached me right before I was to step up to the microphone. ‘We will be delayed a few minutes,’ he said. ‘Some of our pastors are meeting with the bishop. You should know that they are uncomfortable with your use of two slaveholders, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, as examples of leadership.’ I nodded and swallowed hard. I had been asked to travel to upstate New York to speak to a group of Methodist clergy on the topic of leading in a rapidly changing world. A number of the regional leaders had read my book *Canoeing the Mountains*, and they asked me to be the keynote speaker for their annual conference. In the previous four years, I had traveled to speak to the most diverse groups of Christian leaders imaginable on the story of how Lewis and Clark had to lead their Corps of Discovery into the uncharted territory of the west. For some it was just a historical metaphor for discussing how to lead adaptive change. For many others, however, the very topic was a painful reminder of the racism that makes us what Jim Wallis has called ‘America’ original sin.” Bolsinger tried to address the issue right upfront, but he was met with a lot of resistance and opposition as several shared the hurt of the African American pastors in the room. It was a tough thing to deal with. The tension in the room was so high that Bolsinger could not even do his presentation. During the break, he called his mentor to get some guidance on what to do. His mentor reminded him of the need to create a safe space for people to share about their deep pain and differences. What was amazing is that Bolsinger was able to help that group of pastors to have a very powerful and deep conversation about racism and the struggle for justice. In addition, in his next book, *Tempered Resilience*, he was also able to use broader historical figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. This to me is a really good example of when people are willing to stay open, teachable, humble, and comfortable with not knowing or having all the answers. That incident, as uncomfortable as it was, became a great moment for Bolsinger to grow. He had expressed a longing to be able to grow in his humility to appreciate the struggles of others who were racially different from him. This was a good turning point in that growth.

We may not have that kind of experience, but we all have a special gift that comes to us disguised as a problem. Doubt could become a great tool to propel us into deeper faith, but only when we treat it as a holy gift. To see doubt as a doorway or a gift is not the usual way of looking at doubt, especially in religious circles where we often assume that religion is supposed to give us all the answers to life’s big questions. We sometimes even approach the Bible in the same way, looking in it for answers, especially when life becomes difficult or seems out of control.

And so today we will look at holy doubt as a gift to our faith through the story of Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. Thomas does not believe the other disciples that they saw Jesus after he was crucified. After the other disciples tell Thomas about the appearance of Jesus to them, he says, “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.” Thomas had

experienced God and had known Jesus personally, but then he asked for a physical sign of faith. I don't know about you, but I grew up hearing at church that it was not OK to have doubts or to ask such questions. In fact, when I started having doubts about God, like most teenagers do, I felt like I had to leave the church.

I have read this story about Thomas many times and thought that there was something wrong with him. I was secretly upset with God for entertaining his questions and doubts. Thomas was one of the twelve disciples who lived with Jesus for three years. I have often thought to myself if I was with the disciples and saw Jesus physically, I would never have any doubt. Seeing Jesus physically seems like the ultimate seal of faith. So what is the story here? Why do such faithful people doubt God?

Fortunately the story of Thomas doesn't end with the questions and doubts that he raised. Christ does respond to his questions and doubts. In fact, out of his questions, God finds great opportunities to nurture his faith and equip him for the journey ahead. The questions and doubts that Thomas raised became tools for teaching him about a deeper trust in God that led him to do great deeds of faith. Thomas helped spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to a multitude of people. The members of the Syrian Orthodox Church in India tell that it was Thomas who brought the good news to India. I believe that the story of Thomas is a great example of how our faith is formed. We learn about and experience God, yet many of us go through times of doubt and questioning. I dare say that we need these questions and doubts because they help us let go of the familiar things of faith that have become too familiar and lost their meaning. Through questions we can let go of what we know, of our own hold on the truth, of our egos! Questions of doubt help us move beyond where we are to be open to new mysteries and revelations from God. Our questions help lead us from believing what others say about God to having our own firsthand deeper knowledge of God. So it is a movement often from knowing God in our intellect to knowing God in the depth of our being. Doubt and questions are our doorway to true experiences of faith. They help us move from one stage of faith to another deeper one until we ultimately reach a point where we are more in tune with mystery than with answer.

This is hard because faith and doubt are often presented as opposites. As good church people, we are taught to believe and trust, not to doubt. Doubt is uncomfortable! We can't control it. It makes us vulnerable before God. It makes us even admit our weaknesses and limited perspective on life and the mysteries of the universe. We put a great deal of emphasis in our culture and in the Christian tradition on knowing facts and getting the right information. But the story of Thomas shows us a different way of faith and of knowing. Faith is not about the facts or about stuffing our heads with more information.

I offer you two ways to help you embrace doubt as a holy gift to greater faith:

1. **Don't Shut it Down Too Quickly:** When we experience doubt, it is natural to want to run away from it or just accept it at face value. That is because we are uncomfortable with not knowing. I had a friend a few years ago who completely lost his faith because he started doubting that the Bible was literally and factually true. He felt that if one of the basic beliefs (biblical literalism) he was taught as a child was not true, then the whole thing would fall apart. What he missed out on was the deeper faith that comes from identifying with the metaphors and

experiences of faith named in the Bible. A richer way of reading the Bible was waiting for him if he had persevered. The invitation for us is to get comfortable with uncertainty and with not knowing. That is what allows us to continue to be open.

2. **Honesty**: Being honest about our doubts with God is an important part of our prayer. In order for us to see the holiness of our doubts, we have to name them before God. There is vulnerability in such prayers that is transformative. In the same way, sharing our doubts with others, just like Thomas did, can be very powerful. The late writer Rachel Held Evans shared a powerful blog in 2014 about her doubts. As someone who grew up in the evangelical Protestant tradition, such doubt would have been seen as heresy. The title of this piece was “I Don’t Always Tell You.” She wrote: “I don’t always tell you about the mornings I wake up and feel the absence of God as though it were a presence --thick and certain, remembered all over again the way you remember in the morning that someone you love has died. Or about the days when the idea that a single religion can stop the CNN crawler from reporting one more missile strike, one more downed plane, one more bombed hospital, strikes me as freshly stupid, dangerously naïve...I don’t always tell you about how sometimes I’m not sure I want to bring kids into a world like this one, a world so full of suffering. Because that sort of thing doesn’t exactly sell off the shelves at Christian bookstores, does it?” Just like Rachel Held Evans, the questions and doubts of Thomas didn’t take him out of his community of faith. He dealt with these questions in community. Thomas didn’t walk out on the disciples when they told him about the appearance of Jesus.

You may be experiencing doubt right now or know someone who is. Whatever the case may be for you, remember that everything is holy, including our doubts. We will close the sermon and each sermon of this series with a part of a prayer called “St. Patrick’s Breastplate” as translated by Kuno Meyer. It is a powerful prayer of the holiness of all of life. Allow this prayer to enter in your whole being paying attention to any feelings that it evokes in you. I will repeat it twice.

I arise to-day
 Through the strength of heaven;
 Light of sun,
 Radiance of moon,
 Splendor of fire,
 Speed of lightning,
 Swiftmess of wind,
 Depth of sea,
 Stability of earth,
 Firmness of rock.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
 Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,

Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me....Amen