

“Doubts are Surmountable; Disdain Less So”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew's United Church
for Sunday, April 3, 2016 – Easter 2
Scripture Readings: Psalm 150; John 20:19-31
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

So where do you stand with regard to doubts in your life? The question may be asked in a variety of ways and in numerous contexts. Today I want to ask it within a fairly narrow lens – do you see value in doubt, or do you see doubt as a sin, an example of a lack of faith, an indication that your life is reeling because you have no solid foundation for how to live and what to think and believe?

Today's story is about Thomas coming across the disciples who claim they saw Jesus after his crucifixion. Thomas is not impressed. Commentators argue it is unfair to call him “doubting” Thomas, since the word does not appear in the story, but Thomas wants a bit more proof about the appearance, to make sure that they really got it right.

We all have been there – heard a story and wonder if it can be really true. It might be a wonderful grade by a child or grandchild who struggles in school, or an athletic accomplishment that seems far-fetched, or even someone gets a job that seems to pay a lot more than would be reasonable for their training and education. We may even doubt the presence of God when we hear of bombings, earthquakes, and plane disasters. We have our doubts, and they are part of life, but are doubts a sign of a lack of faith or an avoidance of the truth?

This is not the first time Thomas makes the top ten misplays from the Gospel of John. When Jesus suggests to the disciples they know where he is going in a passionate speech around the coming of the Holy Spirit beginning in John, chapter 14, Thomas quickly speaks up, “Lord, we do not know where you are going – how can we know the way?” A frustrated Jesus wonders what people heard in the last three years of his teaching and preaching and healing if they have no idea what his life is all about.

But I come back to the basic question with which I began: “Is doubt a sign of a lack of faith, or a way to explore faith and seek the truth?”

Will Van Der Hart claims that “Faith cannot really exist in the absence of doubt.” The late Dr. Sheldon MacKenzie, a professor at Memorial University in St. John’s, once answered a student’s question around doubt this way: “There are too many people who have the answers to everything. They help only a few who refuse to do any thinking for themselves.”

Professor Richard Holloway of Gresham College remarked at the turn of this century: “The opposite of faith is certainty. Living with faith is living with doubt.”

Doubt goes beyond a question of religious experience and the truth of faith. Seth Godin, a marketing guru, has written that doubt is almost always more profitable than living with certainty. “People don’t like doubt, so they pay money and give up opportunities to avoid it.”

Philip Yancey, a well-known modern Christian writer, says, “I’m an advocate of doubt because that is why I became a Christian in the first place....I’m also impressed that the Bible includes so many examples of doubt. Evidently God has more tolerance of doubt than most churches.” Yancey further states, “Where there is certainty there is no room for faith,” a phrase that echoes the thought of Richard Holloway above.

Yancey argues that doubt keeps us on the search, keeps us looking for what is right. In a provocative sentence he develops further the power of doubt within our faith: “Does faith delude us into seeing a world that does not exist, or does faith reveal the existence of a world we can’t see without it?”

Proof of the latter can be seen in the Psalms, where back to back in Psalm 22 we have “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,” and in Psalm 23 we have “The Lord is My Shepherd.”

Laura MacGregor in her blog “extremecaregiving.com” tells of research she did for her Master’s degree in theology. Now a doctoral student at Emmanuel

College in Toronto, Laura did a qualitative study in her Master's work exploring the experiences of extreme caregivers, those who care for children or parents with severe physical and/or emotional limitations and needs, as to how they engaged in spiritual practices.

Before the study, she expected the usual practices that we hear and are used to: praying, singing, worship, reading the Psalms, even hiking, kayaking, and walking through nature. She was surprised to hear from one mother that her spiritual practice was knitting. At the time Laura was not a knitter, and so she wondered how knitting could be a spiritual practice.

The woman offered that the repetitive nature of knitting was both grounding and soothing. It also results in something practical to share with another, be it a washcloth, a hat, mitts, or even a prayer shawl.

The truth is, doubts are a part of life. We can surmount our doubts, or at the very least live with them, when we know that life does not have certainty.

What we need to worry about are not doubts, but disdain. The attitude where we accept nothing as real or helpful, and we carry our critical, negative perspective into everything we meet.

Doubt saves us from blind certainty, and an empty faith. Disdain only builds walls and cuts off communication.

Thomas may be the greatest disciple in that he reminds us that faith, without doubt, is not faith at all. In expressing his doubt, he avoided being a judgmental, disdainful individual. A role worth emulating, I suggest.