

Doubts and Faith Development
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I don't know if many of you watched it, but the History Channel just wrapped up a mini-series called *The Bible*. There were five two hour episodes and 13.1 million viewers watched the series, and I did as well.[1] *The Bible* was this sweeping narrative all the way from Genesis to Revelation, with a focus on Biblical figures like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, and of course Jesus and the Disciples. There was a great deal of publicity because reviewers thought it would do badly and *The Bible* ended up delivering high audience ratings. Now it might have been partly because the man who played Jesus is a Portuguese actor and model, I'm sure that didn't hurt the ratings, but *The Bible* was quite the hit for the History Channel and was better than I thought it was going to be.

One of the things that bothered me though was their depiction of the disciple Thomas, the main character in our story from the Gospel of John today. This is a well-known story, "Doubting Thomas" misses out on a post-resurrection appearance by Jesus and says that he won't believe unless he can see and touch Jesus for himself. The whole point is that Thomas wants the chance to encounter the Risen Christ on his own terms.

The way it was depicted in the mini-series made no sense at all. All the disciples were gathered in a room and Jesus appears for the first time after his resurrection, and Thomas is with them. So already, this is not how the story goes—as we read in John 20, verse 24 "Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came." [2] So then Jesus says to them (like in our scripture for today) "Peace be with you." [3] Fine. And then another huge mistake—Thomas is there, he sees Jesus right before his eyes and just denies it, saying things like, "this isn't possible" while Jesus goes around the room speaking to each of the disciples in turn and blessing them one by one. He gets to Thomas and then says the famous lines, "Do not doubt but believe . . . Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to believe." [4] And then Thomas stops denying reality and accepts that Jesus is really right in front of his eyes.

They completely ruined Thomas' story in the mini-series, and I have all sorts of conspiracy theories for why they changed it. For some Christians "doubt" is a scary word. I don't know if the folks in charge of this mini-series were trying to appease Christians of that stripe and redeem Thomas by making his doubt not that severe because as soon as Jesus makes his way around the circle Thomas believes. Or maybe the folks in charge were trying to make his denial even worse because he sees Jesus right before his eyes and can't accept that Jesus is still with them the first time around. So doubt seems to be vilified even more!

I was so mad that they changed Thomas' story—because what's remarkable is that Thomas' confession of faith when he does see the Risen Christ is the only instance in the entire New Testament when Jesus is addressed as God. Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!" in verse 28—it's the biggest affirmation of faith in the whole New Testament. It's amazing that Thomas comes to this strong belief in Jesus as God-With-Us after he wrestled with his doubts and needed Jesus on his own terms.[5] And I maintain that Thomas' initial doubt and then deep belief and faith claim are related—it was a process for him.

Now we don't really do the whole saints thing in the United Church of Christ, but if we had a patron saint of our denomination I often think it would be Thomas. Having doubts, expressing doubts, sometimes relishing in our doubts is just what we do in the UCC. I'm convinced that if we wrestle with our doubts and confront the aspects of our religion that make us uncomfortable and we come out of this wrestling match with a few beliefs we can hold onto,

those beliefs will be deep and abiding because it took some work to get there. It's important that we wrestle long enough to come out the other side, staying in the constant wrestling match is exhausting and perhaps not the best place to remain.

I'll give you an example. At my former church, I co-led a one-day retreat on prayer and taught a group of about forty women various ways to pray and other spiritual practices that would help them in their faith development. We even spoke about praying for people who hurt you and for people you may not like for one reason or another. One of the women spoke to me at church a couple of Sundays later and told me that she has a co-worker she can't stand, so she decided after the retreat to pray for this co-worker every day to see if it would make a difference. When I asked if it did, she laughed and said, "Well I still don't like her, and I don't think that I ever will—but prayer in general has gotten so much easier. I figured out that if I could pray for this woman, then I can really be honest and ask God for help with anything I'm dealing with."

Sometimes that's the best we can do. Dealing with difficult aspects of our daily lives like that co-worker you don't like very much and having the audacity to pray for them makes your faith deeper. As my former parishioner said, if she can pray for that woman, who or what can't she pray for now? She came out of that experience with a better prayer life and a deeper faith in God. She would later begrudgingly recognize that God probably loves that woman too.

Anne Lamott describes this process of faith development so vividly in her book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Lamott says that when she prays these difficult prayers she literally begins with a container or box of some sort. She explains, "On a note, I write down the name of the person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed, and I fold the note up, stick it in the box and close it. You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this, 'Here. You think you're so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed.'" [6] Maybe try it and see what happens—because when we deal with our doubts and our struggles and we figure out what we can hold onto in our faith, then this whole faith-thing becomes a little easier to practice and live out daily.

Public Theologian Brian McLaren lifts up doubt as being essential to faith development. In commenting on doubt, McLaren says, "All Christians are committed to lifelong spiritual growth. That means that five years from now, your set of beliefs will hopefully be different from today's ... your beliefs will be more fine-tuned, more tested, more balanced, more examined. What causes you to examine a belief and test it . . . something inside you isn't at rest about a belief ... something in you doubts that belief. By doubting it, and then examining it, you can either call it a keeper because it passed the test, discard it, or adjust it." [7] The point is, we should be working toward lifelong spiritual growth—this is what we see so clearly in the story of Doubting Thomas. I don't care whether we are in our twenties, forties, eighties; whatever, this process is necessary and takes work my friends.

McLaren explains that in his view there are four stages of faith development. His First Stage is Simplicity—everything is black and white, simple and easy. Stage Two is Complexity where you focus on techniques for finding the truth. Stage Three is Perplexity where you tend to become disillusioned in your learning, you doubt all authority figures and absolutes, everything is relative and hazy. And Stage Four is Humility where in his words, "You come to terms with your limitations, and you learn to live with mystery, not as a cop-out, but as an honest realization that only God understands everything. You carry out of stage four a shorter list of tested and cherished beliefs that you base your life on, and a lot of your previous dogmatisms are now held more lightly. In a sense a person keeps finding faith and then becoming frustrated with it and in a sense losing it, and then finding a better version of it, and so on, maybe like a software upgrade." [8]

This process continues throughout your lifetime, and we all enter the various stages of faith development from time to time, or at least we should be entering these stages from time to time. None of us can achieve Stage Four and just stay there for the rest of our lives, that actually isn't a healthy place to be if we want to learn and grow and stretch our minds and hearts to figure out how we are supposed to be living our lives. Ironically if we stay in the Humility Stage, it's not very humble at all.

After all, how do we deal with that co-worker we don't like very much or handle your children doing some things that drive you a little crazy or deal with the frustration that comes with being so busy that you're not spending enough quality time with your spouse or family or friends or handle a setback in your health or whatever it is you encounter that is just plain hard to deal with? When we go through these stages of faith development, when we wrestle with our doubts, I have faith that we can typically come out of the testing with, as McLaren says, "a shorter list of tested and cherished beliefs that you base your life on." And with this shorter list of tested and cherished beliefs, we are onto something remarkable and transformative as people of faith.[9]

Who knows, we may end up like Thomas himself, the Patron Saint of Doubters everywhere, encountering the Risen Christ with a faith claim as huge as "My Lord and my God!"[10] May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] "The Bible TV Series," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bible_%28TV_series%29

[2] John 20:24.

[3] John 20:26

[4] John 20:27 and 29.

[5] Richard P. McBrien, "Thomas, apostle" in *Lives of the Saints*, 268-269.

[6] Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, 36.

[7] Brian McLaren, "Doubt: The Tides of Faith" (written for *Christian Single Magazine*), <http://www.brianmclaren.net/emc/archives/resources/doubt-the-tides-of-faith-written.html>

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] John 20:28.