

Faith Expressing Itself In Love, or: A Church In Which Doubt is Okay
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
April 11, 2021
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Text:

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." ²² Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus (the Twin), one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

²⁶ After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

³⁰ Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

Prayer

Sermon

A little over twenty years ago, a friend of mine was asked to be a Deacon in his Congregational church, which is a big deal in churches that have Deacons. It was also my church, where I was a member right out of college, and I'd been asked the same thing: to be part of the holy ministry of tending to the homebound, preparing Communion, offering the right hand of fellowship when people joined the church.

Yes, I said with delight.

I'm not sure, my friend said, with trepidation. You see, he told the church's leaders, I love Jesus' teachings, I love singing in the choir, I love making cookies for coffee hour, I love being part of this community. But, I don't believe everything I'm *supposed to* believe. I don't think I can be a Deacon if I doubt Easter, if I question Jesus' resurrection happened the way the Bible reports it, or...even happened. Can I be a Deacon if I don't believe the Red Sea literally parted, if I don't believe Jesus literally walked on water?

Well, the senior deacons pondered this, but not for long. They had invited him to be a Deacon not on the basis of unwavering dogma, but on the basis of his thoughtfulness, concern for beauty, justice, and compassion. We aren't a credal congregation and the UCC isn't credal either, they said. People believe all sorts of different things. And now that you've brought it up, some of us have the same doubts.

My friend? He's one of the senior deacons these days.

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It seems to me that we don't talk about doubt often enough. And a lot of that is my responsibility. Our worship services proclaim in ways clear and definitive. There are no hymns to choose that wax poetic on the merits of doubt. The closest we get are hymns of metaphor and poetry: In the bulb there is a flower, for example. As the pastor I prepare a sermon every week in which I attempt to provide a cogent and inspiring interpretation of a scripture passage. I rarely stand before you to say: I doubt. I'm puzzled. I'm confused. I don't know. The last time I preached on this passage I understood it completely differently than I do today. I'm still waiting for revelation. I'm not sure. Yet, those statements are true for me and I imagine for some of you as well.

It is a gift, then, that the Bible gives us in Thomas a faithful disciple full of questions, waiting for revelation, and asking hard questions. Thomas, as our Bible Study on Tuesday described him, is the patron saint of critical thinking. Thomas, you see, asks

only for what his friends have received: an encounter with the risen Christ. And while we remember him for his doubt, let us remember that every single person who encountered the risen Christ was either confused, or doubted. Mary Magdalene didn't believe it at first, Peter and the beloved disciple had to go to the actual tomb themselves, the rest were blessed with an encounter behind locked doors. Thomas needs an encounter.

Happy - blessed - are those who don't see and yet believe, Jesus says, but the Bible doesn't give us many people who are so blessed. And those who are find themselves astonished. Eminent theologian Karl Barth made the point that astonishment is a mix of belief and disbelief.¹ Astonishment is a mix of belief and disbelief. There is room in faith for doubt, room in belief for disbelief, room in the Christian journey for questions. "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

We have set before our Confirmands a mighty task: to understand their own independent, developing, adult faith. I told them and their parents and mentors this week that I was dedicating this sermon to them, hoping that they will hear in this sermon an affirmation that this is a church where doubt is okay.

We have emphasized to these five youth that we are a non-credal denomination - there are no tests of faith that they must pass to be confirmed. We have emphasized that their faith now will be different from their faith five years ago or their faith in five or ten years. We have also emphasized that we are thrilled at their engagement in a process, and Sarah and I are not tied to an outcome. I have seen youth complete a confirmation process and be confirmed with absolute confidence, be confirmed with doubts, and thoughtfully choose not to be confirmed and I have been equally proud of all of them and their choices. But I don't think I've ever taken the time to emphasize that you can be a Christian and someone with questions and doubts at the same time. In fact, doubts and questions are a sign of deep engagement, and that's good!

I've recently been reading a book for my clergy group called *Faith After Doubt* by Brian McLaren that has helped me remember some developmental theories about faith.

He speaks of the importance of a faith that emphasizes the practice of love and compassion over creeds, and he makes a compelling argument for doubt being an appropriate and expected part of faith:

¹ As referenced in <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2021/4/5/three-kinds-of-doubt-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-2>

"There's a difference between doubting God, and doubting my understanding of God, just as there's a difference between trusting God and trusting my understanding of God." (p. 91)

McLaren offers a framework of four stages of belief: *Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Harmony*. Think of it this way - Simplicity is the stage when we receive the faith tradition from our early teachers and parents, without doubt. (Noah's ark? Sure! There were definitely two of each kind of animal on the boat.) We are also accepted into community and surrounded by love. Complexity is the stage when we develop independence which may also come with doubt. (Noah's ark? I'm not sure any boat could have fit that many animals.) Hopefully we continue to be in a community surrounded by love and invited to practice what he considers most important in the life of faith: faith expressing itself in love. Faith is not supposed to be a fortress, it's supposed to be a road. (p. 38) This is often the stage that teens like our Confirmands are in. Perplexity and Harmony are subsequent stages that some folks go through. (Perplexity investigates: Noah's ark? I can see the historical roots in natural disaster and the metaphor of judgment and grace and how that would be meaningful to an ancient people. Harmony enters the story with humility and a deliberate naivete. Noah's Ark: it's good to know God's promise to love us always. Also, I'm glad the anteaters made it onto the boat.) Openness on the community's part to doubt and questions makes the process of moving from stage to stage easier. ²

Now, McLaren is a post-evangelical which means he's bouncing off of a much more conservative tradition to get to his current expansive theology. He feels his former tradition condemned all forms of doubt which made moving through the stages he describes very difficult. I sincerely hope that our church has provided a holding environment for our confirmands - and for each and every one of you - as you move through these natural phases and experience their own faith as it develops over time.

As McLaren puts it:

"It's faith expressing itself in love that beckons children to do the work of Simplicity, learning to habitually choose goodness and generosity and reject meanness and self-centeredness so they can become vibrant, health adolescents. It's faith expressing itself in love that beckons those adolescents to grapple with Complexity and master the skills needed to succeed as adults, so they can become loving friends, partners, parents, workers, neighbors and citizens. It's faith expressing itself in love that summons young adults to pass into and through Perplexity, seeing through hypocrisy, rejecting ignorance, and challenging injustice, even when doing so is costly, all in the pursuit of

² If this is prompting thoughts of Ricouer, Fowler, Gilligan, etc - the book has a handy comparison chart in the back!

love. And it's faith expressing itself in love that welcomes the passionate young seeker into a deep adult lifestyle of empathy, kindness and compassion, where love is the prime directive, the greatest thing, the most excellent way."³

Today I want to affirm that wherever our confirmands are on their faith journey, Sarah and I are delighted at their engagement in an ongoing journey of faith and Pilgrim Church will be with them wherever their journey leads next.

We follow a Teacher, and the very best teachers are those who meet their students' questions with compassion. So, we are a faith community where questions, changing ideas, and doubts are okay. In the end, Thomas, and Peter, and Mary Magdalene, shared the story of Jesus, and I'm sure they sat with many people who wondered, questioned, and doubted.

This week an Jaz Buchanan, an HDS student, preached a powerful message on dealing with doubt. She said:

"The beautiful thing about faith is that when we do not have it, someone else does. The community I found here had faith in me, when I didn't have faith in myself....Someone is holding on to faith for you. Someone believes *in you*."⁴

So here is the good news for all of us on this second Sunday of Easter,

Those who wonder, doubt, or question,

And those ready to proclaim.

The risen Christ's first words to all of us are these:

Peace be with you.

Amen.

³ P. 137

⁴ Jaz Buchanan, MDiv '21, Harvard Divinity School