

The Certitude of Doubt

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
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John 20:19-31



Thomas gets a bad rap. Forever known as "Doubting Thomas," he has gone down in history as the disciple who would not believe unless he could see.

I observed a political conversation between two people the other day. I say "observed," because, even though I was in the room and technically part of the conversation, I never got in a word. Maybe because the Chittister book we've been reading, and particularly this chapter, was in my head, at some point I started listening for those telltale words she points out, words that acknowledge humility.

She writes, "Certitude (certainty) is a very tricky thing. It is so often wrong. And so often loud about it. It can be tolerated only if it comes with large doses of humility. As in, 'As far as I know...' or 'It seems to me...' or 'Do you agree?' or a simple 'I think so, but I'm not sure...'"

I didn't hear any of those phrases, not a single time. And I admit I've been in plenty of conversations where, as I look back on them now, I also spoke with the sort of certainty that gives no room for doubt. Several years ago, I was going on and on with certainty about a person that I just knew was suffering from a particular psychiatric disorder. I was describing my convictions to a friend, and he said, "I didn't realize you did the dual Divinity/Psychiatry degree at Vanderbilt." Ouch.

As I've been working on my doctorate, any time I start to feel the pride of being called "Doctor" one day, I remember the time I introduced a colleague who preferred to be called, especially by young people, "Doctor so and so," to her. After he walked away, she asked, "Now is he a *real* doctor?" When I asked what she meant, she said, "You know, the kind that can really do you any good?" Humility. Carry your titles, carry your certainties, lightly.

That's why I've always felt Thomas got a bad rap in Christian tradition, being labeled forever, "doubting Thomas." Never mind that Thomas does exactly what all the

other disciples do in John's Gospel. They are all huddling behind closed doors while Mary Magdalene alone moves about the darkened tomb area, looking for her Lord. The rest are afraid. And when Mary goes and tells them on that Easter morning, John tells us that on Easter evening, they are still huddled away, fearful of the religious leaders. It is only when Jesus appears to them that they believe.

Thomas is not there, and he refuses to believe the disciples in the same way they refused to believe Mary, unless he too is able to see, unless he too can behold and touch the wounds of his Lord. Only then will he believe.

For this, for doing what all the other disciples did, he alone gets called "Doubting Thomas." But what we learn from the behavior of all the earliest disciples is that this so-called "doubt" is as normal as breathing, the natural first response of human beings when faced with mystery.

The first thing I want to say to anyone who experiences doubt is that you are in good company. None of the disciples, if we take the gospel writers at their word, believed it when they heard it. No one believed after hearing. No, it took seeing, it took experiencing the Risen Lord, to create belief and inspire worship. Thomas was not the only one.

The Apostle Paul says, "We live by *faith* and not by sight." To claim to know something, to have proof of something (even God), is no longer faith, but sight. Faith, says Paul, is a gift. It cannot be earned. It cannot be worked out logically. It is simply the gift of eyes to see. It is the very opposite of certitude.

Because it is gift, because it affirms that which cannot be proven or even sometimes understood, because it lives in mystery, faith necessarily must include doubt. As Frederick Buechner writes, "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Paul Tillich, a German theologian of the twentieth century, wrote that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but an element of faith. He wrote, "Sometimes I think my mission is to bring faith to the faithless and doubt to the faithful."

In his classic work, "The Courage to Be," Tillich said that it is precisely because we are not God, that we do not participate in ultimate knowledge, that we are thrust into doubt. We know that we do not know. And therefore, anything we say must be prefaced by this uncertainty, this doubt.

I recently got into an exchange with a fellow Christian who wanted me to know that he had proof of God's existence. He was trying to sell me – us – a curriculum for youth and adults that meant to “erase all doubt,” as to the fact of God's creation of the universe, and that Jesus Christ was God's only Son, and that all must become followers of Christ or be forever cut off from God. All this, he said, can be shown to be true, “without a doubt.”

I politely declined. What I didn't say out loud was that what he was selling was not faith, but precisely its opposite. He was selling certainty. He was selling what Paul calls “sight.” And Paul says we don't live by sight. We cannot live by sight. We live, truly live, by faith.

And, frankly, faith that has not endured the dark night of doubt is not able to endure any dark night thereafter. Such a faith that endures will be a faith that recognizes its essence as gift, and its common posture as gratitude. To be grateful, to be gracious, to be grounded in the face of uncertainty in the basic truth of faith as gift, is to endure.

A student asked one of the professors in a class I took, “How do we keep our doubts from overwhelming our faith?”

The teacher responded, “I would be more concerned with your certainty, your need to have everything tied down, overwhelming your faith.”

He went on, “You'll know certitude is getting the best of you whenever you begin creating insiders and outsiders, whenever you believe your faith gives you the right to condemn someone else's belief, but mostly, whenever you feel faith gives you permission to be cruel.”

If you find yourself treating another person with contempt because of your faith, it is a pretty good sign you've lost sight of the nature of faith as gift. As Fred Craddock said, “I have never known a person grateful who was at the same time small, or mean, or bitter, or greedy, or selfish, or who took pleasure in anybody else's pain. Never.”

It was not long after this incident that we had a young person in the little church I served get a letter from the church he left to become part of ours, telling him that unless he returned to the true church, he was going to hell. That's one of the things certitude can do, engendering cruelty, threatening young faith, in the name of faith.

And all this talk about doubt is really unfair not only to Thomas, but also to this text. The truth is that the word “doubt” never appears in the Greek version of this story.

The Greek word often translated “doubt” means literally, “unbelief.” Jesus tells Thomas, “Do not be unbelieving, but believing.”

Belief in the Greek does not mean giving assent to certain doctrines, but trusting. Jesus is really saying, “Do not be untrusting, but trusting.” Diane Butler Bass says an even better translation of belief in the New Testament is “belove.” To trust, to give one’s heart to, to belove. This is the invitation given to Thomas, to all the other disciples, and, says John, is the purpose of his gospel.

Do you remember that scene from “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,” (If you tell me that was before your time and you’ve never seen it or the other Indiana Jones movies), that’s just a parenting fail), where Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford is running through a narrow passageway, and he comes to a deep and dark crevasse. To the eye, there is no way over. All he can see is the darkness below, so deep he cannot see the bottom. Earlier in the movie, he is told of this place, and that to make it across, he must step into the darkness, trusting there is something there to hold him up, even if he cannot see it. He stops, takes several breaths, places his hand over his heart, and takes that first step. His feet land on something solid, and beneath him appears a wooden bridge, unseen until he took the first step.

To trust, to give one’s heart, to belove. This is the invitation given to Thomas, to all the other disciples, and to us.

I was with someone several years ago facing a significant surgery. He had been told that given his age and other conditions, it was risky, but necessary. He said to me, “I’m not going to lie to you. I’ve had my doubts over the years about God. But in the end, it always comes back to faith. You either have it, or you don’t. So I’ve always treasured that scripture that says, ‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.’ I guess that will have to be enough.” All I could say was, “More than enough, my friend, more than enough.”

To trust, to give one’s heart, to belove. This is the invitation given to Thomas, to all the other disciples, and to us.

Thomas does. He falls on his knees and offers his worship. He gives his heart, even in the midst of whatever doubts he may have had, perhaps because of them. And blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe. That’s us, this blessed community of trust. We believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.