

## **Christianity, 21**

### **16. Is there any room for doubt?**

**Text: John 20: 19-26**

**Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell**

**April 14, 2013**

**“I wish I could believe in all of this Easter stuff as easily as you and so many others seem to do,” she said in soft defense.** “Sometimes I am even envious. But, you know me. I am the sort who needs more to go on. Resurrection? I do better with real data. An empty tomb? I am too analytical to take that very easily.”

Gale is an engineer with a keen mind steeped in a certain kind of knowing. Her struggle with certain aspects of faith is shared by many, even some of us here today. Still, she is deeply faithful as a follower of Jesus. She has a large capacity for intellect and thought. In a way, she is iconic of the best in scientific positivism and the long arm of the enlightenment.

**Our conversation made me think of Thomas.** You know: Thomas, a disciple of Jesus who also needed more to go on. Thomas: whose only fault was also to want some testable, touchable proof. Thomas: whose seeking named him as the one who doubted ever since, and whose story shows up every year after Easter as the world still tries to sort out what happened to Jesus.

Remember with me. It was just one short week after the empty tomb stunned the world with resurrection mystery. Most of the disciples had already seen Jesus, but not Thomas. And, no matter what the others said to convey what had happened, or how expressive they were in telling, Thomas held his ground. “*Unless* I see the mark of the nails *unless*...I put my hand in his side I will not believe.” *Unless*...

I want Thomas’s story to be our guide this morning. I want it as we do some post-Easter thinking around the place of doubt in Christian faith. I want us to wonder and to ask: Is there any room for doubt in what we believe - and how wide are its margins? And I want us to listen because Thomas, bless his daring, has much to teach and tell.

**Let’s start at absolute ground level.** And let me be this frank: Thomas has gotten a bum rap over the last 2,000 years! He has been tagged as someone who is “less than” or “not quite there yet” or “filled with doubt” or even “oppositional” - and all of this for asking to see the wounds of Jesus.

But that is such a shallow assessment that I want to over-correct for it! I want to say: “You go, Thomas! Good for you!” Honestly, he was just as faithful as all the rest, and maybe even more so. He knew that doubt and faith were not opposites of one another; that they are, rather, a part of a dynamic continuum of wondering that keeps faith alive.

Paul Tillich, prominent Protestant voice of the twentieth century, put it like this<sup>1</sup>: “Faith is not the absence of doubt but the living tension between believing and doubting.” As such, it is often the essential energy force, the fuel, that later brings us to believe.

So, here's some real permission for you! The pastor said it and from the pulpit it and just two weeks after Easter it and you can quote him "doubt is okay" it's a necessary part of faith.

**And then, more.** I have to come clean and confess to a spiritual kinship with Thomas. As I see it, he was simply hungering for his own experience, his own first-hand encounter with the deep mystery before him. He wanted his own felt-sense, his own moment of truth that would animate to the deep insides of his soul. These are things that I value, too.

Sociologists have been able to discern a seismic shift on the religious landscape today. They note that in generations past, much of religious life was structured around organization and institutions. This is surely true here, and it's what gave us the gift of this address and building and all of the wonder that has come through her doors for 300 years! But, people today are far more interested in experiences of faith than they are in religious structures. The living hunger is to connect to the mystery and presence of God, not as a second-hand inheritance, but as a present-moment, living reality.

And so the task of the church needs to shift. We need to invite people into that kind of space in every way . . . connective, practicing, engaging, living toward those moments when the deepest senses of life can be celebrated, shared, experienced and passed on.

**More yet.** Thomas was an insistent inquirer rather than an accommodating acceptor! He was a serious seeker: searching, knocking, engaging, discussing. And he did these things not to be annoying, but to grow in knowing and believing!

There is a wisdom saying in Judaism: "To be without questions is not a sign of faith, but a lack of depth."<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expands on that truth: "Jews are encouraged not only to ask questions about the meaning of faith, but to question God. We ask questions not because we doubt, but because we believe." He goes on: "There are three conditions for asking questions rightly: a genuine desire to learn; a readiness to accept the limits of one's own understanding; and, when it comes to Torah, one learns by living and doing. There is no way of understanding without keeping the Sabbath."

Add the voice of William Sloane Coffin: "Doubts move you forward not backward, just as long as you doubt out of love of the truth, not out of some pathological need to doubt."<sup>3</sup> Not just for the sake of it, but for the more that is waiting to be known.

**Then, best of all, Thomas brings it all the way home.** He teaches us the importance of hanging in with our wondering, asking, even doubting long enough to see it through to a new commitment.

A painting by Rembrandt<sup>4</sup> helps me to tell. Thomas and Jesus are at center as Jesus exposed his wounds. There is near-palpable energy that radiates the two. In one stance, Thomas both reaches forward to touch and rebuffs in astonishment as he speaks the words that shift him from initial doubt to emerging faith: "My Lord and my God!" That movement is the best of Thomas encouraging the best in humanity. It's his moment of

realization, made possible by his hesitant beginning. It's the fruit of staying connected and hanging in there and not allowing for premature closure; of daring to ask and also daring to embrace new ground!

Tennyson once said: "Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt."<sup>5</sup> Those seven words understand that, on balance, the experience of doubt bears both sunshine and clouds; and the best of all seems more probable when we can cleave to the sunnier side!

**Now, I don't know where any of this touches home for you today.** I don't know all of the matters that make you doubt, though I do know some of them. But I am also privileged to know a good many of the ways and places that faith is animated and real for you. I suspect you know some of these things in me, too.

Whatever the case, I bid you to take the story of Thomas with you. You can't go wrong with it! Nor can you or I deny the attraction of the outcome that came his way: this man who moved deep within from . . . "unless" . . . all the way to . . . "my Lord and my God!"

What a great Easter story to tell! In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

© 2013 Charles Geordie Campbell

---

1

2 "Good Questions" in Christian Century, November 14, 2006, p. 6.

3 William Sloane Coffin. Letters to a Young Doubter. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005, p. 2.

4 R. Wayne Willis. P.S. God, Can You Fly? Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002, p. 3.