

Faith - Doubt - and - Determination

John 20:19-30

(Thomas doubts, and then believes *when* he sees.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
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At the beginning of this past week, I underwent a serious period of doubt about your interest in the subject of doubt. I became afraid that none of you were much interested in doubt, so that my reflections today would be irrelevant or even a distraction from what really matters to you.

During my period of doubt, I convinced myself that many people today are focused on just getting by, on making ends meet. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, our culture may be focused on basic needs, not on theological issues, especially not on sermons that discuss topics like doubt.

Then, as I was talking with our daughter, as she is just now in a period of unemployment, I found myself applying the same mental image for her situation that I was thinking of when I was thinking about doubt. I realized then that this mental image could be helpful to a number of people. So, I let go of my doubt about the relevance of doubt today.

This is the image I want you to take with you from today's sermon:

A bamboo plant, when it is growing in a cold climate, leans gradually lower and lower and lower as snow falls upon it. The bamboo bends, bends, bends, as little by little the weight of the snow increases. Then, a point is reached when the bamboo can take no more weight, and what happens? The bamboo snaps back to its original position, boldly and quickly *shaking off* the snow.

The bamboo simply bends until it can take no more, then *lets go* of the snow.

Isn't that a wonderful image for us?

In many ways, life weighs us down. We live with uncertainty about finances, about relationships, about health, even about war. We feel the weight of pressure which we place on ourselves or which we experience others putting on us. In any of these scenarios we bend, bend, and bend.

Since we are humans, not bamboo, we might wonder, when our body is tired, when our psyche is exhausted, or when our spirit is downtrodden, "Will I break?" "Is there some point at which I can no longer bend?" Since we are humans, we might *also* remind ourselves that we can *identify* with the bamboo and affirm to the Universe: "I may bend, but I will not break. I'm determined to stay strong and flexible in my bending. This weight will fall off and I'll stand upright!"

I tend to assume that all of us have faith. Most of us read aloud the affirmation of faith at the beginning of our worship today. We declared our faith in a good and loving God.

I tend to assume, too, that we all experience doubt. I am convinced that there is not only room for doubt, but also that doubt is actually quite useful.

I realize we need to distinguish between drastically different kinds of doubt. Many of us might say we believe in Jesus as the Christ, the one who revealed God's love on earth. Some of us may say that we *have doubt* about the virgin birth. For some who have this

doubt, it's difficult to face. For others, doubting Mary's virginity is not difficult at all. It's resolved in their minds. It's an intellectual issue. It's a *particularity* of Christian faith that, having doubt about, does not really affect their acceptance of the real importance of Christianity. Many of us may say we doubt, or just don't believe, that the world was created in a literal 6 days. We don't even call that "doubt," for we understand our faith's two Creation stories as very meaningful metaphors which point to a wonderful creation process, over time.¹

As big as these "particulars" of Christian faith can be in public debates, and as much as we can go through periods of times in our lives when we wrestle with these particulars, for plenty of Christians these are really intellectual doubts that we don't spend a lot of time or energy struggling with.

But, there's a different kind of doubt. It's the BIG DOUBT. It's the doubt that goes to our **core**. It's doubt about God. This is a doubt that, if we are in the midst of it, matters to us, as theologian Paul Tillich would say, *ultimately*. It's a matter of ultimate concern.

In fact, if we speak of it, we may keep our thoughts just between ourselves and God.

I'll share a relationship analogy. We may doubt that our good friend will be on time. That's a doubt that can bother us, but it isn't BIG. BIG DOUBT in a human relationship would be doubting that the good friend would BE THERE FOR US, be there for us, when it matters. Really be there.

Another brief example: We may doubt that God will drop employment from the sky to take care of us. However, BIG DOUBT is doubting that GOD IS, that GOD cares for us.

Our faith, just like our bodies and our relationships, goes through stages. Sometimes our faith travels through a stage of doubt. If we are **determined**, and if we face our doubt as squarely as we have faced our faith, then we *may* arrive at a greater, even a better-understood faith on the other side of our doubting. But, while we doubt, we don't know if that's going to happen or not.

When we start puberty, we don't know what we'll be like on the other side. When we go through middle age crises, we don't know what we'll be like afterward. When we enter retirement, we don't know what it will be like after we're there. We don't have the choice *not* to go forward, even though we don't know what the future will be like.

Our scripture passage depicts a scene of Jesus with disciples in a room. The passage in John does not say that Jesus is with his famous small group of a dozen or so disciples. He is with disciples, in general, with friends, with people who have stuck by him. The unusual thing about this passage is that Easter has already occurred, and Jesus is there. He says, or it is recorded that people experienced Jesus saying, "Peace be with you. Shalom." The disciples experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, of God, with them.

Thomas was not there in the room, and when he heard what his friends were saying, he doubted. He had intellectual doubt. It is not written that he scoffed at those who spoke of seeing Jesus; Thomas was just *determined* to see for himself.

The scripture passage tells of Jesus appearing again, the following Sunday. This time Thomas was there, he touched Jesus, and his doubt dissipated.

It would be easy to read this scripture passage and conclude that we are wrong to doubt. In fact over the centuries Thomas has been called "The Doubter," and all sorts of negative labels have been put onto him for that. We ourselves may have been called a "Doubting Thomas" if we've questioned some of the particulars of Christian faith.

I think, instead, that Thomas *should* be considered a *great role model*. If we are taught to chew on ideas, to ask questions in math class if we don't understand, to inquire of politicians precisely what they stand for, then why should we be expected to accept ideas about faith without questioning? *Doubt is a real gift to faith. Doubt is a stage of faith.* Doubt very often makes greater, deeper real faith possible.

In the Gospel of Mark, a father brings his child to Jesus; the other disciples have been unable to heal the boy. Jesus says something which we cite often, "If you believe, all things are possible to one that believes." The father answers, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

His unbelief, his doubt, is sincere.

Faith and doubt often go together; in fact, we can and often do hold faith and doubt simultaneously.

The *naming of doubt does not indicate no faith. It shows honesty.* When our faith is fragile, we have to have definite answers, but as our faith strengthens, it can bend, and ambiguity is tolerated, even eventually embraced.

When I was at Claremont seminary, a light-year ago, I took classes in Hinduism and Buddhism. I was and am still moved by an insight in the tradition of Zen I learned back then, and I'm eager to share it with you.

Zen masters talk about *cultivating* "great doubt." One Zen master taught, "When there is enough faith, there is enough doubt," which is described as "the great spirit of inquiry." That's not all: "When there is a great spirit of inquiry, there is illumination." Zen teaches that enlightenment is brought about *through* doubt, "Great Doubt." They don't say great doubt *sometimes* leads to enlightenment, but that it *always* does. "Once Great Doubt arises out of a 100 who practice, 100 will achieve a breakthrough. And if 1000, 1000 will break through."

Zen calls the transition from Great Doubt to Great Enlightenment the "Great Dying."

And, quite honestly, *it feels like a dying, doesn't it*, if we gradually or suddenly greatly doubt all, or even some, of what we had taken on faith as true?

When I was full of optimism and just out of seminary I served as the Chaplain of Simpson College in Iowa. I was 24. One of my new colleagues, a "religion" professor whom I immediately looked up to told me he was in the midst of a deep period of doubt. I didn't really want to hear him discuss his doubt, but virtually every week he would speak to me of his painful loss of faith. He had lost his belief in God. He didn't feel like an atheist or an agnostic, he said. He called himself a Christian, who after having had much faith, and preaching for over a decade, had entered into an intense struggle with great doubt. He couldn't let go of his doubt; in fact he was determined to experience the doubt. He feared that the doubt would never dissipate--he would have it forever. Yet, he hoped the doubt would disperse, like our image of snow on bamboo, that the doubt would suddenly fall off and leave him standing without that weight, with a deepened, if altered faith. I realized that it took a kind of **courage** for this colleague to face his Great Doubt so earnestly.

Paul Tillich is a theologian who wrote a lot about doubt, and courage. One of his most powerful comments is this: "The **courage to be** is rooted in the **God who appears** when **God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.**"²

I need not to have doubted that doubt was relevant to us if we are out of work, for example. For exactly when we have challenges like that we doubt how things will work

out. We simply cannot foretell the future. Yet, when we look back, from some point in the future, we'll see how the current challenge has resolved. What we need today is a *combination* of **strength and bendability**, until the weight shifts off.

Faith is strange and beautiful. The more it is tested, with **determination**, the more we can trust that faith in some form will return, though we don't know that form. We discover that faith can *embrace* doubt, as a good friend, in fact as a Wise Counselor.

¹ Tillich talks about "absolute faith" which is without "*special* content." That would be faith that does not include some particular tenant of Christianity. Tillich says this "absolute faith" is "not without content." "The content of absolute faith is" "the 'God above God.'" "Absolute faith and its consequence, the courage that takes the radical doubt, the doubt about God, into itself, transcends" many ideas and specific notions of God. p. 182. *Systematic Theology*

² *The Courage to Be* p. 190