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Doubt

John 20: 19-30

Hebrews 6: 13-20

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Poor Thomas! We're at him again this week, after focusing our Easter attention on his questioning of the reality of the risen Jesus. He gets a bad rap, Thomas does, for his questions; but especially, much of Christian history has ripped him for the fact that he doubted: "Unless I see for myself the mark of the nails in his hands and put my own hand in his pierced side, I won't believe." And so, despite my efforts last Sunday, my namesake disciple takes it on the chin year after year around this time, usually about his skeptical nature, his inability to accept things that simply make no logical sense to him even if they are somehow theological "truths" supposedly essential to one's faith.

And so, today, I want to defend Brother Thomas again and actually hail him for that *something* within him that moved him to both accept and express his doubts. I do so because I'm in agreement with Alfred Lord Tennyson who said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."

That may seem strange to you - or perhaps not - but for many Christians, doubt is the exact opposite of faith. Faith, for these folks, is certainty, even in the face of all the evidence, in spite of what reason or science or all the logic in the world offers. Faith, seen this way, is the conviction of what are usually abstract theological fundamentals, principles established by someone or some group that claim to be the essence of Christianity. And with a mindset like this, there is no room for doubt; doubt is temptation to stray from what is perceived to be the only truth; doubt, I've heard it said by a few people, is of the devil.

I know this way of looking at doubt because during my college years, I flirted with fundamentalism – at least with biblical literalism. I was part of a small group Bible study that was a mixed bag of theologies, some of whom were literalists and their way of looking at scripture and what is the meaning of faith was very different than my upbringing at the First Baptist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan. In a literalist understanding of faith, the primary purpose is to gain certainty about specific ideas about God and Jesus and one's personal salvation, all of which are found in the Bible, using particular interpretive principles. For a couple of years, I was absolutely certain about a lot of things, particularly about the Ultimate things, and no one could convince me that there may just be other ways to see things.

For me at that time, the opposite of faith was doubt, and for those two years, I tried to eliminate doubt and substitute it with certainty (which, in reality, was my ego but that's another story for another time!) I had no clue what Irish poet and theologian George MacDonald meant

when he said, "Doubt can be a tool in God's hand wielded in the lives of those who allow it, for the strengthening, not the destruction of faith."

See, I didn't want to deal with the myriad paradoxes that make life what it is. To live with ambiguity was not a virtue; it was lack of conviction, wishy-washy, an "anything goes" kind of faith. But as the years have gone on, I've grown a little bit – at least I hope I have! – and I've come to know that faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin and that the opposite of faith isn't doubt, it's certainty. In fact, with great faith comes great doubt because, for those of us who understand faith as much, much more than a clinging to certain doctrines about things, who see faith as a relationship with the One who is beyond all doctrines and our limited human understanding, how can we have certainty about the One who is beyond all certainty? When you have absolute certainty, you've already arrived, you've made it. What purpose then, is there to study, reflect, pray? Certainty courts the death of the soul because our soul's desire is to forever seek God, the One who made and dwells within our soul, the One we can never fully understand. The soul is always yearning for new possibilities, always being raised to new life, forever seeking the larger and ceaselessly melting the clogged ice floes of certainty.

I'm no psychiatrist so I make no claims to intentional study of things like this, but as I see it, the suppression of doubts, all the while holding on to the illusion of certainty, is the engine that drives fanaticism of all sorts. Why is it that those who train suicide bombers spend months or years convincing their "students" that what they are proposing to do is absolutely the truth, in line with their deepest held spiritual convictions? And it's not only those particular violent extremists. Shoving down the gift of doubt from our consciousness is also what powers bigotry of all forms, sexism, homophobia, fundamentalisms and all other absolute certainties, because the unwillingness to embrace doubt is usually a defense against all the paradoxes of life. And that's a shame because it is by living in these paradoxes that we grow – intellectually, emotionally, and in particular, spiritually.

Of course, if we're really honest with ourselves, most of the time we don't want to grow because growing is painful; you slam up against all sorts of people and places and cultures and ideas that are different than yours. And if you listen deeply to all of these things, what might happen? You may be shaken up, ripped out of the comfort zones of what you've always clung to as truth, whether or not it is the truth. But doubt is a gift because it has the power to free us from the spiritual constraints that keep us stuck in the cement shoes that paralyze us on the way following Jesus. Otherwise, we're left with partial truths, one-sided values and a narrowing of the richness that life has to offer.

Do you remember in the story after the scene when Thomas refused to believe until he saw Jesus himself and touched him with his own hands?

"A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Don't doubt believe."

He had a personal encounter with the risen Christ. I don't know if he would have if he had been there that first time Jesus appeared or if he had accepted at face value what the others told him a week earlier. But it seems to me that Thomas' doubts broke open something in him, offering him, not certainty, but a relationship, a rich, deep, life-giving relationship.

I know why a lot of people cling to the claims of certainties, especially today in our age of anxiety. It's a way to deal with all the anxieties that infect our daily living, a way to cope in this time of deep and broad and radical change. But certainties lead to dogma; dogma leads to

rigidity; rigidity leads to idolatry and idolatry always banishes Mystery, Who is the Truth, and this always leads to spiritual death. And yet, when we live with the anxieties of doubt, we move towards openness, and openness leads to awe, awe to discovery and discovery takes us to depths of our soul which is always yearning to grow in its relationship with its Maker. Doubt, I have come to believe, is necessary to becoming radically open to God because doubt is a form of radical trust that the universe is so much richer than we know, so amazing that we can hardly stand to comprehend it all. We need doubt to pry open our souls that we might see what God is trying to show us every moment of every day of our lives.

You know, doubt and uncertainties run the gamut, from what many of us would consider the most trivial theological doctrines, to today as I keep on my journey trying to follow Jesus when, as I wrote in one of my sabbatical essays, I'm wrestling with some theological propositions I've long held dear in light of what I'm learning about how the world really is. But even as some of these tenants of my theology are thrown into the realm of doubt, certain truths become even more powerful and more real to me. In particular, the certainty that I belong. I belong to all life, all existence, everyone and everything, and especially, I belong to God, who loves me with an everlasting love. I am certain that all life is sacred, that God's touch, God's breath, God's presence is everywhere, within and through and outside and overall, and that makes everything holy. And I am certain that I don't need to fear the future, whatever may come. We need not fear because I know that, as we wrestle with all sorts of things all over the world, large and small, God is the one "who was and is and is to be," who is always making all things new, bringing life out of death, and though things in the future may not be anything like they are today, life will continue to be rich and full of wonder and beauty. And I know that sometimes, when I'm filled with doubt, all I need to do is to be still and listen with my soul and there will be God – and that's all I need to know.

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Tradition has it that Thomas was the Apostle who went to India and there he was martyred bearing witness to the risen Christ. No one knows his state of mind or his heart, but I suspect that through all those years, in middle of the night and in bright light of daytime, Thomas still wondered and questioned and doubted many things. It was his nature, part of the heart of who he was. Still, he clung to Christ, the One in whose embrace he lived.

The reading from the book of Hebrews sends us off quite well as we go into the world, bringing all our fears and our faith, including our doubts.

"We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered."

(Hebrews 6: 19-20)

What is your anchor? What is true and unchanging in your life? All the rest is fuel for your soul's growth, to deepen your walk with the Mystery who is life. All the rest pushes you on in a great and wonderful adventure with the One who is with you.