

If I Believe, Why Do I Doubt?

Ray Pritchard - 8/14/2005 - Mark 9:24

This is a sermon about a topic we rarely discuss in church. This is a sermon about doubt. As such, it is an unfamiliar topic to most people, even though there are whole books of the Bible that deal with the issue of doubt in various ways — Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Habakkuk. Many of the psalms touch on the theme of doubt and feeling abandoned by God.

Last year, the 20/20 singles group invited me to an “Ask Pastor Ray” night. That’s always fun because the group is lively, and they pepper me with unpredictable questions. That night 50 to 60 of us sat in a big circle in our church dining room. I told them I would be glad to answer questions on the Bible, the Christian life, theological issues, or they could ask about my personal life. No topic was off-limits. Near the end of the evening, a young lady raised her hand and asked, “Pastor Ray, when I listen to you speak, you always sound so certain about everything. Do you ever doubt?” I told her I thought that was a very important question.

I know that when I preach or when I write, I do sound very certain. Part of that is intentional. For one thing, I know what I believe, and I’m not shy about presenting my views in a forceful manner. When a man stands up to preach, he should preach his faith, not his doubts. People have enough troubles of their own without me adding to their burden. But having said that, I think the question deserves an answer.

Yes, I do have doubts. I don’t talk about them very much, but I doubt every day. (After I preached a sermon on this, one of the elders of the church was concerned about that statement — did I really mean it? Absolutely, I said. I have doubts and questions that come to my mind every single day.) I don’t know how a person could be a Christian and not have doubts from time to time. Faith requires doubt in order to be faith. If you ever arrive at a place where all your doubts are gone, you will know that you are in heaven.

This is one of the hidden secrets of the church. We all doubt from time to time. Doubt itself is not sinful or wrong. It often can be the catalyst to new spiritual growth. As I have pondered the matter, I have concluded that our doubts tend to fall into three categories: First, there are intellectual doubts. These are doubts most often raised by those outside the Christian faith. Is the Bible the Word of God? Is Jesus the Son of God? Did he really rise from the dead? Second, there are spiritual doubts. These tend to be the doubts of those inside the church. Am I really a Christian? Have I truly believed? Why is it so hard to pray? Why do I still feel guilty? Third, there are circumstantial doubts. This is the largest category because it encompasses all the “whys” of life. Why did my child die? Why did my marriage break up? Why can’t I find a husband? Why did my friend betray me? Where was God when my uncle was abusing me? These questions touch the intersection of biblical faith and the pain of a fallen world.

As we approach this topic, there are several things we need to understand up front:

- 1) Many people think doubt is the opposite of faith, but it isn't. Unbelief is the opposite of faith. Unbelief refers to a willful refusal to believe, while doubt refers to inner uncertainty.
- 2) Many people think doubt is unforgivable, but it isn't. God doesn't condemn us when we question him. Both Job and David repeatedly questioned God, but they were not condemned. God is big enough to handle all our doubts and all our questions.
- 3) Many people think struggling with God means we lack faith, but that's not true. Struggling with God is a sure sign that we truly have faith. If we never struggle, our faith will never grow stronger.

It helps me to think of doubt as a kind of immunization. When you receive a smallpox vaccination, the doctor actually gives you a tiny portion of the disease. That tiny portion is just enough to activate your antibodies so that you have the strength to fight off the disease later. In the same way, doubts can actually end up developing a much stronger faith if we face our doubts honestly.

In order to flesh out this principle, let's look at three men who doubted, and how Jesus dealt with them.

I. Three Men Who Doubted

A. The Father of a Demonized Son

“Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’”
(Mark 9:24 ESV)

Every parent understands these words. Who among us has not looked down at a sick child and felt fear, worry and doubt overwhelm us? Often it is much easier to maintain our faith when we ourselves are sick. But let our children suffer, and the whole world seems to collapse around us. And if the suffering is great, as it surely was in this instance, we may find that we can hardly pray because fear has so gripped us. We may begin to doubt God's presence and his goodness, and we may even wonder if somehow God has abandoned us. If the suffering is not soon relieved, we may become angry with God and turn from him altogether.

Certainly we have all said, at one time or another, “I believe. Help my unbelief.”

“Lord, I believe, but my heart is filled with doubt.”

“Lord, I know you can, but I'm not sure you will.”

“Lord, the situation seems hopeless. Help me to trust you.”

Here was a father with a son possessed by an evil spirit from his childhood. For years the spirit had caused the child to throw himself into the fire or into the water in order to kill him. Sometimes the child became rigid, foaming at the mouth. The primitive medical science of that day offered no help at all. When the man brought his son to Jesus’ disciples, they could not help him. Who can blame the father for saying to Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us” (v. 22). The little word “if” hangs in the air, expressing both faith and doubt intermingled in this father’s tortured soul. For years, he has sought help everywhere and always he has been disappointed. Having heard about Jesus and his miracles, he brings the boy to his disciples, and they fail also. Who could blame him for doubting?

Jesus’ response is immediate: “Everything is possible for him who believes” (v. 23). The healing the father desperately desires hangs on his own belief. Will he believe? Can he believe? From his heart comes the truth: “I believe. Help my unbelief.” Notice three positive aspects of the father’s statement: 1) He admitted his need. 2) He admitted it to the right person. 3) He asked for the help he needed. Here is faith deeply intermingled with doubt, and yet Jesus performs the miracle anyway. Evidently the faith mattered more than the doubt, because Jesus doesn’t even rebuke him for his unbelief. He simply heals the boy once and for all.

B. John the Baptist

Do you recall the occasion when Herod threw John the Baptist in jail because John dared to rebuke him for his gross sexual sin? No doubt confused and frustrated by his incarceration, John sent messengers to Jesus with a very pertinent question: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:2-3). In order to understand this, we need to keep two things in mind. First, John had made one of the earliest public confessions of Jesus when he cried out, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Then he said, “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God” (v. 34). Make no mistake. John knew who Jesus was. And that leads me to the second insight. In recent years, our church has sent over 250,000 copies of *An Anchor for the Soul* into prisons across America. As a result, we have received thousands of letters from prisoners. My heart has been deeply moved by the accounts of the hopelessness most of them feel. No place on earth is more corrosive to faith than a prison cell. No place on earth is darker and more hopeless than a prison cell. It is no wonder that as he languished in prison, not knowing when, or if, he would be released, John began to wonder, and then he began to doubt. He at least knew enough to ask the right question. Are you the one sent from heaven, or is there someone else who will be our Savior? Are you really the promised Messiah? The circumstances may have changed, but the question is the same one this generation is asking: “Jesus, are you the one or should we look elsewhere?” The answer our Lord gives is very instructive. He does not rebuke John or put him down. He simply gives John the evidence he needs in order to regain his faith. Go back, he says, and tell John what you have seen. Then he lists six miracles:

The blind see.

The lame walk.

The lepers are cured.

The deaf hear.

The dead are raised.

The poor have the gospel preached to them.

Note what he didn't say: "Tell John that I am the fulfillment of the Messianic promises of the Old Testament." That is true, but he didn't say it. "Tell John that I can walk on water." Also true, but he didn't say that either. "Tell John that I make the Pharisees look like fools." Very true,, but also not mentioned. Jesus essentially says, "Go back and tell John that in my name, the hurting people of the world are being totally transformed." Matthew 11:7 says that as John's disciples were leaving Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John the Baptist. He praised him by calling him "more than a prophet" (v. 9). Then he declared, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (v. 11). What a commendation by Jesus. But remember when it was given. Jesus spoke those words while John the Baptist was still nursing his doubts. It's as if Jesus is saying, "John may doubt me, but I don't doubt him. He's still my man, doubts and all." What an incredible affirmation.

C. Thomas

It is impossible to talk about doubt without considering the man whose name has become synonymous with doubt, to the point that we call him "doubting Thomas." In order to understand his story correctly, we need to know three pre-Easter facts about Thomas:

1) He possessed enormous courage.

Thomas first steps onto the stage of biblical history in John 11. Lazarus has died in Bethany — a suburb of Jerusalem. Jesus and the disciples are in the area of Jericho when they get the word. When Jesus decides to go to Bethany, his disciples remind him that the last time he went near Jerusalem, the leaders tried to stone him to death. It would be suicidal to go back. Jesus decides to go anyway. But the disciples were unconvinced. At that point, Thomas speaks up and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). It is a brief statement that reveals enormous courage. Thomas agreed that the Jewish leaders would probably kill Jesus if he went back to Jerusalem. Events would soon prove him correct. But what can you say about a man who says, "If they kill him, they'll have to kill me too?" It takes a real man to say that. There is love there, and loyalty, and despair, and sacrifice, and total commitment. It may just be that Thomas understood better than any other disciple what was about to happen.

2) He did not accept easy answers.

John's gospel mentions Thomas one other time before the crucifixion. It is late Thursday night in the Upper Room. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet and given them the great command to love one another. Judas leaves the room to do his dirty deed. The rest of the disciples crowd around their Lord, knowing the end was not far away. To them — those loyal men who had stood with him in his hour of trial — Jesus said,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going (John 14:1-4).

Thomas has been listening quietly, intently, carefully. All this talk of coming and going is too much for him. It seems vague and mysterious. In a moment of great honesty, he blurts out, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). Those are the words of a totally honest man. The rest of the disciples were just as perplexed, but only Thomas dared to speak out. We all know people like that—if they don't understand, they won't let it pass. They keep asking until it makes sense. That's Thomas. And that's a second key to his personality. He was an independent thinker, a thoughtful man, not easily stampeded. He wouldn't make a confession of faith unless he deeply believed it to be true. Let others have a glib, easy faith that comes without reflection and deep thought. Not Thomas. His was a faith won through the agony of personal struggle.

3) He was fully devoted to Jesus Christ.

He was with Jesus during all the tumult of the last few days of his life. He was with him in the Triumphal Entry and he was with him when Jesus debated the Pharisees. He was with him in the Upper Room and he was with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. The picture we have of Thomas on the eve of the crucifixion is this: He is a brave man, intensely loyal and deeply committed to Jesus. If need be, he is ready to lay down his own life. He is no doubt inclined to look somewhat on the dark side of life. He is completely honest about his doubts, confusion and fears. And he won't be satisfied with second-hand answers.

John tells us that Thomas was not present on that Sunday evening when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst (John 20:19-25). The Bible doesn't say why, but I think I know. There are basically two different ways people respond to sorrow and tragedy. Some seek solace in the company of their friends. They want people around to help them talk it out. Others prefer to be alone with their thoughts. Such was Thomas. If it is true that Thomas realized more than the others what was going to happen in Jerusalem, then it may also be true that he was more deeply hurt. He was not with the disciples because his heart had been crushed. Everything he had, he had given to Jesus, and Jesus had died. He still loves, still cares, still wants to believe, but his heart is broken. He is not a bad man nor is

his doubt sinful. Deep inside he wants to believe. Thomas is definitely not a skeptic or a rationalist. His doubts come from devotion to Christ. There is no doubt like the doubt of a broken heart. It's one thing to doubt the Virgin Birth in a classroom setting. It is something else again to lose someone you love and wonder if there is still a God in heaven.

Thomas is not an unbelieving skeptic; he is a wounded believer. He was not unwilling to believe, but unable. Thomas stands for all time as the one man who most desperately wanted to believe if only he could be sure. After all these years, Thomas has gotten a bad reputation. Doubting Thomas, we call him. We tend to look down on him. But not Jesus. Eight days later, Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus speaks to him as to one whose faith is weak, not to one who has an evil heart. He said, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27). It's worth noting that Jesus knew all about Thomas' doubts. He knew the raging sea within his heart. And he came just so Thomas could be sure. Jesus didn't put him down. He said, "Go ahead. See for yourself. Stop doubting and believe." This means that above the front door of every church in the world, we should erect a two-word sign: DOUBTERS WELCOME. That should be the church's message.

If you have doubts, come inside.

If you have questions, come inside.

If you are uncertain, come inside.

If you are a skeptic, come inside.

If you are searching for truth, come inside.

As far as I can tell, Thomas never actually touched Jesus. It seems that simply seeing him face to face completely convinced him. Thus do the strongest doubters often become the strongest believers. When he sees Jesus, he rises to the highest level of faith in the gospel of John as he cries out, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Doubt does have its uses. Deep doubt is often the prelude to an even deeper faith. I love the way Frederick Buechner expresses it: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (from the book *Wishful Thinking*). It is a wonderful truth that the greatest doubters often become the strongest believers. And the honest doubts — once resolved — often become the bedrock of an unshakeable faith. It has been said that no truth is so strongly believed as that which you once doubted.

II. Seven Ways to Move from Doubt to Faith

Doubt is not sinful but it can be dangerous. It can also be a spur to enormous spiritual growth. It's what you do with your doubt that matters. Here are seven simple suggestions

about how to handle your doubt.

A. Admit your doubts and ask for help.

That's what the father did in Mark 9. That's what John the Baptist did. And in a way, that's what Thomas did also. He plainly stated why he could not and would not believe until he saw the evidence for himself. God is not fragile. He can handle your doubts, your fears, your worries, and all your unanswered questions. He's a big God. He runs the universe without any help. Your doubts won't upset him. Tell him your doubts, cry out and ask for his help. And don't fight the battle alone. Go to a Christian friend, a pastor, an elder, a deacon, anyone with a strong faith and godly insight. Ask them to walk with you as you face your doubts honestly.

B. Recognize that faith is a choice, not a feeling.

It took me a long time to figure this out. For many years I tended to associate faith with how I felt at any given moment. It's easy to feel like you've got a lot of faith when all is well, you've got money in the bank, your wife loves you, the doctor says you don't have cancer, your children are doing well, your career is moving ahead, you're happy at your church and all is right with the world. But what will you have when you run out of money, your marriage falls apart, you end up with cancer, your children have problems, you lose your job, your friends at church won't talk to you, and life in general stinks. If all you've got is a "God of the good times," then your faith is shallow indeed.

While doing a radio interview, I was asked how I could be so positive and confident when I spoke about God's will. The man asking the question seemed burdened with many cares and difficulties. My answer went this way: "When my father died in 1974, I came face to face with the ultimate unanswerable question of life. I didn't know then why such a good man would have to die at the young age of 56 or why he would leave my mother and her four sons without a husband and a father. I had no clue about what God was doing. In the years since then I have learned many things about life, but I confess that I still don't understand why my father died. It doesn't make any more sense to me now than it did then. I am older and wiser but in the one question that really matters, I have no answers. But I have learned since then that faith is a choice you make. Sometimes you choose to believe because of what you see, often you believe in spite of what you can see. As I look to the world around me, many things remain mysterious and unanswerable. But if there is no God, and if he is not good, then nothing at all makes sense. I have chosen to believe because I must believe. I truly have no other choice. If I sound confident, it is only because I have learned through my tears that my only confidence is in God and God alone."

C. Don't be Afraid to "Borrow" Some Faith.

A few weeks ago, a woman in our congregation came up to greet me after the service. She said, "You probably won't remember this," and proceeded to tell me a story that, in fact, I did not recall. Some time ago she was going through an extremely difficult time

that related to a very painful divorce. In the midst of it all, she saw me, briefly told me the story, and said that she felt like she was losing her faith. On the spur of the moment, I looked at her and said, "That's fine. I've got plenty. You can borrow some of mine." I said it and then forgot about it. But when the woman recounted the story, she told me how much that had helped her. She had indeed "borrowed" some of my faith to get her through the hard time. Not only did I not recall the conversation, I must have had plenty of faith right then because I didn't miss it when she borrowed some of mine.

I've told this story several times lately and each time, heads nod across the congregation. If "borrowing" someone's faith doesn't make sense to you, then just skip this point. But if it does, then keep it in mind. When you find yourself filled with doubts, go find someone filled with faith and "borrow" some of theirs. It works.

D. Act on Your Faith, Not Your Doubts.

That's what Noah did when he built the ark. That's what Abraham did when he left Ur of the Chaldees. That's what Abraham did when he offered Isaac. That's what Moses did when he marched through the Red Sea on dry ground. That's what David did when he faced Goliath. That's what Joshua did when he marched around Jericho. That's what Daniel did when he was thrown into the lion's den. That's what Nehemiah did when he built the wall.

Don't you think that all these great heroes of the faith had their doubts? Of course they did. They didn't know in advance how everything was going to come out. But they took a deep breath, decided to trust God, and they acted on their faith and not on their doubts. Do the same thing and your faith will continually grow stronger.

E. Doubt Your Doubts, Not Your Faith.

This simply means that you should not cast away your faith simply because you are in the deep valley of darkness. All of us walk into that valley from time to time. Some of us spend a great deal of time there. But when you find yourself in that valley where all is uncertain and you are sorely tempted to give in to your doubts, fears and worries, remember these two words: keep walking. Just keep walking. Nothing is gained by camping out in the valley of darkness. The only way out is to keep on walking. Every step forward is a way to "doubt your doubts." Soon enough the light will shine again.

F. Understand That There are Some Things You Will Never Understand This Side of Heaven.

All of us have questions that we simply can't answer. Often those questions revolve around the whys of life. Why did this happen? Why did it happen to me? Or to my children? Or to my wife? Or to my husband? Why did it happen now and not ten years from now? To all those questions of the heart, the answers will not come until we get to heaven. It is faith-building to say, "I understand that I won't understand right now."

G. Keep Going Back to What You Know to Be True.

This, for me, is perhaps the most important point. After considering the sufferings of this life, and the perils and tribulations of following Christ, Paul concludes Romans 8 triumphantly by declaring, “For I am persuaded.” And he declares that nothing in all the universe can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In II Timothy 1:12 he says, “I know whom I have believed.”

Some things you think.

Some things you hope.

Some things you know.

In times of trouble, keep going back to what you know to be true. When I hit my 50th birthday several years ago, I realized that I believe less now than I did 30 years ago. Back then I thought I had everything totally figured out. Life has a way of knocking us down a few pegs. That’s certainly happened to me. So on one level, I don’t have total certainty about all the details of theology. In a sense, my knowledge is both greater and smaller than it was three decades ago. But what I know, I really know. I have a handful of convictions that cannot be shaken. I would include in that short list these truths: God is good, life is short, every day is a gift, people matter more than things, fame is fleeting, this world is not my home, and even hard times are meant for my benefit. And at the core of my faith is an unshakable belief in the sovereignty of God. He is God and I am not. He is sovereign over all the details of my life, and I can trust him completely even when those details seem to be spinning out of control.

There comes a moment when we have to decide to go “all in” about what we believe. You have to look at your cards, look at your chips, and then you have to say, “All in.” That means you are risking everything on that one hand. If you’re right, you win it all. If you’re wrong, you lose it all. It’s that way in the Christian life also. You can’t hold on to your cards forever. Somewhere along the way you’ve got to make a stand. Years ago I decided to go “all in” on Jesus. I’m pushing my chips to the center of the table and I’m going “all in” that he is the Son of God, that he died on the cross for my sins, that he rose from the dead on the third day, that he is the Lord of the universe, and that he will someday take me to heaven. Lewis Sperry Chafer said that believing in Jesus means trusting him so much that if he can’t take you to heaven, you aren’t going to go there. I like that. If Jesus can’t take me to heaven, then I’ll never make it because I’m going “all in” on him. I don’t have a Plan B.

Recently I ran across a statement that resonated with my own heart: “One who has never doubted has only half believed.” By that standard, I’m not ashamed to say that I have fully believed because I have often doubted. But my doubts have only made my faith stronger in the end.

Here is my final word to you. God never turns an honest doubter away. Never. Come to him with your doubts, your skepticism, your unbelief, your hard questions, your sincere uncertainties. He welcomes your hardest questions. How do I know that? Thirty-six years ago, when I was 16 years old, having just finished my junior year in high school, I struggled to figure out what I could believe. Although I was a baptized church member and a leader of our youth group, I had never truly trusted Christ as Savior. Miserable and confused, I knew something was wrong with my life, but didn't know what to do about it. One day in June 1969, I sat down on the concrete steps outside my house and prayed a simple prayer, "Jesus, if you are real, come into my life."

That's not much of a prayer if you think about it. That's a very shaky confession of faith. "Jesus, if you are real, come into my life." He was and he did. And my life was changed that day and the change continues 36 years later. I know God welcomes honest doubters because he welcomed me.

If you have doubts, cry out, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." Then get ready because that's a prayer God will always answer. Amen.

Dealing with Our Doubts

Sermon by Donald B. Strobe

Mark 9 : 14-32

David Heller is a young Boston psychologist who, as part of a continuing research interest, collects letters children have written to God. "Dear God: Children's Letters to God" (New York: Doubleday, 1987) is Heller's second publication on this subject. In it he reports the following letter: "Dear God, I have doubts about you sometimes. Sometimes I really believe. Like when I was four and I hurt my arm and you healed it up fast. But my question is, if you could do this why don't you stop all the bad in the world? Like war. Like diseases. Like famine. Like drugs. And there are problems in other people's neighborhoods too. I'll try to believe more. (Signed) Ian." (age 10) (p.121) Who of us cannot relate to that child's letter to God? Who has not asked the same questions? It is said that the most important questions are asked by children and philosophers, and it does seem that way, doesn't it?

I. IMMEDIATELY AFTER JESUS AND THE "INNER CIRCLE" OF PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN, CAME DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, THEY ENCOUNTERED HUMAN SUFFERING. This narrative, commonly referred to as "An epileptic boy healed" appears in all three Synoptic Gospels...and in each, immediately follows the Transfiguration of our Lord. In all the Synoptic Gospels these events are linked: the glory at the mountaintop and the suffering in the valley. That's the way life is, isn't it? We may have some high moment of inspiration, but soon life brings us down to earth again.

There is a great painting by the Italian master Raphael, showing the descent from the Mount of Transfiguration. He depicts in a powerful fashion the striking contrast between the top of the mount and the bottom - above, the beauty of that high and holy vision, which we call the "Transfiguration of Jesus;" and below, the tragic need and suffering,

the impotence of the disciples, and the fruitless discussion about it. So does life have its stark contrasts: sometimes we go from the beauty of worship here to find ugliness outside; we move from the peace and tranquility in church back into the turmoil in our homes, our places of work, our world. But that's where we must go. We cannot stay here forever. Jesus took His closest disciples down from the mountaintop and back into the marketplace.

Halford Luccock in the INTERPRETER'S BIBLE comments on the phrase "going downhill." It is usually applied to people in a condemnatory or pitying manner. When we say of anybody, he (or she) is "going downhill" we mean that that person has seen better days. But, says Luccock, "there is a nobler sense of the words as well - the sense in which Jesus spent his whole life going downhill from the high and lonely places, where he held communion with God to the level, crowded places of human need. There are those who spend much of their time on the fine art of 'going uphill,' climbing to some height of advantage, position, power, or wealth, and pay no attention at all to this much finer art, the art of going downhill. It is the lifelong descent from the place of vision to the place of deed, from the hill of privilege to the plain of need." (Halford E. Luccock, THE INTERPRETER'S BIBLE, Vol. 7, New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951, 779) We all need times of escape. "Retreat" is the word which we usually use. But retreats are for refreshment. After a retreat, we are supposed to make some advance. William Barclay writes: "...solitude is not meant to make us solitary. It is meant to make us better able to meet and cope with the demands of everyday life. (DAILY STUDY BIBLE, Phila: The Westminster Press, 1956, p. 220) How often, whenever Jesus was confronted with heavy theological questions, he turned people's attention away from the heavens, and back to their neighbors in need here on earth.

When Jesus came down the mountain, He saw a great crowd, engaged in a heated argument. When they saw Jesus, they stopped. There was evidently something about Jesus that amazed the people...perhaps his face was still shining with the radiance of the mountaintop experience, like Moses' face after meeting God on Mt. Sinai. Jesus asked them, "What are you discussing?" There is terrible irony in this word "discussing." In the presence of a deep and agonizing emergency, all they could do was to discuss! Have you seen the poster which enumerates a whole list of different items, sort of a paraphrase of Matthew 25? One of them is this: "I was hungry, and you formed a discussion group to discuss world hunger. Thank you." How many times in the history of the church have Jesus' disciples, face to face with appalling human need, been preoccupied with discussion? "Like a freshman forum, moves the Church of God; brothers, we are talking, where the saints have trod." We're very good at it. We Methodists, especially, have a penchant for thinking that if we have thoroughly debated something, and passed a resolution, we have done something. I know that "It is better to discuss something without resolving it than to resolve something without discussing it," as someone has said, but there is a time for discussion and a time for action. In the face of suffering humanity at the foot of the mountain, the need was for action, not discussion.

This poor father had an "only child" (Luke 9:38) who was subject to seizures, which sounds to those who read the words carefully as an almost clinical description of

epilepsy. The poor father brought his son to the disciples, hoping that they could do something about the problem. But “they were not able.” How many times that has been true down through the ages...the world comes to the doorstep of the church, and we are powerless to help. People are ground down by depression, guilt, poverty, etc., and instead of lifting the burden, sometimes we add to it...and blame the victim for his or her problems. Why were the disciples so impotent? Jesus answers simply: from lack of faith. “Faith” in the Bible means more than belief. It means “trust.”

II. AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN, THERE WAS HUMAN SUFFERING. And the disciples were impotent in the face of it. I have felt that way many times, standing by a hospital bed, wishing that there was more that I could do, wondering why God allows good people to suffer so. Twenty years ago there came out of Korea a classic little book titled “The Martyred” by Richard E. Kim (New York: George Braziller, 1964) In it the agnostic Captain Lee comes to know Mr. Shin, a Christian pastor, in the midst of the Korean War. (Or was it only a police action? I can never keep those things straight.) In the midst of the horrors and terrible suffering of the people, Lee kept asking the minister, “Does your God care that people suffer?” And Shin for many months avoided giving the answer, out of his own despair and uncertainty as to the answer. Finally, one day, Lee corners him and says: “Shin, your God doesn’t care, does He? Your god, any god, all the gods in the world - what do they care for us? Your God, he doesn’t understand our sufferings: he doesn’t want to have anything to do with our miseries, murders, starving people, wars and all their horrors - your God couldn’t care less!” The Christian pastor, Shin, in his own agonizing unbelief cries out to the agnostic Lee: “All my life I have searched for God but I found only man in all his suffering!” But of course, had he but realized it, when he found man in all his suffering, he found God!

I know, this is not the usual way of thinking of things. Instead of seeing the presence of God in human suffering, we see instead God’s absence. Theologian Paul Tillich reported that when he toured the battlefields during World War I, soldiers most often expressed their disbelief in God in terms of not being able to reconcile the notion of a good God with the evil they saw all around them. They asked: How can there be a loving purpose at the heart of reality and the world be as it is? Albert Einstein confessed his inability to believe in a personal God along these same lines. If you could preach a sermon to those who have suffered in the world’s holocausts and hurricanes; who have lost family and friends to earthquakes, famines, floods, and plane crashes, what would you say? What message of comfort would you give to the starving, the homeless, those victimized by war, military coups, tyranny? There is only one thing I can think of to say: there is a God who suffers with us and is involved in the midst of it all. I believe that evil is a problem only for those who believe that God’s will is always perfectly done here on earth. But if that were true, how come Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...on earth as it is in heaven?” We pray that prayer because Jesus taught us that God’s will is NOT perfectly done on this earth. But I digress. Jesus tells this agonized parent that “All things are possible to him who believes.” All things? That’s a pretty broad statement. And it must be seen in the light of Jesus’ own teaching and life. It is not appropriate to ask God to do parlor tricks. Jesus is not advocating our using faith as sort of magic for our own personal advantage. He rejected that temptation Himself,

when the devil dared him to jump off a cliff and trust God to save Him. The God of Jesus Christ doesn't do parlor tricks. Jesus rejected that temptation, and by implication, rejected it for His disciples. Jesus did not even save Himself from suffering. Robert Raines writes of the problem of suffering: "There is no answer to that question in any philosophy or religion under the sun, in nothing but Jesus Christ nailed to the cross, and he is the answer, the flesh-and-blood proof that God cares, cares so much he didn't stay up in his blue heaven but came down to earth to enter into and take upon himself our sufferings, to share our sufferings - no matter what - all the way. The noblest fellowship on earth is the fellowship of those who suffer. To suffer is truly to care. God is with those who suffer, whether they recognize it or not." (The Pulpit, January 1965, p.19)

III. "I BELIEVE...HELP MY UNBELIEF..." The father's reply to Jesus tells us a whole lot about the nature of faith. His faith. My faith. Your faith. Everybody's faith. It is paradoxical, but not really contradictory. After all, the man showed a measure of faith by bringing his son to Jesus in the first place. We have all showed a certain measure of faith by coming to worship this morning. I have no illusions that each and every one of us has come because of a fully developed, mature faith. Most of us, at least some of the time, and some of us, most of the time, are a mixture of faith and doubt. This poor fellow came to Jesus not because he had perfect faith and trust in Him, but because he was so desperate he was willing to try anything...even Jesus! And Jesus did not chide him, nor turn him away. Some of us have come to worship this morning out of desperation. We've tried everything else...perhaps there is help and hope here. After a period of religious agnosticism, the pendulum is swinging these days. Religion courses, even in secular universities, are filled to overflowing. Theologian Harvey Cox's classes at Harvard are so full they can scarcely find rooms big enough to hold them these days. There is a wistful yearning and longing across the land, across the world. There's a God-shaped void in our hearts, and we are trying to fill it. "I believe...help my unbelief!" isn't a bad prayer for any of us at any time. There are tides of the spirit. The sea of faith ebbs and flows. Sometimes it seems easy to believe, and other times much easier to doubt. One of our problems is that we are used to taking the easy route...so we wander to and fro, pushed this way and that by whatever fad is current at the time. We are like the man who lived in the Ozarks and was having trouble getting his rocking chair just right on the front porch of his home. He would twist his chair this way and then that, rocking awhile in one place, then moving to another. Finally, his wife wanted to know what ailed him. He said, "Can't make up my mind whether it's easier to rock north and south with the grain of the wood or east and west with the wind." A lot of folks are like that - they're willing to go along with whatever seems easiest at the time. But real, deep, religious faith requires effort. There are no short-cuts or bargain-basement closeouts in faith! "I believe; help my unbelief!" These words can have at least a couple of different meanings. They can mean "change my unbelief into belief," or "change my weak belief into stronger belief," or "help me in spite of my inadequate faith." (And our faith is always less than adequate.) Either way it is a prayer which we all have prayed, or need to. We are all of us strange mixtures of faith and unfaith, belief and unbelief. We say one thing in the safety of the sanctuary, but another in the daily round of life. We may stand up in church and confidently proclaim: "I believe in God the Father Almighty..." but the next day we say, "I wonder..." How do we deal with our doubts? For one thing:

don't feel guilty about them. In a sense, doubt is not contrary to faith, but a necessary ingredient of it. Without doubt, faith becomes credulity or gullibility. A lot of people think that is just what our faith is: that we are like simple country rubes walking around the County Fair starry-eyed, susceptible to every spiritual con artist who comes down the pike. That may be true of some believers, but not for those who, like our man in today's Scripture, are courageous and humble enough to deal honestly with their doubts. "I believe, help my unbelief." Carl Michalson says that this form of intellectual ping-pong is necessary for any of us who desire to have a mature and satisfying faith. In a classic little book by John Oman titled *GRACE AND PERSONALITY* (New York: Association Press, 1961) he says: "Unbelief is a sin, not because we force ourselves to believe or to suppress doubt and inquiry, but because, to some evil intent, we are insincere with God's witness to himself. In the strict sense, we should not even try to believe; for we have no right to believe anything we can avoid believing, granting we have given it entire freedom to convince us." Those are very important words. We have no right believing anything we can avoid believing!

William Lyon Phelps of Yale wrote in his autobiography: "My religious faith remains in possession of the field only after prolonged civil war with my naturally skeptical mind." Some of us have been through that battle, also. We have come to faith only after a long struggle with doubt. Harry Emerson Fosdick once preached a sermon in Riverside Church titled: "The Importance of Doubting Your Doubts" taking his cue from G.K. Chesterton, who once spoke of his "first wild doubts of doubt." Fosdick said that one comes into true faith only after getting to the point where one begins to doubt his or her own doubts! I like that! Harold Bosley, who was minister of First United Methodist Church of Evanston, for many years, said: "We never get beliefs 100% doubt-proof. We can always ask questions about them that no mortal man can answer. But life won't let us wait around until we are 100% certain, before we must act. We must trust the Creator of life! Many times we act with no more than 51% assurance. And sometimes not even that much - but we must act in the light of the best we know." (National Radio Pulpit, p.24, Aug-Sept., 1971) That is what we have to do. Nobody escapes faith. Everyone has to act in this world on less than perfect assurance. Josh Billings, 19th-century American humorist, said: "If there was no faith there would be no living in this world. We couldn't even eat hash with any safety." No one can escape the necessity of faith of some kind. The question is: "Faith in what or whom?"

This distraught man said to Jesus: "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us!" (v. 22) And Jesus replied: "If you can!" Now, commentators have interpreted these words in two different ways. They may be taken as an exclamation of wonder that anyone could use the word "if" in connection with God's power. Others take the words as referring to the man's own part in the healing process. "If YOU can." It seems as though Jesus was turning the man's question upside down. He seems to be throwing the issue back to the man himself, saying, in effect, "It's not a matter of what I can or cannot do; most of it is up to you. It's a matter determined by your faith." Taken either way they proclaim the same great truth of God's power and the need of our faith to make that power operative. "It is mostly up to you," Jesus seems to be saying. "I have made the

power available. Now you must use it. I have come to you. Will you come to Me? Are you willing to trust Me?" Remember: in the Bible, "Faith" means "Trust."

We began with little Ian's letter to God, confessing his doubts. I can imagine God writing a reply to Ian's letter, and answering it in this way, addressed to all of God's children, everywhere: "Dear children of mine, you have doubts about Me??? I have doubts about you sometimes. Sometimes I really believe. Like when you come to church on Sunday mornings and tell Me how much you love Me. But my question is, if you could do this why don't you stop all the bad in the world? Like war. Like diseases. Like famine. Like drugs. You think you've got problems, you should try being God sometime! On the other hand, whenever you've tried it, the results haven't been impressive. I'll try to believe more. Trust Me. (Signed) God."

The Dynamics of Doubt

Sermon by RON LAVIN

:

On the evening of the great first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he declared, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:19-31, NIV)

E. S. Martin has observed:

Within my earthly temple there's a crowd,
There's one of us that's humble, one that's
proud, There's one broken-hearted for his sins,
There's one that unrepentant sits and grins;
There's one that loves his neighbor as himself,
And one that cares for naught but fame
and self, From much corroding care I should be free,
If I could once determine which is
me.¹

1. E. S. Martin, as quoted by Melvin A. Hawmarberg, *My Body Broken, Fortress*, Philadelphia, 1963, p. 15.

Happy Doubters' Sunday! A strange greeting for the Sunday after Easter? Not at all when we stop to realize that this Sunday the Gospel is about St. Thomas, the doubter who said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A Doubters' Sunday? Yes, not only because the Gospel is about St. Thomas, but also because in a very real sense, St. Thomas is the patron Saint of the twentieth century. There are many doubters outside and inside the church in our age.

It is not my purpose today to encourage doubt. It is my purpose today to include the doubter. Jesus said to Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe ... Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus also said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side ..." In other words, Jesus encouraged faith, not doubt, but he included the doubter in the inclusive fellowship called the church. The story of Thomas is about inclusiveness. It is also about wounds.

Our Wounds and His Wounds

"A Christian is not someone who doesn't doubt, but someone who doubts his doubts more than he doubts his faith." Dr. Helmut Thielicke, the German theologian, said that. He said it in the context of World War II. War, like all catastrophic events, raises many doubts about God and Christianity for people.

It is my belief that most of our doubts come from unresolved conflicts and situations which seem intolerable. We project our troubles onto the Almighty, not knowing what else to do with them. Most of our doubts are not intellectual conclusions made on the basis of research into the nature of things. Doubts often come from our wounds.

When Thomas was wounded by the sudden turn of events that first Holy Week, when he grieved over the loss of his best friend, he defended himself against further hurt by falling into what was for him a familiar pattern, a skeptical outlook. When Jesus confronted the wounded Thomas, he showed him his wounds.

The resolution of doubts is not an intellectual exercise in mathematical or philosophical propositions. It is a matter of being included in the circle of the wounded. Jesus, the wounded healer, shows us his scars.

One of the greatest creeds of Christendom was uttered by a father who wanted his demon-possessed son healed. (Mark 9:20-29) "How long has he been this way?" Jesus asked, watching the boy go into convulsions, rolling on the ground. "From childhood," said the father pathetically, "from childhood ... if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus replied, "If I can? All things are possible to him who believes." The father cried out this magnificent creed: "I believe; help my **UNBELIEF**." And Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the boy.

Belief and **UNBELIEF** are the twin motivators within every human heart. The question is not whether we have doubts - some have many, some few - but what we do with the doubts we have.

There is a beautiful picture of the resurrected Lord surrounded by children who are playing around him and enjoying his presence. One little girl is not playful, but serious. She is looking at the scarred hands of Jesus. "Did it hurt?" she asks. Yes, it hurt, but Jesus was "wounded for our transgressions ..."

Thomas is called the Twin and with good reason. There are two persons, not one within each of us - one that believes, one that doubts. When we are wounded, sometimes the doubts grab a foothold, at least for a season, and we say, "See, I told you so. God doesn't care." Not so. Jesus was wounded. This is a story about wounds and about faith.

Faith

A poet has written: "Doubt is pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother." Paul Tillich has expressed the relationship between faith and doubt this way: "Faith is courage that conquers doubt not by removing it, but by taking it in as an element into self." Concretely, honest doubt need not be the opposite of faith; it can be an expression of it. Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem "In Memorium" said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." Martin Luther experienced honest doubt in depth. It was a soul despair called "Anfechtung." Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian-philosopher experienced the upheaval of the inner man called "angst." Like the apostle Thomas many great Christians have wrestled with doubt in a hand-to-hand struggle which at times seemed unbearable.

It seems to me that two of the most important dynamics of doubt are (1) a willingness to express doubts to other Christians and to God and (2) a willingness to doubt our doubts when we see the wounds of Christ.

The psalmists doubted. God isn't predictable and life is often confusing. The ancient Hebrew poets expressed their feelings clearly to the Almighty. The psalmists faced their doubts honestly. They told God that they did not understand him. They fought with God,

argued with him, questioned him and chided him, but the most significant factor in their doubting was that they talked with God, not just about him.

In Psalm 73 the psalmist expresses his feelings that sinners prosper while the righteous suffer. He calls God to task for the injustice of it all and then says, "Nevertheless, I am continually with thee." In the Christian faith we believe because of a number of things we see and feel but also in spite of a number of things. "Nevertheless," is a great resolve from an honest agnostic who turned the corner when he went into the Temple and got a higher perspective.

The Psalmists expressed their doubts, but they expressed them to God. They talked with God. Many modern skeptics only talk about God. There's the difference between godly skeptics and secular skeptics.

The question for Christian agnostics is not, "How could God let this happen to me?" but "God, how could you let this happen to me?" In other words, we can speak to God personally about our doubts. He understands.

You can talk to God about anything if you stand in the biblical tradition of expression. You can be that honest with God about your feelings, whatever they are, as long as you talk with God, not just about God, as long as you utter your feelings in the atmosphere of human limitation and confession, instead of just complaining to other people about God.

Jesus said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He expressed his feeling of being forsaken. Once and for all he silenced those who would have us express only nice, kind thoughts to our Father! But notice how he speaks: "My God," he says.

Christians need to express their real feelings to God no matter what these feelings are! This is generally done best in the context of Christian fellowship where people openly share their problems, questions and doubts. Doubt is a lonely phenomenon. When we can set solitary doubt in families, it can be "taken in as an element of faith." As Christian agnostics get together with other Christians and express their doubts honestly and openly to God and other strugglers, Jesus has a way of appearing. Christian agnostics need to doubt their doubts, question their questions. Our skepticism at any given moment may very well arise because of a frustration, a fight in the family, a disappointment, or suffering which seems unbearable.

If we would see our doubts as natural expressions of our humanity and our limited existence, we could take them to God and deal with them honestly and openly. Thus we would stand in the biblical tradition.

What some churches and pulpit pounders have often advocated is a watered-down faith that suggests that doubt is wrong and that a Christian is a mild-mannered, pious-sounding, ever-smiling, happy, cheerful and totally unrealistic dud. If you read the Bible, you discover the superficiality of that kind of ideal. The apostles all doubted, and argued and struggled for top spots and fought and were faithless ten times more often than they

were faithful. We have been encouraging a phony belief in belief. No wonder some young people laugh at the incredible and utterly unrealistic schooling they get in church. Christians are human, and that means they can doubt. But they should also doubt their doubts.

A student with a smattering of psychology once said to William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, "You only believe what you believe because of your early upbringing." The eloquent churchman, with a sparkle in his eye, replied, "You only believe that I believe because of my early upbringing because of your early upbringing."

We do need to ask why we are questioning as well as why we believe. Sometimes acting skeptical is just a means of drawing attention to yourself. Sometimes it is an expression of depth. The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon once said:

If you have ever been dragged through the mire and clay of soul-despair, if you have been turned upside down, and wiped out like a dish as to all your own strength and pride, and have then been filled with the joy and peace of God, through Jesus Christ, I will trust you among fifty thousand infidels. Whenever I hear the skeptic's stale attacks upon the word of God, I smile within myself, and think "Why, you simpleton! How can you urge such trifling objections? I have felt in the contentions of my own **UNBELIEF**, ten times greater difficulties."

How many people are outside the church today because they have doubts and feel uncomfortable around believers. They would not have felt uncomfortable with Jesus. He would simply have helped them understand their doubts and led them to confess: "I believe, help my **UNBELIEF**." Jesus helped Thomas "take his doubt in" by showing his wounds to the apostle. As we show our wounds to one another, instead of just speaking about our virtues, we encourage the incorporation of **UNBELIEF** into belief in the family of God.

The counterpoint of belief and honest expression of doubt is expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer is considered by some to be one of the greatest Christian theologians in the twentieth century. He is remembered for his strong opposition to Adolf Hitler, for his suffering, for his imprisonment for the sake of the gospel, and for his faithful witness to Jesus Christ which converted some of his guards and strengthened his fellow prisoners. He should also be remembered for his honest and open expression of the counterpoint of faith and doubt which were a part of his humanity. His poem, "Who Am I?"² shows us some of his wounds. Through his showing of wounds many see Jesus appearing.

Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me I stepped from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerful, firmly, like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me I used to speak of my warders freely and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.

AM I THEN REALLY THAT WHICH OTHER MEN TELL OF? OR AM I ONLY WHAT I MYSELF KNOW OF MYSELF?

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, MacMillan Company, New York, 1963, pp. 18-20.

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, tossing in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint, and ready to say fare well to it all.

WHO AM I? THIS OR THE OTHER?

Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another? Am I both at once?

A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptible weebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

WHO AM I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

WHOEVER I AM, Thou knowest, O God, I AM THINE!

This is the age of analysis. The most important thing seems to be our "ratings." God is not much interested in popularity polls or Nielsen ratings. He wants to know why we feel the way we do. He wants us to know why!

One of the reasons why doubt has caused us so much trouble is that our doubting has been done as if we were the measure of things, as if our doubting and questioning determined truth, as if we ourselves could vote on whether or not God is important, as if our opinions were the most important issue of all.

Doubt is a legitimate exercise, a meaningful experience for a limited human being, but if in doubting, man sees himself as the measure of all things, he will remain in what John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* calls the "Sloth of Despond."

If when doubts assail you, you bring them to God and act on what you believe, you will discover that tomorrow your belief is richer and deeper than today.

Only in the atmosphere of free expression and willing obedience will you hear your name called. "Thomas." It is almost as if Jesus says what he said to the blind man long ago: "Ephphatha." ("Be open.")

It is important that someone who knows everything about you calls you by name.

This strange Eternal Friend does just that.

Listen ... The still small voice within is making reply: "My Lord and my God."

"I believe. Help my **UNBELIEF**."

"Peace be with you."