

The Dance of Doubt and Faith
John 20:19-30
March 30, 2008

Garrison Keillor wrote an article on *Salon.com* about Holy Week. He confesses: “I came to church as a pagan this year, though wearing a Christian suit and white shirt, and sat in a rear pew with my sandy-haired gap-toothed daughter whom I would like to see grow up in the love of the Lord, and there I was, a skeptic in the henhouse, thinking weaselish thoughts.

“This often happens around Easter. God, in His humorous way, sometimes schedules high holy days for a time when your faith is at low tide, a mud flat strewn with newspapers and children's beach toys, and while everyone else is all joyful and shiny among the lilies and praising up a storm, there you are, snarfling and grumbling. Which happened to me this year. God knows all about it so I may as well tell you.

“Holy Week is a good time to face up to the question: Do we really believe in that story or do we just like to hang out with nice people and listen to organ music? There are advantages, after all, to being in the neighborhood of people who love their neighbors. If your car won't start on a cold morning, you've got friends. ...

“Skepticism is a stimulant, not to be repressed. It is an antidote to smugness and the great glow of satisfaction one gains from being right. You know the self-righteous -- I've been one myself -- the little extra topspin they put on the truth, their ostentatious modesty, the pleasure they take in being beautifully modulated and cool and correct when others are falling apart. Jesus was rougher on those people than He was on the adulterers and prostitutes.

“So I will sit in the doubter's chair for a while and see what is to be learned back there.”ⁱ

Keillor takes us to Thomas, who has the reputation of being doubtful. He wasn't with the other disciples on Easter Sunday when they experienced the presence of the risen Christ. He didn't see Jesus with his own eyes. So before he can fully trust their witness, he wants to experience for himself what they have seen. Thomas doesn't ask for any more than the other disciples have known. He simply asks for what he needs in order to trust their statements. His skepticism is a stimulant.

Consider for a moment how you decide whom to trust. What enables trust to develop in your relationships? Is it credentials? Is trust engendered by an advanced degree or a great deal of experience in an area or a position deemed trustworthy? Perhaps you trust someone upon the recommendation of a friend. We may witness such integrity in a person that their very presence evokes our trust.

Maybe it is a herd instinct we humans share with animals. We tend to be swayed by a sign that says, “Over 1 billion sold.” As a book lover, I check the bestsellers list for recommendations, figuring that if thousands of people have bought a book they surely can't be terribly wrong about its quality.

Sometimes there is logic and reason behind our trust. My husband tends to make decisions based on facts; I tend to decide based on feelings. When we find ourselves in disagreement about something, his facts can often persuade me to trust his judgment.

What engenders trust? What allows you to embrace another's truth and follow their lead?

Thomas isn't alone in wanting more evidence before he trusts that Jesus is risen from the dead. When Mary Magdalene first announced the good news to the disciples, Peter and the other unnamed disciple, presumably John, ran to the empty tomb for themselves to survey the evidence.

In a poem on this passage, Heather Murray Elkins says, “Doubting runs in the family.”ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner writes, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Galileo called doubt the father of discovery. He lived in a time when, in the scientific realm, the earth was considered flat and the sun circled around it. He was one of a few brave souls to question that theory. He proved it wrong, and suffered serious consequences because of the doubt he shed upon a universal principle. Scientific discoveries start with doubt and questions. As Keillor says, “Skepticism is a stimulant.”

In the Jewish tradition, it is understood that that “to be a human being is to perpetually ask questions, to wonder without ever fully satisfying our wondering.” More important than having all the answers are the struggle and growth, an honest wrestling with the questions. “In Jewish spiritual life, faith is not the starting point of the journey. Uncertainty is not the enemy of religious and spiritual growth. Doubt is what fuels the journey.”^{iv} Skepticism is healthy, legitimate and even celebrated in Jewish life.

The Psalms are full of questions and challenges to God. They are peppered with the raw human emotion that most of us feel at one time or another. “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1). “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” (Ps. 13:1-2). In all the Psalms of lament but one, the Psalmist experiences the presence of God in response to his plea. Near the end of those very same Psalms we hear these words: “Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan” (Ps. 10:14). “I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation” (Ps. 13:5).

Jesus himself questioned violence as the way of conflict resolution, so he said, “Forgive one another” and “Love your enemy.” He doubted that long prayers and dietary laws were essential to faith. He doubted that Samaritans were an inferior race; the Good Samaritan was the hero of his most famous parable.

Doubt and questions keep faith awake and moving. Sometimes our questions lead to answers; sometimes they don't. Sometimes our uncertainty is transformed into certainty; sometimes it isn't. My experience is that there are at least sufficient glimpses and hints to allow me to trust and to move forward.

Trust tends to come gradually. Trust is built over time with experience. Trust is what was originally behind the ideas of faith and belief. When we say we believe in God, we are not assenting to a particular creed or doctrine of the church. Belief in God is trusting God, giving our heart to God, being in relationship with God. Thomas asked for proof; he was given the experience of divine presence. The experience was sufficient to lead him to make a bold confession of faith, “My Lord and my God.” Thomas moved deeper into faith.

Jesus never shames Thomas for his desire to see the wounded hands and sides of Jesus. Jesus receives Thomas where he is on the journey and offers what he needs. His learning style must be visual and kinesthetic, for he wants to see and touch. Educators know that students will be far more attentive and receptive when lessons are taught in ways that meet the needs of the students. Similarly God seeks to address us in multiple ways so that we might capture the message and experience the presence being communicated. We are accepted as we are and given what we need to grow deeper in faith. It's what we call grace.

In response to Jesus' graceful presence, Thomas responds, "My Lord and my God." He chooses to give his heart to Christ, to believe, to trust. My sense is that there still may have been days when Thomas asked needed more evidence, when he yearned for greater assurance, even as he sought to grow deeper in faith and give his heart more passionately to Christ. It seems that there is a dance between doubt and trust, one step in faith, the next made with doubt, another bold leap in trust, followed by a hesitant move forward. Even feeling more like a skeptic during Holy Week, Garrison Keillor showed up for worship, perhaps to allow his distrust to be shaken, or at least to allow himself to be in the presence of a loving community. Perhaps like Thomas, he found enough of what he needed to take the next step deeper into faith.

Doris Betts wrote an article last fall in which she described life with her husband of fifty-five years as they lived with the Parkinson's disease that invaded his body. As the years past they suffered through his weakened muscles, broken bones, dementia, hallucinations and hostility. There was a gradual erosion of selfhood, suffered by 30% of Parkinson's patients. She writes of her doubt, anger, and grief, and also of the glimmer of hope within that insisted, "If there's no God, there ought to be." Out of the torment, she resolves, "I keep deciding to believe in God, even on bad days. In this, my seventh decade, faith seems to me not certainty but commitment, a renewable vow.

"And when friends and family behave like unawares-angels, when there comes like a flash blessing from nowhere a return of my husband's former self, some of my host of needs are met, my clumsiest prayers are heard."^v "I keep deciding to believe in God, even on bad days." That's her renewable vow.

Doubts and questions will haunt us all, especially on bad days. It is healthy to wrestle the questions, to probe deeper, for the more we struggle, the more we learn and the greater the opportunity to grow deeper in faith. Skepticism is a stimulant. Even in the midst of the dance of doubt and trust, we can consider the renewable vow and decide to believe in God, even on bad days.

ⁱ Garrison Keillor, March 19, 2008, www.salon.com, Tribune Media Services, Inc.

ⁱⁱ Heather Murray Elkins, "Doubt runs in the Family," quoted by Ted Virts, April 22, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 20.

^{iv} Rabbi Daniel Gordis, *God Was Not in the Fire*.

^v Doris Betts, "The Renewable Vow," *Image*, Fall 2007 (No. 55), pp. 63-66.