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Doubt

John 20:19-29 & Genesis 17:15-20

A sermon by William M. Klein

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¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." ¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" ¹⁹God said, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. (Gen. 17:15-20 NRSV)

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." ²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (Jn. 20:19-29 NRSV)

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Tradition has not simply remembered him as Thomas. Tradition, looking down its nose, has scornfully hung the label of "doubting" Thomas on him. We've assumed he must have been a half-hearted or perhaps a reluctant disciple because he doubted Jesus was raised from the dead. Some may say, "Had he been a better disciple he would have had no doubts."

In a similar way we've thought about Abraham. When God told him that, in spite of their advanced years, he and Sarah would have a son, Abraham laughed so hard he fell down. He and Sarah had wanted a child for many, many years...but anyone with any sense knew they were too old to have a child. Some may say, "Had his faith been stronger he would have had no doubts."

Thomas doubted because he knew Jesus was dead...and dead people stay dead. Abraham doubted because people in their ninth decade of life do not have children... thank you very much. And I, for one, would have been right there doubting with them.

2

We all have our doubts, don't we? Frederick Buechner, whom you've heard me quote many times, wrote something about doubts which I have also quoted many times because I think it is so on target. He wrote, "If you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. (Doubts) keep (faith) awake and moving."¹

You and I may not doubt the same things...but, unless we are kidding ourselves, we all have our doubts. We may think we would love to have the benefit of absolute certainty, particularly about matters of faith...but then again what would that be like? What would that look like? What would we have to ignore in order to have the benefit of absolute certainty? How many times would we have to check our brains at the door? And, thinking back to what Buechner wrote, in what would we have faith if we closed the book on the things of God when God has not yet completed the book?

What fundamentalists of any religious persuasion have done is precisely that...i.e., to close the book. The 9/11/01 terrorists were inspired by absolute certainty with respect to their cause. The atrocities being committed in our own day by ISIL are inspired by a similar absolute certainty. Their religion functions for them as an antidote against all self-doubt, all consciousness of the limitations of knowledge, all awareness of the precariousness of human judgment. And lest we think such fundamentalism is only a phenomenon within some Muslim groups...be assured ultraconservative Jews, militant capitalists, and right-wing Christians...all have bought into the notion that faith is more about certainty than trust.² They have forgotten that doubts serve a very important purpose...i.e., to help keep faith alive, healthy, modest, and always attentive to the God who has not quit speaking yet...the God who speaks to us in ways and through people we can imagine and can never imagine.

3

In Mark's gospel account we read about a father who wanted his son to be free of an evil spirit. Jesus' disciples were unable to cast out the spirit. So he went to Jesus...and Jesus asked the man if he believed Jesus could heal his son. The father replied, "I believe; help my unbelief!"³

We can all identified with that father's reply. With all his heart he wanted Jesus to be able to fix his son...but using his head he knew such things don't happen. "I want to believe...but to do so I have to overcome what I understand to be the realities of this world. And so, Jesus, I would love nothing more than for you to heal my son and in the process to make me a believer."

I've heard people say people of true faith have no doubts...that doubt means lack of faith. If one's faith were stronger, if one really had true faith, then they would have no doubts.

I want to suggest that doubts can serve to strengthen faith...because, after all, if the scriptures are to be believed, faith, by definition, is not what we can prove...it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.⁴ Faith, at its core, is not

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about intellectual assent as much as it is about personal investment, trust in Jesus, and commitment to the living God.

Jesus didn't come to change people's minds. He came to change the world by changing our hearts. Doubts are the ants in our pants...they keep us from ever becoming too comfortable with what we think about God and with what it means to be faithful.

4

As people of faith, which would you say is more important...certainty or trust? Think about that for a minute. Which stance most demonstrates faithfulness - certainty or trust?

Let me get at this question by thinking first about certainty. Certainty has to do with the assurance we have figured "it" out (whatever "it" is)...that there are no questions still to be resolved...that we understand something completely and thoroughly...that all ambiguity has been resolved. Certainty, then, is something **we** do. Through the cunning of our minds **we** have concluded this or that is so.

I can be fairly certain two plus two equals four...that if I stick my finger over a burning candle it will hurt...that raw garlic will upset my stomach. Can I say with the same certainty that my wife's love for me is grounded in reality and is not an illusion?⁵ Can I say with certainty that God exists, that he raised his son from the dead, and that he loves me no matter what?

Trust, on the other hand, has to do with the realization that while there are many things we can figure out...there are also many things about God, this world, and ourselves we will never figure out. Trust entails humility on our part...humility about our ability, humility about the extent of our grasp. To trust means depending upon God more than we depend upon our ability to master all that is necessary to gain absolute certainty.

We have doubts about so many things that are real but that cannot be proven...and so we must trust where we cannot see.⁶ Our doubt, then, serves a very good and useful purpose. It helps us understand a very important truth...that life with God has more to do with trust than it has to do with us arriving at absolute, 100% certainty.

Novelist Ron Hansen writes about a priest friend who points out that the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. The danger of certainty is smug belief. Hansen's friend says, "God plants in us the seed to love and worship God, and the seed is enough to make us want to seek God out...but not enough to (let us pin God down). That reaching, that striving, is what God is really interested in."⁷

That is why it is called "faith." At the crucial moments in your life's decision making, you are always trusting in God's guidance and mercy and not in your own perfect understanding. You're always "falling into the hands of the living God," as Hebrews 10:31 put it...letting God's knowing suffice and God's arms save.⁸

5

With all of this in mind, let me return to the story of doubting Thomas. For whatever reason, Thomas was not with the rest of the disciples when the risen Christ appeared to them. Talk about an event you didn't want to miss...this was it. After showing them his hands and side, the risen Lord blew upon them and his Spirit entered them. Then, as suddenly as he had arrived, he was gone.

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Later that night Thomas joined them. Imagine what he must have thought when he entered that room. When he had left them they were downcast, beside themselves with fear. When he returned they were beside themselves with excitement. The fear was gone. A radical transformation had taken place in them. There was something markedly different about them all.

They all descended upon him saying in one voice, "We have seen the Lord." He must have wondered if everyone had gone mad. First Mary and now the disciples. Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."⁹

Let's not be too hard on Thomas. After all, he was not the only doubter. All the disciples doubted what Jesus had said while he was still alive...that he would rise from the dead. What removed the doubts they had was Jesus in the flesh before them - nail holes and all. So don't think Thomas was the only doubting disciple.

A week after Jesus appeared to the disciples, he appeared in their midst again. This time Thomas was not busy somewhere else. John tells us they were all together in the house - and this time the doors were not locked...which suggests to me the fears they had a week earlier were gone.

Again Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you." Then without the first hint of a rebuke, he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Jesus made sure Thomas was included by repeating the whole scene a second time for his benefit alone. He did not scold Thomas for doubting the word of the other disciples. Jesus didn't meet Thomas half way. He met Thomas' conditions willingly, patiently, lovingly.

There is no mention that Thomas touched Jesus. He had seen the risen Lord with his own eyes. That was all he needed. Just as a week earlier when the disbelief of the disciples vanished the moment they saw Jesus - in the presence of Jesus, Thomas quickly went from disbelief to belief.

And Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." He was talking to us, wasn't it!

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As I draw this sermon to a close I want to quote something else Frederick Buechner wrote. He said, "If there's no room for doubt, there's no room for me."¹⁰

I hear him saying he firmly believes that this side of death there is room for people of faith to have doubts. He says this because it is in times of doubt, in moments when we are paralyzed by uncertainty, that our Lord comes to us...much as he came to Thomas...much as he came to laughing Abraham. God comes to us, not because we have no doubts...but because God loves us and wants us.

What God wants from us is not our certainty. What God wants is our trust. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Buechner, Frederick. 2004. Beyond Words. NY: HarperCollins, 85.

² Hall, Douglas J. 2005. Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 100.

³ See Mark 9:24.

⁴ See Hebrews 11:1.

⁵ Marty, Martin E. 2009. *Context*. February issue, Part A. Chicago: Claretian Pub., 2.

⁶ See 2 Corinthians 4:18.

⁷ Marty, Martin E. 2008. *Context*. December issue, Part B. Chicago: Claretian Pub., 1. Ron Hansen is Gerard Manley Hopkins, professor in the Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University.

⁸ Rohr, Richard. 2008. Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 136.

⁹ Taylor, Barbara B. 1999. Home By Another Way. Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 115.

¹⁰ Buechner, Frederick. 1970. Alphabet of Grace. NY: Seabury Press, 47.