

John 6:57-67

Matthew 16:13-20

## DOUBTING YOUR DOUBTS

It will seem strange to some of you that I would use Lent for a short series of sermons about doubt. On the other hand, every single person in the New Testament story had to wrestle with doubts. Though the Gospel writers were encouraging belief, the stories they tell make it clear that every single believer has to come through doubts. Some people doubted and turned away. Some people never took Jesus seriously to begin with. Nobody believed in Jesus easily. And nobody ever comes to faith by sitting around thinking philosophical thoughts or arguing theological questions. It is when we show ourselves to be honest and eager to know him that God comes to us with the experiences that reveal. Just so with the first Christians. Belief came from experience with Jesus – from encounter. A lot of it came from getting in over your head and then realizing you could not go back to the old ways. The passages we just read tell of some people turning away. They also reveal that Jesus was never trying to coerce or persuade people against their will. He was who He was and He did what He did, and everyone was free to respond to it in any way they chose.

How different that is from the atmosphere of so many churches and followers in our time. We are so afraid that people will not see or respond correctly, we want to jump in and make it happen the way we think it is supposed to happen. And the moment we do that, it cannot be authentic; it is always corrupted and coerced. That way we can never tell for sure whether we are gathering the followers or gathering the frightened, the gullible, or those looking for entertainment. Jesus wanted an authentic response. *“He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”* He wanted each person to come to their own conclusion, in their own time, for their own reasons. He knew what we often fail to realize: that a church full of pretenders is not going to further the Kingdom.

In any case, doubt has a bad name in our day. We are all supposed to believe and never doubt. But that is ludicrous – a contradiction in terms. There is *no* authentic belief which has not walked into and through its doubts. You often hear me claiming that you cannot believe beyond the level of your doubts. Yet to this day, people come to me shy, sheepish, and apologetic because they have doubts. I never mean to belittle or be unsympathetic toward anyone’s doubts, but inside I am gleeful: “Oh goody! Now at least we have a chance for authentic faith.” Nobody comes dancing

and singing to the Cross, or to conversion. We do not come to Jesus like ducks to water. He is too different, and the LIFE He invites us into is too different.

Lent is a time to take stock, to turn, to renew disciplines and commitment, to deepen our WALK, no matter where it is or how well we are doing. Our love for Jesus and our loyalty to Him are never enough. But that is not a negative, a guilt trip, or a discouragement for those who walk the Path. It only looks that way to people who are still looking for excuses – who only think they are “thinking about” walking the Path. The reason our love and loyalty are never enough is because the dimensions and promises and possibilities that Jesus invites us into are huge and endless. We have only touched a small part of the beauty and joy set before us. More and more we realize that it is fear, recalcitrance, and lack of trust that shield and protect us from a far greater and more dynamic relationship with God. We do not mean to, but we still hold back – in so many ways, and on so many occasions. That is because we still have doubts. And if we do not face them, process them, walk into and through them, they will cut our faith forever.

Does that not make it clear that Lent is a wonderful time to consider our doubts? Behind every doubt is a fear. And fear is the enemy of faith. Now, you can believe, as so many do, that the way to handle doubts is to pretend we do not have any. But the truth is, doubts we do not face cut our power and love all the time. To be sure, sometimes doubts operate behind the scenes – on the inside where they can wreak havoc without conscious awareness on our part. That way they can cut back our obedience, weaken our responses, and infect our choices without our being fully aware of it. In fact, the half-hearted responses to the Christian Life that are going on in so many churches across the land are the product of years of pretending we believe what deep down we do not yet believe. Yet still, many of you have been taught that you are not supposed to have any doubts.

Facing our doubts and walking through them does not make us perfect, but it means we get to stop pretending. That is always freedom and joy. It sets us up for a far more dynamic and delightful time with Jesus. So I preach these sermons in the hope that all of you will drag your doubts out and look at them calmly in the light of day. I preach these sermons because I know so many people who are ashamed of their doubts, instead of realizing that doubts can be the very springboards to faith. I even know some of you who think you are the only one who has doubts. That all the rest of us were born with pure and unadulterated

faith. A church – that is, a faith family – that does not acknowledge its doubts, that does not deal with its doubts, and that does not help each other with doubts is a sham, a mockery of the Christian Life.

So first I have to urge you to honor and face your doubts. Even though you will doubt it, I want to tell you that if you do this with honesty, it will lead to greater faith, not greater doubt. But enough preamble. Where to begin? My mother often told me what her Greek professor (Bruce Kirchner, after whom I was named) taught in his classes: **No true God is afraid of questions! No true God is afraid of your doubts.** God will never despise you for doubting, nor be surprised that you doubt. Nor will God be distressed when our inquiring minds lead us into questions and doubts – inquiring minds, by the way, which were God’s idea and design, not ours. *“You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (John 8:32) If we only bring our good side to God and never admit our evil, how will God heal us? If we only bring our faith to God and never admit our doubts, how will God take us to new levels of truth and trust?

My mother, by the way, was often more graphic than I am. She would urge us to picture poor God – the Almighty, Omniscient Creator of the Universes – up in Heaven, writhing in agony because some pitiful little human being was entertaining doubts. And poor God was covering his ears and hiding in shame, saying, “Oh dear, oh dear – maybe I don’t exist after all.”

In any case, doubts themselves are never the enemy. A conviction you hold without ever having doubted it is not a conviction. It is a prejudice, a superstition, or an unfounded opinion.

Jesus, whom I call Lord and Christ, was one of the greatest doubters of all time. He doubted every principle and precept of the Judaism He grew up in – until He literally saw all of it in dimensions nobody else had ever seen. It was so new, in fact, that sadly it could not finally be contained within the borders and structures of Judaism. It was, as He said, like new wine in old wineskins. People who realized what Jesus was revealing ended up forced to break beyond the beliefs that they too had grown up with and had believed all of their lives – until they met Jesus. That beautiful/terrible awakening faced every person who came to believe in Jesus. Just so, meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road forced Paul to doubt all of his former convictions. He did not abandon them all, but he had to see them in a new light. And so his break with the Judaism he had known, grown up with, and tried to honor

was inevitable. We could go on to speak of the doubt that was part of the story of every great leader in our tradition. Martin Luther began to doubt the authenticity and authority of the pope and the entire structure of Catholicism as he knew it. For a person in the Middle Ages, who was both priest and Augustinian monk, such doubt was almost beyond belief. But it did not lead Martin Luther into atheism. It led to what many of us believe was the brightest light and faith and Christian conviction we had seen for a thousand years. Indeed, Christianity had gone into a new guise for all the old spiritual slavery Jesus had come to free us from in the first place: guilt, shame, rules, and human structures and authorities that worked through fear rather than love. And now all in the name of the very Jesus they desecrated and dishonored. But it was Luther's doubt that blew the cover off. And then a clearer, deeper faith was able to grow where before there had been pretense, coercion, and outer show.

So if all our greatest leaders were great doubters, why do some of you feel surprised or embarrassed about your own doubts? Some of your doubts are inspired by the Holy Spirit, who is trying to lead you into greater truth than you have been taught. Does it seem dangerous to talk this way? It is only dangerous if there is no true God who can rescue us from falsehood. But we need to remember that rescuing us from falsehood, like so many other aspects of the Christian Life, is not a simple, one-time affair. It is a lifelong process – a many-dimensional, many-lifetimes process. We never get it “right” once and for all. Life is not that small. So we move from one layer of doubts to another. We are never invited to lose our humility and stop growing and learning. We never get to have the comfort and security of many of our fundamentalist cohorts, who have reduced it all down to something so small that they can understand it all – and tell it to you in five slogans and ten Scripture quotations.

Jesus was a great doubter, and if you really try to follow Him for more than three steps in the religious territory already familiar to you, He will have you doubting everything you have ever known. He will cause you to doubt your own identity, your own gifts and possibilities, your own purposes for being here, your own possibilities and powers – your very destiny, both here and hereafter. For want of a better way to put it, Jesus moves us from a three-dimensional reality to a ten-dimensional reality. But we cannot “go there” with Him unless we are willing to doubt everything we thought we knew.

Perhaps I should acknowledge that there is a form of doubt much more negative than the kind I have just been talking about. There is a form of doubt that is not true doubt at all, but just an excuse for turning

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away from life and commitment. I know some people who are merely cynical. They take pride in never being convinced or committed to much of anything or anyone. They think it is freedom to not be personally involved in anything. They are “above it all” – God, family, love, community, nobility, integrity. If nothing is valuable, you cannot be betrayed. If nothing matters, you cannot be hurt. Or so they hope. So all bets are hedged, all promises have loopholes. You can admire their kind of sophistry if you wish. I find it boring, and a very sad waste of time and life. But in my day, some of them won Nobel Prizes for literature. What I won you cannot see, but I would not trade it for all their glory.

Anyway, and as you all know, it is far easier to tear down than to build up. It is easier to find fault with the affirmations of others than it is to make affirmations of your own. It’s too bad that every critic is not required to make a movie before criticizing someone else’s; to write a book before criticizing someone else’s; to paint or sculpt or frame a belief system of their own before criticizing someone else’s. Nevertheless, if you do something positive – if you try to make any kind of contribution in any way, in any walk of life – others will shoot at it, try to tear it down, try to find some false or ugly motive for it – try, in fact, to ruin the contribution. That is just the way it works in this world. It causes many people to stop trying, or to be very cautious about putting anything “out there.” But they forget that there are also many who will encourage, appreciate, and be grateful for every contribution. Far more important: God will appreciate it. God will approve of the effort. God has ways of his own to reward.

As you have gathered, my point – my reminder as we go through this Lent – is that doubt is often the springboard into new possibilities, new creativity, new ways of doing things, new dimensions of belief. As always, the way to tell the difference between whether our doubt is a negative, cynical excuse to duck life or whether it is a tool of the Holy Spirit to bring us to still greater life: watch for the fruit. It is a little key that Jesus gave us. If you doubt because you really want to believe, if you doubt because you want to stay authentic, if you doubt because it leads to greater clarity about what you really care about and trust, then that is a very blessed doubt. You should welcome it, encourage it, and track it to where it is trying to take you.

One more aside: If you want certainty, you came to the wrong planet! Some of us have convictions so strong that we would be willing to lay down our lives for them. That is the nature of trust – or what we call FAITH. But faith is never fact. Conviction does not make us correct

in some factual, provable way. The Christian Life is a leap of faith. It is always betting our lives on what we believe – and more than that, on *who* we believe in. But Jesus never allows us the kind of certainty that permits us to write off other sincere believers because we are right and they are wrong. I'm afraid I come closer to that than many of you do, yet I never doubt that Jesus loves and works to save some of the very people I cannot abide. If you abide them simply because you do not have many deep convictions of your own, I am not impressed. Nevertheless, we are not Christians because we are right. We are Christians because we trust Jesus to love us, to stay with us, to lead and guide and save us. If you want certainty, you have come to the wrong planet! We *believe* because we do not *know*. If we could know in any absolute sense, belief would be a useless and irrelevant concept.

Why do I stress this? Because some people are waiting for certainty before they commit. Certainty will never be yours in this realm. If you are waiting for certainty, you will live your whole life and never taste true joy or love or purpose here. Rather, evidence mounts and finally we decide to bet it all. That is, we do not know, but we believe. It never gets any better than that – not in this realm.

You will have to forgive this poor illustration, but it is very real to me. I teach against the vast majority of Christian “belief systems” of our time. Through experience, study, prayer, and watching the lives of others as well as my own for many years, I have come to the deep conviction that Jesus came to us and brought us a more radical love, acceptance, promise, and invitation than most of the Christian world in our time sees or trusts. Therefore I teach and preach a Message that does not fear the fires of Hell; that does not believe that because somebody has failed to speak the proper formulas, they are damned; that does not think or believe that our performance is the issue but, rather, that God’s love and mercy as revealed in Jesus Christ are the issue. But the vast majority of the Christian world in our time would tell you with complete conviction that I am going to Hell, and that I will burn there through all eternity because of what I teach and the way I teach it. Not only that, any of *you* who are foolish enough to be influenced by me will also go to Hell and burn there through all eternity. I am not exaggerating. I am told this clearly and unequivocally by many sincere Christians, and on a regular basis. Because I trust Jesus’ love – His life, death, and resurrection – far beyond the way most people see or comprehend it, I am willing to bet my life, and yours too, on the mercy and love of Jesus. Just like always, we have to doubt that mercy and love or we cannot believe what we have seen.

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Now, this will not impress those of you who have never taken the whole religious thing very seriously in the first place. But I really think we have eternal souls, and I really think that the whole reason and purpose for this planet is to be a training ground for the dimensions to come. And I am convinced that our beliefs and the principles by which we live are very important indeed. So if most of Christendom (as it is taught in our time) is correct, I really will go to Hell. But I am willing to bet my life and yours that Jesus is *far* more, and far more caring and loving – and that the Kingdom He invites us into is far greater, more vast, more incredible – than what the majority of churches and Christian structures are proclaiming in our day. And I have to tell you, I would not be able to believe any of it if I had not faced, followed, and walked into and through my doubts.

But that, though very real to me, was only an illustration. Here is the real point of this sermon:

**If you are going to mess around with your doubts, then by God you better learn to doubt your doubts!** It is a precept I picked up from a man named Harry Emerson Fosdick. I never met him; I never heard him preach in person, though years later I heard some of his sermons on tape. But he wrote a sermon titled “Doubting Your Doubts,” and I came across it one day when I was in eighth or ninth grade, browsing through the books on my parent’s bookshelf. It is a great precept. I did not make it up or find it by myself, but I hand it on to you with delight. Anybody can doubt anything. With the kind of minds we are given, that is easy to do. But a lot of people have never learned to go on to a far more important step: doubting your doubts. And that means: as rigorously as we challenged and tested our beliefs, we must also challenge and test our doubts.

Can Jesus really be the Christ, the Son of God? You would have to be brain-dead not to doubt it. Such a preposterous supposition cannot help but raise a thousand questions. And it is all too easy to let the questions mount up until they seem like the only reality, and then walk away from the whole story, convinced that the people who give it any credence are simple-minded, superstitious, or just brainwashed. Many thousands of people in our day and time are doing just that. They have learned to doubt, but they have never learned to doubt their doubts. How do they explain the story of Jesus? They simply write it off without bothering to doubt whether it makes any sense to assume that, without motive or purpose, it came out of nowhere, means nothing, and was all fabricated by charlatans and shysters. To be fair at all, one must doubt the doubts.

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Here is a man – completely unusual – who did and said things that have had more impact on this world than any other human being who ever lived. If He is not the Christ, then who is He? And where did He come from? And what was His life about? I find that if I doubt the doubts as hard as I doubt the beliefs, I end up with more faith than ever. Maybe you will not end up in the same place; it is a very large subject with many possibilities. But if you doubt your doubts, you will end up with convictions of your own that will be very important for the rest of your life. If you do not doubt your doubts – never face them in honesty and sincerity – you will never know what you really believe.

Of course, the principle does not operate on only one level. Does Mariana love me? Does anybody? Some days it is easy to doubt such things. And if I have not learned to doubt my doubts, I will end up in darkness and despair very quickly, and with no real reason to do so. Satan loves to fill our minds with doubts that He then tries to keep us from questioning. That is, the doubts have become sanctified as truth beyond question. We have a world full of people who have elevated their doubts to beliefs, without ever bothering to challenge them. That is not a fair playing field!

In any case, I urge you to use some of this Lenten season to pull out your doubts and review them. If you have already doubted them clearly and honestly, well and good. I am not trying to suggest that you have to go over what is already known and finished territory. But if you have been troubled by doubts, tried to sweep them into the corner, or paid them no real attention, then it is time to honor them as tools of the Holy Spirit. Bring them out into the open. Look at them in the cool light of day and let them do their worst. And when they have become quite clear, then it is time to doubt your doubts. By the way, lots of doubts try to stay vague, general, and fuzzy so they cannot be challenged. That is not okay. Make them come out and state their case with clarity. Shooting from under cover, with no chance of being shot back at, is not allowed by any fair-minded person. So the first thing we say to our doubts is: “Hey, get your ass out here in the open where I can really see you.”

Of course, fear is always a huge factor. And how can you handle fear if you have not already chosen to believe in God? Well, if you doubt your doubts, you have to allow for the possibility that God is real. And when you do, that is exactly the time when God is likely to give you experience – some encounter that ends up strong evidence for belief. After all, none of us are convinced by fact or information. We are convinced by experience and encounter.

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And how can you think that maybe the doubts are a tool of the Holy Spirit, if one of your doubts is about whether or not there really is a Holy Spirit? That is wonderful doubt! Claim it. You must, if that is where your mind is at the moment. But what about doubting your doubts? If you do, then you must allow for the possibility that there might be a Holy Spirit. And that means spending some time in true quiet – waiting, inviting, opening your mind and soul in willingness to receive – just in case there really is a Holy Spirit who really does want to communicate with you.

And even now, the Holy Spirit is saying to you: “I dare you to do that in sincerity, giving it a fair chance. Give me your undivided attention for at least thirty minutes for seven days in a row.” If you can do this in honesty and with integrity and still claim there is no Holy Spirit, then at least from your perspective you know that you need never be troubled about such a belief again.

It is true, of course, that belief – true conviction – is a great blessing. And doubt, for as long as it lasts, is a downer. Doubt never gives us something to live for. Doubt never lights our lives. It is belief – true conviction – that brings us joy, purpose, light, and love. Yet every road to true conviction is laced with doubt. We never get to truth or wisdom by setting doubt aside. We only come to believe by walking into and through our doubts. The grace of Jesus is that His Holy Spirit helps us to do this, even before we fully believe in Him.