

## Haydenville Congregational Church

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John 20:19-31

### “The Gift of Doubt”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Bible story known as “Doubting Thomas” used to shock me. Thomas seemed so thick skulled and thick skinned. Jesus has died on the cross. The disciples run and hide behind a locked door for fear of what....I am unsure. Then Jesus appears among them. And he is not angry that they are timid and confused—like usual—and are hiding. He is not mad that they slept through his last night of tortured prayer while he was alive on earth. He is not upset that they deserted him when we went bravely to the cross. He appears among them and greets them with a sign of loving forgiveness...“Peace be with you.” It is astounding that Jesus does not yell at them for being disloyal and cowardly. But no. Jesus comes to where the disciples are hiding and greets them with a loving welcome, “Peace be with you.”

But Thomas, who was not with the disciples when Jesus came to the locked room, heard the stories and doubted that the others had really seen Jesus.

“We have seen the Lord,” they told him. But Thomas, who has earned the moniker “Doubting 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.”

Well, I used to think when I read this story, the nerve of that guy. What an ungrateful and unfaithful response.

The Bible tells us that a week later the disciples are again in the house and now Thomas is with them. Jesus appears and lovingly greets them saying: “Peace be with you.” Then Jesus turns to Thomas and says “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Only then does Thomas say, **“My Lord and my God!”**

Well, I used to think, Jesus had to prove himself to Thomas. Who does Thomas think he is?

My irritation with Thomas was validated when I read that John Calvin himself said that “the stupidity of Thomas was astonishing and monstrous...he was not only obstinate, but also proud and contemptuous in his treatment of Christ.”

I had my negative response to the story of Doubting Thomas in my early days in divinity school when I could get high on righteous anger and I loved to slam my fist on a desk and have an opinion that held great certainty. My fist slamming certainty about a number of things including Thomas softened when I went to Mount Holyoke College and served as the Dean of Religious Life and Protestant Chaplain. Day after day I met with students (and occasionally staff and faculty members) who were experiencing periods of doubt on their spiritual journeys. And I found their questions meaningful, their journeys moving, their searching poignant AND lo and behold! I saw that their spiritual lives were eventually strengthened by these periods of doubt.

After a while I found myself asking people who came to me seeking, searching, in a crisis of faith or a time of doubt: “Tell me about the God you are doubting.” Over time, as I listened deeply, read more and thought about doubt in a person’s spiritual journey I realized that doubt is common among people of faith, common AND EVEN USEFUL. I came to agree with Rev. James Harnish, who wrote in an essay in *Christian Century*: “Honest doubt is not a contradiction of faith but an essential quality in a healthy, growing relationship with God.” Now, I as approach 60 years old and I am less of a hot-head, I have come to appreciate what Rabbi Daniel Polish calls, “the valuable service disbelief can render.”

Thomas is not a Biblical figure to be ridiculed. He gives us a powerful example of a true believer in a time of doubt. And Thomas allows us to see how gracefully and kindly Jesus responds to doubt...“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Jesus does not disown his disciple, scold him for not believing, or reject him for having doubts. Jesus kindly says, here touch me...reach out your hand and touch me. Do not doubt but believe.

Since recognizing that periods of doubt are actually an integral and even important part of a long, trust-filled, love-filled, committed faith journey, I have discovered that many mystics, saints, preachers, and theologians have experienced intense periods of doubt.

It was Saint John of the Cross, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish poet and Catholic mystic, who first used the term “the dark night of the soul”—a metaphor used to describe a phase in a person’s spiritual life marked by a sense of loneliness, desolation and doubt. I have discovered over time how many deeply spiritual men and women have experienced a period when they passed through “the dark night of the soul” as they doubted God or felt that God had receded from their life.

One of the most dramatic examples is Mother Teresa. Publicly, Mother Teresa placed herself completely at the service of others, doing the God’s work in the slums of Calcutta. But privately Mother Teresa experienced intense periods of doubt and painful internal struggles over her religious beliefs—some of her periods of doubt lasted years. At one point, Mother Teresa wrote that she “felt no presence of God whatsoever,” neither in her heart or when she took the Eucharist.

Mother Teresa’s doubts and her crisis of faith are revealed in her letters to her spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet. These are her words from one of those letters: “Where is my faith? Even deep down...there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. If there be God—please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such...emptiness that those thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my soul. How painful is this unknown pain, I have no faith.”

The well known and outspoken atheist Christopher Hitchens, a fierce critic of Mother Teresa’s and the author of *God Is Not Great*, jumped all over the writings of Mother Teresa when they were made public after her death. In a misguided attack, Hitchens wrote: “Which is more striking: that the faithful should bravely confront the fact that one of their heroines all but lost her own faith, or that the Church should have gone on deploying, as an icon of favorable publicity, a confused old lady who it knew had for all practical purposes ceased to believe?” Hitchens’ diatribe reveals his lack of understanding of the cycle of doubt and belief that are a part of a spiritual journey. Hitchens does not understand the bleak periods of doubt that so many believers experience—his words make me embarrassed about my own lack of understanding earlier in my life. Hitchens does not comprehend that many people of faith experience periods of doubt and are eventually stronger for it. His attack exposes his lack of awareness of the long, winding, difficult journey the Christian life involves.

Hitchens does not realize that Mother Teresa took her name from Saint Therese of Lisieux, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French Carmelite nun who also experienced a painful period of doubt in her own life. Saint Therese of Lisieux told her fellow nuns, “...if you only knew what darkness I am plunged into.”

Saint Therese of Lisieux and Mother Teresa of Calcutta are just two in a long line of saints and mystics, monks and nuns, priest and pastors who have experienced periods of doubts and found later that those periods defined and strengthened their faith.

Henri Nouwen, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloane Coffin, Frederick Buechner and Parker Palmer are just a few well known and deeply admired people of faith who went through difficult periods of doubt in their spiritual journeys.

Writing years later about a terribly painful period of depression and doubt that he experienced, Parker Palmer, the prominent Quaker teacher and writer, said, "...we reject simplistic answers and learn to embrace mystery, something our culture resists. Mystery surrounds every deep experience of the human heart: the deeper we go into the heart's darkness, the closer we get to the ultimate mystery of God."

Martin Luther King plunged into a time of despair and doubt and emerged stronger, calmer and more committed than ever to the struggle for civil rights saying that "I know that the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Father Henri Nouwen wrote with passion in his books *Wounded Healer* and *Reaching Out* about the movements of the spiritual life and how the journey inevitably involves pain and doubt but eventually reaps the rewards of hope, courage and confidence.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner wrote this about doubt: "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."

And William Sloane Coffin, in his lovely book *Letters to a Young Doubter*, writes: "In my experience, a religious faith despite doubts is far stronger than one without doubts. I suspect that no one so reveals an absence of faith as a dogmatist."

The words of these contemporary theologians reflect what we also find in the Bible. Thomas was not the only doubter—that is evident when you study Scripture. There is a strong Biblical tradition of authentic confusion and doubt before God.

King David, referred to as “the man after God’s own heart,” experienced periods of great confusion and doubt. The author of many of the Psalms, David pours out his anguish in a number of the Psalms—we find that he doubts God, cries out to God, and feels deserted by God. “How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” David writes in Psalm 13.

And John the Baptist, who heralded Jesus’ coming, talked about the one who would follow him, the one whose sandal he was not worthy to untie, John who recognized Jesus as the Messiah when he baptized him....even John doubted. When John was imprisoned, he sent his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:19)  
Even JOHN doubted that Jesus was Jesus.

But the most poignant example of doubt is with Jesus himself. When Jesus was nailed to the cross and hung there in torment, he cried out, “My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) The Bible says that Jesus cried out in a loud voice. He thought God had abandoned him. Are you there? Are you there? It seems that moments before he died, even Jesus was seized by doubt.

The lesson we can take from the Doubting Thomas story and a glimpse into the many men and women of faith who have experienced brief or extended periods of doubt is that doubt is an inevitable and a healthy part of a spiritual life and a spiritual journey. Experiencing a time of doubt does not mean one has lost all faith, it does not mean one has abandoned one’s faith or been abandoned by God....it means that feeling and expressing doubt is normal and a part of a life of faith that has chapters and seasons, challenges and trials. Doubt need not be feared, avoided, denied or pushed away. Periods of doubt can even be embraced—we can be comforted by knowing that greater wisdom and closeness with God awaits IF we wade through the doubt, work through the doubt, and stay in dialogue with God **EVEN WHEN GOD SEEMS FAR AWAY OR NONEXISTENT.**  
Come, visit me, and tell me about the God you are doubting.

The dark night of the soul, a period of doubt and despair, is perceived by mystics as a blessing in disguise....mystics believe that through doubt and despair an individual is stripped of the extraneous beliefs and practices that do not foster spiritual development. Many mystics and monks, saints and scholars have said that doubt that is investigated, expressed, worked on and worked through leads to a purer union with God.

The courageous witness of all the holy men and women who have revealed their doubts resounds through the ages. So many of us, like Thomas, have experienced or will experience a time of doubt. We must remember that Jesus will not shun us or turn away, Jesus will draw close to us with a greeting of peace.

When doubts overtake us and our faith is shaken, when we, like so many others before us, experience a crisis of faith, we are invited to turn back to God, to talk again with God, to express our doubts not hide them, and to turn to each other. For in community we can borrow faith from each until ours returns, we can lean on one another when our faith is shaky, we can support each other when experiencing the dark night of the soul. And we can rejoice together when we emerge from a time of doubt and feel a stronger, deeper faith rising within us. We can rejoice together when one of our own emerges from a period of doubt and calls out, like Thomas, **“My Lord and my God!”**

Amen.