
The Spiritual Gift of Doubt
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:19-31

I love the story that we just read from John. Why, you ask? Well, it's not entirely because of the story itself, but because of the way we frame it. As I'm sure you know, when the Bible was originally written, it did not include chapters, verse number, and headings. Those have all been added to make the Bible easier to read. But I am often surprised by the headings we find inserted in the text. Many Bibles label the story we just read from John as, "Doubting Thomas".

Which is a bit odd really. In the story, Thomas recognizes Jesus in his midst. And yet, we label him "Doubting Thomas" because he only recognized Jesus *after* he had seen Jesus's hands and feet. Thomas only wanted to see what his friends had already seen. Thomas only wanted to see a bit of proof after all. And yet, we label him, "doubting". The underlying interpretation behind that label is that we should not question, or doubt, our faith. And so this is the perfect week to honour a sermon request I've received, which is to talk about science and religion, and how they relate.

[slide: science vs religion]

I have heard it said that religion and science are incompatible - because science is about having questions that might never be answered while religion is about having answers that can never be questioned. And while I love the play on words in that idea, I do not agree with it.

I realize that for some people - perhaps including some of you - faith means believing things that you can't prove. That is a popular and traditional view of faith. The idea is that while science answers many questions, there are still things we don't understand, and we rely on God and/or the Bible explain those things. 2000 years ago, God and the Bible provided answers to questions on many subjects including cosmology, astronomy, fertility, agriculture, medicine, etc. This way of understanding God has been called "God of the gaps" because God and the Bible are used to fill in any gaps in our knowledge. Of course, since science has expanded over the centuries while the Bible has

remained essentially the same, the God of the gaps has been forced to shrink. We simply don't have as many gaps in our knowledge as we use to have. The Church has not always appreciated advances in science because it was sometimes seen as a way to reduce the value of God.

[slide: heliocentric vs geocentric]

For example, in 1633 the scientist Galileo was condemned by the Catholic Church because he believed that the Sun was the centre of the universe, not the Earth as the Church believed at the time. Using a new invention called a telescope - I won't demonstrate here - it turned out that Galileo could make sense of the phases of Venus IF the Sun was assumed to be the centre of the universe, but the phases of Venus make no sense if the Earth is the centre.

To me it's an interesting story, because the belief that the Earth was the centre of the Universe was not biblical. Moreover, the location of the centre of the universe doesn't really affect anybody on a day-to-day basis. And yet, Galileo was condemned by the Church. I suspect the basic issue was that Galileo had simply closed off a gap that had previously been reserved for God. Or perhaps the Church saw Galileo as the thin edge of the wedge and wanted to discourage other thinkers. Looking back, its sort of humorous, because the Church and Galileo were both wrong - the Sun is not the centre of the universe any more than the Earth is.

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Also in the 1600's, Rene Descartes, the french philosopher, realized the great value of doubt. He reasoned that while many things we think are real might be imaginary, "the very act of doubting one's existence served - at a minimum - as proof of the reality of one's own mind".

[slide: cogito]

This led to the famous expression, "dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum", often translated as, "I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am", which is usually shortened to simply, "I think, therefore I am". And it's too bad that we tend to shorten it, because we remove the importance of doubt from the process. Descartes would not have got anywhere if he had been honest about his own doubts first.

[slide: ubi dubium]

And long before Descartes, the Roman statesman Cicero (106-43 BC) famously said, “Ubi dubium, ibi libertas”, which means “where doubt exists, there is freedom”. Jesus said that the truth will set us free, but so will doubt. Who knew? It’s almost as if doubt can lead to truth! To be clear, I am speaking about positive doubt which we will unpack shortly.

Science finds great value in doubt. I personally believe that religion can find value in doubt too. But traditionally, religion has not been a big fan of doubt, because doubt and faith have been seen as opposites.

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Doubt has been connected with having questions. And faith has been connected with having answers. But to me science, and theology both do better when reality and doubt are integrated into the conversation.

You know me as a minister. But you also know that I’m still a scientist. People sometimes ask me how that works, and I say that it works very well. For me at least. Although I have a certain amount of sympathy my congregation. Because I do actually recognize how my own approach to faith might differ from your own. This isn’t bad of course, it’s an opportunity for both you and me to grow. Over the years, I have reflected on what faith means to me - and to others. But I can summarize part of the issue with one true story.

When I was at a former church, an older person came up to me after service one Sunday and said, “You know, I’ve had a lot of ministers over the years, and I always expect ministers to have a lot of answers, but you ask us a lot of questions.” And then her voice slowed to a crawl as she said, “it’s almost as if you want us to think for ourselves”. I responded by simply giving her a hug. And that’s one thing I have learned about my own faith.

[slide: questions and answers]

That I love questions, usually more than I love answers. And I do realize this throws some people off because they connect questions with doubt and doubt with lack of faith. And apparently, some people connect ministers with answers, not questions.

But for me, faith is not about believing things I can't prove. Faith is simply embracing that we are not alone. That we are connected to each other and to something beyond ourselves. That we are called to love each other. That we are called to care for each other. Those seem to be the most valuable lessons we learn from religion anyway, doubt or no doubt. And doubts are not bad. I hope we all noticed in our reading from John that Jesus did not criticize Thomas for holding his doubts. Jesus didn't seem to have any problem with doubt. Jesus simply accepted Thomas for who he was and then showed Thomas what Thomas wanted to see.

The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is unbelief. To misquote Sproul - there is a huge difference between unbelief that is closed-minded certainty and the open-minded uncertainty of doubt.¹ When doubt is open-minded and uncertain, when doubt is in the form of a question rather than an answer, then doubt is usually a positive thing. Open-minded doubt springs from the realization that life can be understood, and perhaps made better. We should applaud doubters. Let's applaud the doubters who said, "What if the earth is not flat?". Let's praise the doubters who said, "Here's an idea - let's let women vote" Or in more religious terms, let's celebrate the doubters who said, "Hang on a minute - if we are all children of God, do we really have to kill each other?" Doubt of the status quo can help us evolve and mature, as individuals and as a society. Perhaps doubt can even be a catalyst to strengthen our faith. The doubt that is helpful, the doubt that is liberating, the doubt that gives life is open-minded and uncertain. Unbelief is the rejection of faith. Doubt - liberating doubt - actually calls us to deepen our faith because it forces us to grapple with our faith. That type of doubt is truly a spiritual gift.

Fun fact. If it were not for doubt, we would not know each other. It was not my faith that led me into ministry, it was my doubt. Well, it was both really, because for me faith and doubt are the same thing. But it was my questions about Christianity that drove me into the seminary. That and my love for the church. I had a lot of questions, and decided I needed to find some answers.

[slide: emmanuel]

I still remember walking into Emmanuel College my first day with the idea that I would

¹ <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/is-doubt-a-sin-can-it-be-a-good-thing/>

take every single question I had about Christianity into that building because it was probably the best shot I would have in my whole life to find answers to questions of faith.

As for asking questions in seminary, I quickly learned that Emmanuel College was a good place to ask questions of faith. But that had limits too. It turns out that seminary professors are actually human beings. Some of the profs were natural doubters themselves, and you could ask them anything. In fact, if you had a question that was only partly-formed, they would help you figure out your question first before moving anywhere near an answer. And they always had the most interesting answers. Other profs were not natural doubters, but they helped me too, by helping me understand human nature better

In any case, I state boldly that doubt - positive, open-minded, hopeful doubt - is a spiritual gift. And if that's true, then very likely, some of us have that gift, and others do not. Scientists have made that observation many times, getting their knuckles wrapped for discovering things that Church authorities didn't like.

I'm reminded of the story of the German physicist, mathematician, and theologian, Johannes Kepler born in 1571.

[slide: kepler]

Kepler's study of astronomy was driven largely by his belief "that God created the cosmos in an orderly fashion which caused [Kepler] to attempt to determine and comprehend the laws that govern the natural world, most profoundly in astronomy. The phrase 'I am merely thinking God's thoughts after Him' has been attributed to Kepler"² In spite of his piety, Kepler was excommunicated in 1613 because he believed that the moon was a solid body. Lutheran theologians at the time had decided that the moon could not be a solid body because in Genesis the moon is described as a "lesser light to rule the night", and since the moon was a "light", it could not be solid.³

Open-minded doubters that ask interesting questions have frequently come afoul of church leaders who prefer simplistic answers. In Kepler's case, he wanted to see the mind of God by observing the heavens using astronomy. In Thomas's case, he wanted to

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Kepler#Christianity

³ <http://dermottmullan.com/kepler.htm>

see Christ by looking at Jesus's wounds. Thomas was labeled a doubter and Kepler, a heretic. It's sort of funny that Thomas wanted to use his sight to confirm the presence of Jesus in his midst. Kepler used almost the same method. Kepler used his sight and his insight to look for the creator of the heavens in the heavens themselves. His observations led to a number of theories, as well as to the conclusion that the moon must in fact be solid. And for using his God-given sight, and insight, Kepler was ejected from the Church.

[slide: sanity]

This is a very long-winded way of saying that the main difference - traditionally - between science and religion is that in science, you are allowed to ask questions and you are allowed to have theories that evolve over time. But I think the church has substantially caught up. Because these days, in church, we are allowed to ask questions. And our own theology has evolved along the way. For example, 40 years ago, non-Christians were considered heathens. Today, non-Christians are considered as friends, neighbours, and potential partners in ministry. And here at SHUC, we advertise ourselves as a Progressive Christian community, clearly open to questions and to changes in thinking. You even put up with a minister who is a scientist. Thanks be to God! The gap between religion and science is definitely shrinking - in our own lifetime.

And if you yourself ever feel like Thomas, know that you are welcome here too. Questions, concerns, hesitations are all welcome here. Besides, Thomas didn't really doubt. Thomas just needed a bit of support from his friends, like we all do.

Doubt is a spiritual gift. Embrace your own open-minded, positive doubt and see where it takes you.

Amen.