
Faithful Doubt
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
April 24, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:19-31

This Sunday - we enter into a special time of the year. This is that special space between Easter and Pentecost. The official name for this period of time is the “Season of Easter”. Does anyone know what is so special during this time? Well, I suppose we could start with a general knowledge quiz: Here are some things that I think all Christians agree on:

[image: quiz]

- When was Jesus born? (~2000 years ago)
- When did Jesus die? (on Good Friday)
- And Christians agree that by Pentecost, which is 50 days after Easter, Jesus was present to the disciples as a spiritual presence.

But here is something that Christians do not agree on:

- When - exactly - did Jesus become a spiritual presence? When was it that Jesus transitioned from being physically present with the disciples to being spiritually present? Or in normal language, when exactly did Jesus “head to heaven”?

What are some options:

- In the gospel of Luke, Jesus leaves on Good Friday. Jesus tells the one criminal who is crucified beside him: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”
- In the gospel of Mark, Jesus heads to heaven right after giving the disciples some final instructions.
- In the book of Acts – Jesus heads for the heavens shortly before Pentecost, as we will read in a few weeks.
- In the Apostle's Creed, the time is vague - it simply says that Jesus ascended into heaven sometime after Easter. Mind you, that creed also says that Jesus descended

into hell which is not biblical.

In any case, depending on what source you use, there is a window of 52 days during which Jesus may have headed for heaven. That window of opportunity being sometime between from Good Friday and Pentecost.

[image: doubt]

And finally - why are we talking about this? It is because that period from Good Friday to Pentecost is precisely where we find ourselves now. Easter is behind us, and Pentecost lies ahead of us. And I am reminded that the whole issue of when - exactly - Jesus headed to heaven is an issue that has split Christian groups and created whole new denominations. The issue does seem to matter.

And yet, I don't see how an uncertainty of 52 days can be all that important. 52 days is less than 5% of the 3 years of Jesus's public ministry. 52 days is only about 0.007% of the time that has elapsed since Jesus's death. I always thought that the important point was that Jesus's spirit lives on today. But many denominations insist that they and only they know the exact time and date that Jesus transitioned from a physical presence to a spiritual presence.

When I reflect on the history of the Christian church, and on human nature, I can only come to one conclusion. Which is this. Even though different denominations have fought passionately about the exact date that Jesus make his transition, these denominations were not actually fighting because of the date. They were only fighting because we all prefer certainty to uncertainty. The denominations did not really fight about the date. They just wanted to be certain. They wanted there to be a definitive answer.

As a member of the human species I understand our collective desire for certainty. We like to believe that we know what is going on in life. It is just way easier.

[image: red green]

The philosopher Red Green said that the three little words that men find so hard to say are, "I don't know".

And our desire for certainty is perhaps why we think that doubt is a bad thing. The problem is that doubt is not really an option. It's reality. The only way to avoid doubt

is to close your mind off completely. Only a closed mind is certain.

[image: voltaire]

Voltaire famously said that “doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd”. However it seems to be human nature that we prefer certainty to uncertainty and we prefer knowledge to doubt.

Do you think that is true? Well, let’s do a few short experiments right now to find out. Do you prefer certainty in life? Or do you find great comfort in your doubts? Do you prefer it when life makes sense? How do you react to situations in life where doubt is the only appropriate response? What does it take to blow your mind?

Let us begin with a fun little story. The conclusion of the story will require a certain amount of doubt. You might even doubt what it is that you doubt. Here goes:

[image: proof that $3 < 2$]

1. Let $a = 1$ and $b = 2$
2. Since $1 < 2$, it follows that $a < b$
3. $a^2 < a \cdot b$ [multiply both sides by a]
4. $a^2 - b^2 < a \cdot b - b^2$ [subtract b^2 from both sides]
5. $(a + b) \cdot (a - b) < b(a - b)$ [factor]
6. $a + b < b$ [divide both sides by $(a - b)$]
7. $1 + 2 < 2$ [substitute in the values for a and b]
8. $3 < 2$ [simplify]

Now - be honest - do you doubt that conclusion? Or do you doubt my little proof? Do you doubt your own sanity? Do you doubt my sanity? For sure, something does not add up.

Let’s try something else. We all like food, right? But even food gives us the opportunity to see if we prefer certainty in life. How do you react when you realize that many things in life that you thought were true are in fact lies? Consider these food facts while your sense of reality implodes.

[image: series of food images]

- Philadelphia cream cheese is not from Philadelphia. It is from New York.
- Hawaiian pizza is not from Hawaii. It’s from Canada. Somewhere in Ontario.

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- Swedish meatballs are not from Sweden. They are from Turkey, and are based on the famous Turkish kofta.
 - German chocolate cake is not from Germany. It's from the US. The person who first created it was named ... Sam German.
 - Double Stuf Oreos only contain 1.86 stuff, not double.
 - A foot long Subway sandwich is only 11 inches. I need to ask Bella about this one.
 - Cap'n Crunch is not a captain. He is only a commander.

We have been living a lie. And the way out is to accept the fact that doubt is a normal part of life. We need to embrace our own doubts and see what we can learn from them.

[image: bird dog]

This brings us to today's story about the disciples recognizing Jesus. And about Thomas being the one who wanted to recognize Jesus in a particular way. As I am sure you know, this is the Thomas we often refer to as “doubting Thomas”. The issue of doubt comes entirely from the story we read this morning. Because 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.”

But personally, I don't like the label “doubting” applied to Thomas. It seems harsh. It seems unnecessary. It seems unrealistic. Moreover, I'm not sure that the label is even correct - when applied to Thomas.

[image: dog person]

For one thing - the story makes it sound as if Thomas was the only disciple who had any doubts. But I suspect that a number of disciples would have had doubts. Thomas however was brave enough and strong enough to voice his doubts. What sane person would not have had doubts after all that happened during Holy Week? And Thomas is brave in other ways too. In John 11, Jesus is about to head to Judea, and the disciples warn Jesus not to go for fear that he will be stoned. And Thomas tells the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Jesus.” Thomas is brave. Thomas is brave enough to stand against the other disciples. Thomas is brave enough to freely admit his doubts.

And - more than that - Thomas wanted a first-hand experience of the risen Christ - Thomas did not want to settle for a second or third-hand story. And because of that perhaps we should applaud Thomas. Thomas was not content that the women said they found Jesus at the tomb. Thomas was not content that the other disciples had had an experience of the risen Christ. I suspect that Thomas would not have been content if he had been given an early release of the New Testament that proclaimed the living Christ.
[image: girafe]

Thomas did not accept the testimony of others. Does that mean that Thomas doubted. Or does it mean that Thomas was looking for something deeper - deeper than just hearing a story of the risen Christ. Perhaps it is only possible to look for deeper meaning by doubting - by not taking the stories of others as the final word. Even the Bible is not the final word if we believe that God is still speaking. Doubt can sometimes be dismissive. But when doubt pushes us to look more deeply, that can be a very faithful type of doubt.

I think that idea works very broadly with our own faith too. Doubt is an essential ingredient for exploring our own faith. Doubt helps us recognize limitations in some of our understandings of God and Jesus. Sometimes we learn something about faith or God as children. And as we become adults, some of those teachings no longer work for us anymore. And when that happens, we have a choice. We can either discard faith altogether. Or we can accept more mature ideas and embrace a more adult version of faith. That is essentially what the progressive movement within Christianity is all about.
[image: Emmanuel College]

During my time at seminary, I “lost my faith” at least 4 or 5 times. But each time that happened, what really happened was that I lost a more elementary understanding of Christian faith, and I simultaneously found a more mature, more expansive, more creative view of Christian faith. I lost some Christian ideas I had never really reflected on seriously until I was forced to really look at them at seminary. And I replaced them with more reflective, thoughtful, believable concepts and ideas. I found a much more rational faith. And the seed that led to my better understanding of Christian faith was doubt.
Faithful doubt.

Thomas should be applauded because he chose to find his own way to make his faith more real. And then he did it. Do you think after the experience that Thomas went through he would ever doubt the risen Christ again? I don't think so. It's ok to lose your faith if you find a better one in the process! And you can do that and remain faithful. It happens all the time, when we seriously consider - what is the Trinity exactly? How can Jesus be divine and human? And perhaps you have your own burning questions of Christian faith.

[image: cat]

Thomas held out for his own experience of the risen Christ. For that reason I always think of Thomas - not as doubting Thomas - but as faithful Thomas. Not only did Thomas demand and wait for his own experience of Jesus - but his experience was unique because of it.

And in the story, Thomas's desire for his own personal revelation of Jesus is satisfied. Thomas says that he wants to see Jesus's wounds, and Jesus offers to show his wounds to Thomas - to let Thomas touch him. Jesus was not offended by Thomas's doubt. Jesus simply allowed Thomas to touch him and to let Thomas draw his own conclusions.

Thomas recognized Jesus by his wounds. Thomas recognized Jesus by touch. It sounds to me that Thomas had a very intimate experience. An intimate experience that Thomas would not have had if he had simply believed the "party line" of the disciples.

And what about us? In what ways do we recognize God in our midst today. In what ways do we refuse to recognize God in our midst? What symbols embody Jesus or God for you? How about in this church? The cross? The building? Other members of the congregation? Our mission? Our dreams? The music? The coffee? Where is God in this church for you?

[image: llama]

And where is God outside this church for you? How do you recognize God outside this sanctuary? At the bus stop? Visiting people in hospital? Visiting people in prison? At a grocery store? Spending time with family? Spending time in nature? In a smile? In a tear? What do you do to find God? What works for you?

Perhaps we should follow the example of Thomas. Thomas the faithful. Thomas the brave. Do we have the courage to follow our own hearts to find our own authentic and intimate experiences of God? Of course a good starting place is to listen to the experiences of other people, and our traditions too. But each of us has our own sense of the divine. For a truly intimate experience of God we need to be vulnerable to exploring new ways. Exploring new paths. And like Thomas, we might need to follow that path that our friends do not understand.

[image: uncertainty ahead]

As the path into our future unfolds, I hope and pray that we can all be open to our voices within. That we can be open to the voices of the divine. That we - like Thomas - find the bravery we need to express ourselves and to hold out for what we need on our own journey of faith.

Doubt is a gift. Doubt is faith. Doubt is grace. Doubt is life. Embrace the gift of your own doubt. And find God in intimate ways.

Amen.