
The power of doubt
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:19-31

Well, that year went fast. And here we are again at one of my favourite services. Because we have just read the story where Thomas does something incredibly reasonable and for that he receives - for all of eternity - the label “Doubting Thomas”. And in church tradition, that label of “doubting” has not been seen as a good thing.

[image: faith vs doubt]

In the church, doubt has been seen as the opposite of faith. And the church is all about faith, right?

I - as you might expect - have no problem with doubt. I think doubt can be a great thing. I eat doubt for breakfast. That is why our church sign this week celebrates doubt as simply the opposite of being closed minded.

[image: only a closed mind is certain]

“Only a closed mind is certain”.

And I should be clear that when I say that doubt is a good thing, I mean open minded, positive doubt. Sometimes doubt strays into skepticism and pessimism. And pessimism is not usually helpful. But doubt and pessimism are completely different things.

But before we go there. I need to have a short rant. Because there is so much talk about inclusion these days. In the church - and in our society - we just love to lift up and celebrate groups that have traditionally been ignored. And that’s great. And today is a great day to lift up a group that has traditionally been excluded from the church. Namely, scientists. The church has often shut the doors to scientists.

[image: Giordano Bruno]

I have shared some examples in the past with you. But today I am reminded of Giordano Bruno. Bruno was born in Naples in 1548. As was common in those days, scientists were never just scientists. Bruno was a scientist, but also a philosopher, a

mathematician, and a cosmologist. Bruno disagreed with the common belief that the Earth was the centre of the universe. He believed that the Earth revolves around the Sun. Perhaps more provocatively, he believed that the universe was infinite and therefore had no centre. But what really got him into trouble with the church was his belief that distant stars were actually also suns that had their own planets. And that some of those planets might have life on them. This was known as “cosmic pluralism”. That idea threatened to reduce the importance of humanity in the universe. In the year 1600 Bruno was burned alive by the church, the fire being fuelled in part by his own writings and book. I myself have no desire to be burned alive, but I do enjoy the deep symbolism in that tragic ending.

Incidentally, Bruno is sometimes depicted looking more like this:

[image: Bruno 2]

And any similarities to Obi-wan Kenobi are just in your imagination.

[image: Obiwan]

Scientists have not been very welcome in the church precisely because the bread-and-butter of science is doubt. And the church has always had a big problem with doubt. Except in this church of course. Where you are free to bring any questions you have and we will be pleased to grapple with your questions alongside you ... but I’m getting ahead of myself.

[image: earth sunday]

So let’s return to the power of doubt ... and first distinguish between positive doubt and negative pessimism. And we have to somehow squeeze in the fact that today is Earth Sunday. But is there a connection between Earth Sunday and doubt? You betcha. Or at least there is a connection between Earth Sunday and skepticism. It’s called “climate skepticism”. Climate skeptics are either people who are skeptical about the reality of climate change. Or they are people who believe the fact that our climate is changing but are skeptical that we can or should do anything about it.

After I had the skeleton for this sermon crafted, a member of this church - who I will not name - gave me a publication that would appeal to climate skeptics. The paper offered climate predictions from the past that did not pan out. These predictions are often

vague and are usually offered by people who are not actually experts in the field. But some of them are compelling. For example, it was quoted that Al Gore said at a 2009 UN climate change conference “The entire north polar ice cap during some of the summer months will be completely ice-free within the next five to seven years.” That has not happened. It is now predicted that that will happen by 2035.

The fact that some climate predictions have not turned out has fuelled some of the climate skepticism and climate denial.

Part of the problem is that scientific knowledge is usually incremental and evolving. But citizens want firm answers right now.

[image: climate change]

To quote from the masterpiece, *Evolving Christianity*, “Since the 1950’s, a consensus has emerged that recognizes that adding chemicals to the earth’s atmosphere causes changes to the atmosphere. The earliest research focused on rising atmospheric temperatures.

By the 1970’s, this understanding had grown into a broader recognition of the changing state of the atmosphere. It was then called “global warming”. Increasing greenhouse gases in the atmosphere increase atmospheric temperatures. Greenhouse gases are well-mixed in the atmosphere, so the impacts are global. Hence the term global warming.

As more countries invested in atmospheric research, more specific findings were discovered. This led to the broader topic of “climate change”. Average atmospheric temperatures are rising, but in some locations, temperatures are dropping. Moreover, the former interest in temperature has expanded into a whole list of related interests. Research now looks at storms, hurricanes, winds, extreme events, flooding, as well as temperature. Interest in climate change is now global, and concerns go far beyond simply changes in temperature.

The science behind climate change is now well-established. Research is now focusing on the implications of climate change on humans. These impacts include the ability to grow food, and access to clean water. This phase called “climate justice” takes

climate change as a given and explores its impact on humanity and the planet.”¹

Predictions about rising temperatures and shrinking ice caps have been off in their timing. But we are certainly seeing the growing inequalities around the world in terms of the impact of climate change on actual human beings. According to the UN, “Over the past decade (2010–2019), weather-related events displaced an estimated 23.1 million people on average each year, leaving many more vulnerable to poverty. Most refugees come from countries that are most vulnerable and least ready to adapt to the impacts of climate change.”²

It is true that some climate predictions have not panned out. But Climate science has evolved a lot recently. But even if you do not believe in climate change, the impact of climate change - particularly the impact on the poorest people of the world - is undeniable.

Incidentally, science is stranger than some people realize. Because scientific estimates always come with uncertainty values. The uncertainties are usually calculated, but our media never reports them. And this give a false sense of precision in scientific estimates.

[image: equations below]

For example. In mathematics, $2 \times 6 = 12$. But in science, $2 \times 6 = 10$. I won't dwell on that fact right now, but feel free to talk with me about it over coffee time. Another issue is that is that in general, many predictions simply do not work out. People like to make provocative statements, perhaps in the hope of becoming famous.

Consider these predictions:

[image: automobile prediction]

According to this prediction from 1903, the automobile is a fad. That belief caused a bank to not invest in the Ford Motor Company.

[image: tv prediction]

In 1946 a producer at 20th Century Fox said “Television won't last because people will get tired of staring at a plywood box every night.” Other predictions claimed

¹ Evolving Christianity by Rev. Paul Shepherd, pp 107-108.

² <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/causes-effects-climate-change>

that if television was successful, entire generations would not know how to read.

[image: mouse]

In 1984, when Apple invented the computer mouse, predictions were that nobody would want the thing. How did that turn out? How many of us even know how to use a terminal window on a computer today?

[image: train speed prediction]

In 1800 a professor at University College, London said, “Rail travel at high speed is not possible because passengers, unable to breathe, would die of asphyxia.” And “high speed” back then was 32 km / hour.

[image: confirmation bias]

One problem with all predictions is that we are human beings. And we gravitate towards hanging on to prediction fails when that we do not like the prediction itself. This is a result of a feature of human nature called “confirmation bias”. That is where we latch on to observations that support our biases and largely or completely ignore observations that challenge our position.

Predictions are often wildly wrong, or at the least, unpredictable. And it is perhaps easy to understand why so many people are climate skeptics today. But skepticism does not take us very far. Whereas, doubt has the power to transform society. So let’s get back to that. What is the difference between doubt and pessimism. Well, I asked the AI tool ChatGPT that question. Here is the result.

“Doubt and pessimism are two different attitudes that can have a significant impact on how we view the world and approach problems.

Doubt is the feeling of uncertainty or lack of conviction about something. It can be seen as a form of healthy skepticism or cautiousness, as it can prompt us to ask questions and seek more information before making a decision or taking action. Doubt can also be an indication of humility and recognition that we don't know everything.

Pessimism, on the other hand, is a negative outlook or expectation about the future. It is the belief that things are likely to turn out badly or that problems are inevitable. Pessimism can lead to a sense of hopelessness, and it may cause people to give up or avoid taking risks.

In summary, while doubt can be a useful tool for critical thinking and decision-making, pessimism is a more negative and defeatist attitude that can hinder progress and growth.”³

[image: doubt can make you more faithful]

Skeptics are often intent (perhaps unconsciously) on preventing change. Of convincing people that making an effort is not worthwhile. Meanwhile, positive doubters can propel society in new directions.

Think of the doubter who first asked the question, “hang on a second, why can’t women vote?” It was a doubter who said that. They did not just go with the flow. They did not support the status quo. That’s positive doubt. Think of the religious person who asked, “if we are all children of God, do we really have to kill each other?” That’s positive doubt.

Doubt can be used to move past the status quo by asking open, inviting questions. Skepticism tries to shut down conversation. Positive doubt tries to open conversation up. Skepticism invites exclusivity. Positive doubt opens up inclusivity.

[image: grumpy cat]

I cannot believe how much skeptical energy has been directed in my direction after Marjorie and I bought an electric car. I have been attacked - verbally - on numerous occasions. Even by members of this church.

This is why we have not had TV for 20 years. I find reality entertaining enough. I once got out of my car only to be approached by a stranger who pointed to the car and said, “that won’t save the planet you know”. And I said, “Yes, I know that, I just came here to buy some groceries.”

Electric cars appear to have a magnet that attracts people who know nothing about electricity by have no problem telling me that I’m an idiot. Again - I don’t need TV in my life. The least political example I can use is that people argue that you can’t have an electric car in Canada because of our winters. Yes, there is some loss of range in cold temperatures. But Norway has worse winters than we do. And in 2020 the percentage of new cars that were electric was ... 54%.

³ Response from ChatGPT to the question”what's the difference between doubt and pessimism”

[image: don't do nothing]

Skeptics simply cannot handle change. It is easy to sit back and point fingers and find faults in any potential solutions that leads forwards. No solutions are perfect. But that does not mean they are not worth doing.

Many people say that they are concerned about climate change, and then do not act. Why is that? Norwegian Parliament representative Per Espen Stoknes says, “More than 80 percent of all news and mainstream media play up the issue of doomsday or catastrophe. From psychological research, we know that if you overdo the threat of catastrophe, you make people feel fear or guilt or a combination. But these two emotions are passive. They make people disconnect and avoid the topic rather than engage with it.”⁴

[image: ozone hole]

Short aside - do you remember the crisis we called the “Ozone Hole”? In the media, this became an issue in the 1970’s. Humans had been putting ozone-depleting substances (like CFCs, solvents, and propellants) into the atmosphere since at least the 1930’s. But by the 1970’s, enough of these substances were in the stratosphere, causing a much larger springtime decrease in stratospheric ozone. That was called the “ozone hole”. The hole was never really a hole, it was a drastic thinning of the ozone layer near the poles. And the ozone layer protects us from some aspects of ultraviolet radiation. The ozone hole led to the Montreal protocol in 1987 which banned the use of certain ozone-depleting chemicals. The ozone hole is recovering, and is expected to be completely regenerated by 2045. The Montreal protocol was hailed as a success. The ultimate solution was that manufacturers simply had to switch to use different chemicals. The government did not ban refrigerators. We just changed the chemicals used in the heat pumps.

Here’s the thing. That atmospheric problem was solved with technology. Not with any attempt to change human (or consumer) behaviour. And it is working.

[image: don't do nothing]

⁴ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_overcome_apocalypse_fatigue_around_climate_change

Today, however, is different. Today we have many tools to fight climate change. However the most effective tools require us to change our behaviours. You have already heard many sermons from me that give the details. We need to eat differently. We need to share differently. We need to imagine differently. We need to care differently.

We have long moved past the day when a sermon like this ended with me telling you to just change your lightbulbs. Today, we need to deepen our understanding of the word, “love”/

We need to embrace the power of doubt.

Amen.