
The power of doubt
Chapel in the Park United Church
April 12, 2026
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 circles, that label of “doubting” is not usually seen as a good thing.

I mean think about it. After Jesus dies, his spirit visits his friends - except for Thomas who was not there. Jesus shows his friends the wounds in his hands and side. When his friends later tell Thomas that they have seen Jesus, Thomas does not believe them because - frankly - what his friends told him was unbelievable. Thomas - quite reasonably - just wants to see the same proof that his friends had already seen. But in spite of that, Thomas is forever known as “Doubting Thomas” - casting his integrity into question and making him the perpetual butt of sermons - at least once a year. Thank you Thomas!

[image: faith vs doubt]

In the church, doubt has usually been seen as the opposite of faith. And the church is all about faith, right? But for better or worse you called a minister who is also a scientist. So as you might expect - I have no problem with doubt. Doubt is what fuels science. It also fuels a great deal of social innovation. Doubt can even fuel faith. For me, doubt is a very good thing. There is power in doubt.

But 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.

Perhaps the problem is not really doubt. But rather, the type of doubt. Negative, closed doubt is just dismissive. Whereas, positive, open doubt is curious and searching.

[image: points below]

Negative doubt - also called pessimism says things like:

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- Nothing will work
 - Why bother?
 - Who cares?

Positive doubt says things like:

- Is that really true?
- Might there be another way to do this?
- Whose voice is missing from this conversation?

Negative doubt just shuts down the conversation. Positive doubt can take us to new places.

[image: cynicism - 2 meanings]

It's a lot like the word "cynicism", which is strongly related to doubt. The word carries two very different - and somewhat contradictory - meanings.

In modern usage, cynicism usually means a distrust of everyone's motives. It means assuming that everyone is motivated by greed, vanity, and self-interest, and therefore, nobody should be trusted. Modern cynicism is negative doubt wrapped in self-righteousness.

But the word "cynicism" also refers to a Greek philosophy made popular around the 4th century BC. Followers believe that happiness is achieved through virtue, self-sufficiency, and living with nature. They reject social conventions like wealth, power, and fame.

Ancient cynics did not dismiss everyone's motives. They stood against the status quo and relied on their own sense of self, and value. And I would call that a positive sense of doubt. As a modern example, society tells you that you need a cooler car and a better phone. Cynics say, no, that's ok, thanks. I'm fine the way I am. Cynics say I do not need vast wealth to be happy. Cynics say I do not need to be just like everyone else in order to be happy. That's positive doubt.

Positive doubt is really just standing against the status quo and using your own brain. Which is why most social innovation comes from positive doubt.

Consider this: It was a doubter who first said, "Wait a minute - why can't women vote

anyway?”. The doubter who said that did not just accept the status quo. They asked the legitimate question about why women should not vote. That’s positive doubt in action. It was a doubter who first said, “Hang on - if we are all children of God, do we really have to murder each other?” Positive doubt is fundamental to progress precisely because it challenges the status quo. As did Jesus. Jesus was a cynic in the ancient sense of the word. Jesus was himself a doubter. A positive doubter.

[image: timeout]

Before we continue. Please allow me a short rant. Because there is so much talk about inclusion these days. In the church - and in our society - we often lift up and celebrate groups and voices 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 because science embraces doubt.

[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 revolved around the Sun.

[image: you are here]

Perhaps more provocatively, Bruno 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 books.

Today - in 2026 - even schoolchildren know that what Bruno said was true. As I said, the church has historically had a big problem with doubters - even to the point of violating the 10 commandments to get rid of them. Fortunately, doubters are a persistent

bunch. We do not go away.

Incidentally, Bruno is sometimes depicted looking more like this:

[image: Bruno 2]

And any similarities to Obi-wan Kinobe are just in your own mind.

[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 doubts or questions or concerns you have and we will be pleased to grapple with your ideas alongside you ... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I often wonder why negative doubt - also called pessimism - sometimes called constant complaining - is so popular in our society, and even in our churches.

One reason may be that we often hear predictions of future events that turn out to be wrong. So we are trained to doubt what we hear. Fair enough. That's reasonable.

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

[image: mouse]

In 1984, when Apple brought out the computer mouse, predictions were that nobody would want them. How did that turn out? How many of us use a computer without a mouse today?

When people make predictions like those, doubt can be a valuable power to have. But we need to embrace positive doubt. And again, negative doubt shuts conversations down, while positive doubt opens up conversations.

[image: earth sunday]

Today we are also invited to celebrate Earth Sunday. Is there a connection between Earth Sunday and doubt? You betcha! 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.

[image: doubt and real faith]

One reason that some people are skeptical about climate change is that climate change predictions do not always come true. For example, at a 2009 UN Climate Change Conference, Al Gore said, "The entire north polar ice cap during some of the summer months will be completely ice-free within the next five to seven years." And that did not happen. Gore's message was not completely wrong however. He just got the timing wrong. It is now predicted that his statement will come true around 2035. And I believe that current studies put much more certainty on that number.

But clearly, statements like the one that Gore made can lead to doubt and cynicism - causing people to doubt the speaker's motives rather than facing reality. And 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 book, *Evolving Christianity* by Paul Shepherd, "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

Climate science has evolved a lot recently. And even if you do not believe in climate change, the impacts of climate change - particularly the impacts on the poorest people of the world - are undeniable. People are being displaced from their homes and homelands. Entire communities are being affected. Global inequality is on the rise. These are lived realities.

[image: ozone hole]

We have faced environmental crises before. I assume that most of us remember the crisis that was called the “Ozone Hole”. This became a pressing concern in the 1970s. Humans had been releasing ozone-depleting substances into the atmosphere since at least the 1930’s (CFCs, solvents, propellants). The “hole” was not really a hole, but rather a drastic thinning of the ozone layer near the poles of the earth. That matters because ozone protects humans from some aspects of ultraviolet radiation. This led to the Montreal protocol in 1987 which banned the use of certain chemicals. But the key takeaway from

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

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

this is that the crisis was solved by forcing manufactures (of refrigerators and other devices) to change their production procedures. And that has worked. The ozone is on track to self-repair by around 2045.

Here's the thing. That environmental problem was solved with technology. Not with any attempt to change human (or consumer) behaviour.

[image: don't do nothing]

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 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.

While some technological advancements are helping, real solutions involve behavioural changes. Our choices when we shop. Our habits. Perhaps even our way of life. And here is where positive doubt can be very effective. We can ask questions like:

- Do we need to live like we do?
- Are there other ways to care for the world?
- What would it mean to love the earth more deeply.
- Whose voice is missing from this conversation?

We have long moved past the day when a sermon like this ended with me telling you to just change your lightbulbs. Today, we are invited to consider how we share. How we care. We are invited to deepen our understanding of the word, "love". But perhaps step 1 is to embrace the power of doubt.

Thomas did not refuse to believe. Thomas just asked to see. To see reality as it was. The enemy of faith is not doubt. The enemies of faith are dishonesty and indifference. The enemy of faith is a refusal to see the world as it really is.

Faith is not about not having doubts. Faith is about how we choose to live our lives even when we do not have all the answers. Even when we have answers we do not like.

We need to embrace the power of doubt. Embrace the doubt that leads to new life.
Amen.