

THE GIFT OF DOUBT

There are many ways by which to see and meet and come to believe in Jesus in these days and weeks and centuries which follow that first 'Easter Moment'. For some, such a truth becomes utterly and explicitly apparent as the result of a dramatic or evangelical or 'mountaintop' experience. Many a parishioner I have known, and some of my closest colleagues in ministry over these last 30 or so years, have spoken eloquently to me about just such moments of transformation and miracle for them.

For example, a colleague who once served in my home Deanery, and who was my mentor during yearlong interim training long ago, used to tell me very matter-of-factly about the night Jesus himself visited his dorm room at college and changed his life forever; right then and there my friend gave up a career in business for one in the church.

For many others, including me, the path has been what we once called "*progressive revelation*." That is, my seeing and meeting and engaging and ever more understanding Jesus of Nazareth -- let alone Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah -- has been a journey, a walk, a wilderness, a sprint, a stumble, sometimes a stagger, but always onward. A bit more, in new places, in different faces, and in unexpected moments. Over strange time and across mysterious landscapes, Jesus has been revealed to me and I have come to know Jesus throughout these last 6 decades. No one way of meeting Jesus is "*right*", no one way is "*correct*" or somehow more "*Christian*" than another, and anyone that tells you so has obviously never read the Bible. Indeed, I am firm in my belief that no one person or group or congregation or denomination can ever claim such ultimate authenticity or purity on such a deeply, profoundly, personal matter. For the beauty of this Easter Christianity, as we now watch it unfold these next 50 days and beyond, is that the opportunities for encountering Jesus are far too plentiful to number, and they are as lovely and ephemeral as the proverbial lilies of the field.

At times, my own years and decades of spiritual searching have produced and revealed a faith which has sometimes felt like a house of cards. This is not always so, but neither is it rare or odd for me to possess such an awareness of frailty and equivocation. I often sense that the next great wind, the next nudging of the table, the slightest sneeze or the angriest interloper or the most irrational crisis might topple this carefully crafted system and send me back to a place of renewed uncertainty and reconstruction, wandering and wondering. In such times and in such places there is no friend more valuable, no sentiment more useful, no emotion more precious, no disposition more real than doubt -- pure, unadulterated, utterly human, timeless, 'St. Thomas' type doubt. Quite frankly I don't know what I would do without him or without it, and I don't know how I could ever come to an ever deepening faith if such doubt did not first exist. But that's just me. The image is much overused, but I think it is helpful here: doubt is the incessant sand in the oyster, agitating away, yet ultimately producing that pearl of great price -- shimmering faith -- immaculate and lustrous, worth all that we might sacrifice so as to obtain it.

In a recent newsletter meditation, an anonymous church author expressed with great clarity that which I have long felt. He or she wrote this: "*In the teaching of Jesus, 'doubt' is seldom the opposite of faith; [instead] the antithesis of faith is far more frequently 'fear'.*" And so, it is not doubt which leads us away from faith, but it is fear. And thus, in these same words, the virtue of doubt as a means toward greater and deeper faith is affirmed. In a similar vein, Paul Tillich once wrote, "*Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.*"¹ How then, we might ask, can this be? What are the qualities of doubt which make it so to be appreciated, accepted, even occasionally longed for, especially when we find ourselves stalled, or stuck, or merely in a tough place within our hearts or in our world?

¹ Paul Tillich. "Systematic Theology: Volume II". p114. c1957. The University of Chicago.

First, if you have doubt it means that you are liberated from blind and stony and obstinate certainty. Doubt opens the door for ever newer perspectives on Jesus, on faith, on salvation, on servanthood, on how we live our life with others, how we are citizens in this complex and spasmodic world, how we go about realizing the Gospel while still trying to understand just exactly what this Gospel fully is. In essence, doubt opens the door upon ourselves, doesn't it? There is no crime in both seeking and serving at the exact same time. There is no law, to my knowledge, that mitigates against living in faithful joy even as we search in faithful uncertainty. Indeed, as we hear from Jesus himself in John's Gospel: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" [John 20:29] Such precious devotion and joy springs forth in the very midst of doubt, and is as far removed from fear as we might possibly ever dream of. Like all such communities of seekers for more than 2000 years, you and I lay claim to our wonderful imperfection and heartfelt longings when we embrace such Christian doubt. And we cast aside the terrible sword of extremism and prejudice and fanaticism when we abandon the hard-boiled and often bitter certitude which is rooted in fear.

The other gift of doubt, the other side of the same coin, is this: if you are in such a place of questioning and uncertainty, it means that you have not closed off the possibility of some new and unforeseen epiphany, of some lovely and unscripted manifestation of the Spirit, of meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus or in the corridors of Baystate. It means that you permit the possibility, invite the absurdity, of meeting Jesus at Food Pantry or Hot Lunch or Church Without Walls; lying broken on Chestnut Street or under the South End Bridge or maybe in Stanley Park; in the cry of a newborn child or on the etched face of an ancient elder, or showing up some Sunday morning or at a Zoom meeting unannounced, in the guise of a person whom you have never seen before. It means that there exists an inkling of light, of portents, of "what ifs" and "maybes" despite the pain, despite the dis-ease, despite the un-rest, despite the spiritual fissures and narrow canyons of confusion through which we must pass in this life of ours, no more so than right now. To me (and, indeed *for* me), doubt has become synonymous with openness and with hope. It was not always so. But in time, doubt has prodded me into remaining available, perceptive, ready, curious, open, optimistic, and yes, even heartened.

When I have found myself in unyielding conviction and immovable certainty I have inevitably arrived at a place of disappointment. I make the arrogant mistake of trying to fix and shape and mold Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit precisely and only so as to fit **my** needs, in **my** time, in **my** place, in **my** life and for **my** moment, as if I were the only one who mattered in this whole grand and unknowable scheme of God's for humanity. But when I have found myself in doubt, there I have discovered a hope and a promise and even a fulfillment. There I have found --- and been found -- by God. I have been found by communities and faces and hands and hearts of love, presence, charity, kindness and the reflection of the risen Christ looking back at me in every single face I meet.

"You call for faith:

I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.

The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say..."

(Robert Browning)

As you share your day with my old friend Thomas, I pray that you also will receive and embrace the gift of doubt. And in so doing, wherever the journey of faith may take you in this new world born at Easter, may you also find renewed hope, a strengthened heart, and the infinite love of others who seek and search right alongside you.

~ **Amen.**