



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A Doubtful Faith

Clay Nelson © 8 April 2018

I fear I'm a creature of habit. Most mainline Christian churches have a three-year lectionary that they, for the most part, share. A lectionary sets readings from both the Hebrew scriptures and Christian writings to be read on particular Sundays over the course of the year. After three years, if you have gone to church every Sunday, like every good Christian does, you have heard most of the Bible. There is one notable exception. It is on the Sunday after Easter. Christians hear the story of Doubting Thomas, which is told only in the Gospel of John, every year. Thomas also has a saint's day, which means a minister must come up with a new take on the subject of doubt at least once if not twice every year. I can't seem to break the habit so, on this first Sunday after Easter, I find myself reflecting once again on doubt.

Before going further, I need to explain that the Gospel of John, the last to be written of the four included in the New Testament, was by a community of Jewish mystics who had been kicked out of the synagogue for their heretical ideas. Nothing in their gospel happened historically. Not the Samaritan woman at the well. Not the wedding at Cana. Jesus never said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Nothing Jesus supposedly said, was said by him. When Evangelical Christians trot out their favourite verse, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life," that is John, not Jesus. He never said it. He never thought it. John's Gospel reveals how his early followers came to understand him. It was not about what he said or did.

The gospel says more about them than Jesus. To listen to the story of Doubting Thomas without understanding that those who told it had been ostracised by their community for believing Jesus is the Son of God is to miss the nuances in the story.

Just in case you are amongst the 10 per cent who grew up as Unitarians or are spiritual seekers who did not grow up in any church, here is a brief synopsis of the story:

The empty tomb had been discovered a week earlier by some women, who were, of course, by virtue of their gender, unreliable witnesses. The male disciples had taken off for home in Galilee when their leader was arrested, tried and sentenced to die. Ten of the remaining eleven had gathered in an undisclosed location to discuss what to do next. In fear, the doors were locked. Jesus appeared to them unimpeded by locked doors and told them not to be afraid and breathed his spirit upon them. One of the eleven was missing, Thomas. When told of the appearance, Thomas was sceptical. He joined them the next week, and once again Jesus disdained the locked doors and invited Thomas to touch his wounds. Thomas did and was convinced, being the first of his followers to declare Jesus as his lord and his God. Jesus was unimpressed that Thomas needed to be convinced by seeing and touching his wounds and blessed those who have not seen and still believe. It is pretty clear, Thomas was the first Unitarian. For two thousand years he has paid the price by being disparaged for his doubt.

John's community was disparaged as well for their belief in Jesus and his resurrection. This story condemned those in the synagogue who required proof that Jesus was the fulfilment of their hope that the Messiah would come to save Israel. For John, doubt was the antithesis of faith. Doubt is still the enemy in many faith groups. The story is read in Christian churches each year to say belief in Jesus as the Son of God is good. Doubt is bad.

I have to say it is not so simple.

Believing is not faith. Believing is about what we hold true. When our beliefs move us to action, that is faith. In Greek, faith is a verb. English doesn't have an equivalent so we incorrectly conflate them, making belief the equivalent of faith. In fact, when we doubt it is about disbelief, not a lack of faith. There is a long history of people of faith having doubt.

Doubt: a history by Jennifer Hecht is a thick book that runs through the history of great doubters like Socrates and Jesus, Confucius and Thomas Jefferson. She explores doubt in the various world religions as well as great secular traditions. "Like belief," she writes in the introduction, "doubt takes a lot of different forms from ancient Scepticism to modern scientific empiricism, from doubt in many gods to doubt in one God, to doubt that recreates and enlivens faith and doubt that is really disbelief." (p ix)

Many of us are Unitarians because we were led here by doubt. It is not that doubting brought us to try this community. But doubting is what led many of us away from other communities where doubt was discouraged, where questions were quarantined, where wondering about stuff was not welcomed. Many people in this congregation left another faith community in doubt, or perhaps you were sent from or even kicked out of other communities because you had doubt about the creeds, and the beliefs, and the professions of faith. Or maybe you never were all that connected to a faith community and began to experience doubts about the meaningfulness of the life you were leading. Whatever the circumstances, doubt was a major element. And now, with doubts still in hand, you are here. Doubting is the red meat of Unitarians and why many true believers scorn us. Yet, those same true believers, filled with certainty, would find their faith greatly enhanced by some doubt.

According to one of my favourite American theologians, Frederick Buechner, "If you don't have doubts you're either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants-in-the-pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving."

According to Boshan Hakusan, a Zen master, doubt is essential to enlightenment. "Great Doubt, Great Awakening; small doubt, small awakening; no doubt, no awakening."

According to French philosopher René Descartes, doubt is essential to seeking truth, "It is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things."

According to a preeminent theologian of the 20th century, Paul Tillich, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

According to your minister, "Doubt isn't about what we don't believe. It is the impetus to live out our faith with integrity." By that I mean I seek to live a faith that lets go of certainty and makes room for larger and possibly unknowable answers. A faith that meets truth while still bearing the full weight of suffering and our doubt of what is right, and what is possible.

Let me offer an unexpected example of such faith.

Leslie Hazelton, an agnostic Jew, published a biography of Muhammad. She wanted to understand what happened that night in the year 610 on a mountaintop outside of Mecca when Muhammad received the first revelation of the Quran. As an agnostic Jew, she felt out of her league but this question would not let go of her. As a rationalist, “the human encountering the divine as Muslims believe Mohammed does seems like wishful thinking.” But as she researched written accounts she was struck not by what happened but by what did not happen. He did not come down the mountain walking on air, singing halleluiah and bless the lord. He did not radiate light or joy, there were no choirs of angels, no golden aura, no sense of his absolute foreordained role as the messenger of god. He did none of the things that might make it easy to put down the whole story as a pious fable. In his own reported words Muhammad was so convinced at first what had happened was unreal...a hallucination, a trick of the eye, or at worst a possession by a spirit, that he was tempted to escape the terror of what he experienced by jumping off a cliff. So, the man that fled down the mountain that night trembled with fear, overwhelmed not with conviction but by doubt. She says, “that whether he believed the words he heard that night came from inside himself or outside himself, what is clear is that he did experience them, and he did so with a force that would shatter his sense of himself and his world.”

Some conservative Muslim theologians insist that Muhammad didn't doubt for a moment. They want him to be perfect. Yet it was precisely his doubt that brought him alive for Leslie, that allowed her to see him in full, to accord him integrity, and the more she thought about it the more his doubt made sense because the more you doubt the stronger your faith.

Novelist Graham Greene, says, “doubt is the heart of the matter, abolish all doubt and what is left is not faith but absolute heartless conviction that serves as an ideal refuge from the struggles and questions of real faith.” Doubting isn't easy and is often painful. Many prefer to avoid it completely. Yet, this struggle is simply part of reclaiming our power to act in faith. Jacob wrestled with the angel, Buddha faced Mara, the demon who assaulted him beneath the Bodhi tree, using violence, sensory pleasure and mockery in an attempt to prevent him from attaining enlightenment. Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness being tempted by Satan to forsake his mission, and Muhammad struggled with despair as he was forced to flee from his beloved Mecca in fear for his life.

To better struggle with doubt, we must know there are two types, says the Buddha; one is helpful to faith, and one a hindrance. The helpful doubt encourages us to investigate when we are feeling disoriented, to experiment with teachings and not dismiss a truth simply because it doesn't fit into our worldview. This good doubt helps us discover a wider view of truth that will in Buddha's words “makes of us a light.”

The second kind of doubt is a mind state of uncertainty and indecision that brings this practice to a standstill. Yann Martel in his book *Life of Pi*, says “To choose this type doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.” Plagued by this doubt we get lost in endless thought loops that question our ability, our worth, and even the value of questioning.

Today we live in a world strewn with this kind of doubt and it hampers our ability to perceive truth, to have faith, to take action, to assert our beliefs or claim our identities. It can be

confusing and overwhelming. This doubt cynically isolates us from others, our communities and even ourselves. Unitarian minister Michael Schuler offers us an antidote. Trust.

*Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.
Question your convictions,
for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind
and its natural wisdom.
Suspect all certitudes,
for the world whirls on—nothing abides.
Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.
For without trust there is no space
for communities to gather
or for friendships to be forged.*

It is trust that allows our doubts to enliven our faith, a faith we can believe in, a faith we can act on, a faith that can make us a “light to the world.”