

The Dignity of Doubt

John 20:19-31

There's a story I once heard about a defendant who was on trial for murder. Apparently, the evidence was strong implying guilt, but despite months of investigation, police had never been able to recover the victim's body. So in the defense attorney's closing statement, realizing the possibility of a guilty verdict, he decided to seal the deal on reasonable doubt with a clever ploy. He addressed the jury and said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, since we all know no body was ever recovered in this case, it already indicates reasonable doubt in regard to my client's guilt. But I will make it even more evident. I have a surprise for you. Momentarily, the presumed victim will actually march into this courtroom!" With that, he pointed to the courtroom door.

Immediately, the courtroom was abuzz like a Perry Mason mystery, with the jurors on the edge of their seats. Yet, a minute or two passed and nothing happened. Finally, the lawyer turned toward the judge and smiled, saying, "Actually, I made this whole thing up. However, everyone here looked on with great anticipation, expecting the victim to walk through the door. Therefore, it's clear that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether or not anyone was ever killed. So I must insist you return a verdict of Not Guilty!"

Soon after, the jury retired to deliberate. Within a few minutes they returned, pronouncing their verdict: Guilty! "But how?" the defense attorney defiantly asked. "You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door."

“Oh, yes, that’s true,” the jury foreman replied, “We all looked...but your client didn’t!”

Well, I admit, there are better lawyer jokes out there, but this story does convey one of the ways that doubt, specifically “reasonable doubt,” works in our collective consciousness. In the American system of justice where having reasonable doubt is the standard by which to acquit, the bar for conviction ends up being quite high, as it should be in judicial law. The burden of proof is on the prosecution to make the case for guilt, whereas innocence is implied by acquittal. Without sufficient proof, reasonable doubt is fairly easy to attain (I know, I’ve served on a jury before). As frustrating as that might be to victims or prosecutors, the American system of justice would fail its duty if we operated with anything less. Our sense of doubt is a positive virtue to prevent a “lynch mob” mentality and to protect the innocent from unjust verdicts. We wouldn’t want it any other way in a court of law.

However, doubt doesn’t always work this way in a courtroom or anywhere else. For example, whenever we have beliefs or opinions that are important to us, or when we are advocating for a particular result, or if someone we love has been harmed, if we have always believed something to be true and it is questioned, then any doubt raised is taken as a lack of support or sign of betrayal. Skepticism indicates you don’t believe in someone and that you’re questioning their integrity and interpretation of events. In effect, it means you failed the loyalty test.

This is an entirely different view of doubt, but it also shows up in the courtroom. For supporters and advocates of the victim,

regardless of the evidence presented, loyalty is valued more highly than objectivity (Whose side are you on?). The same is usually true with the supporters of the defendant. Why? Because doubt impugns the integrity and character of the one you care about and support. To question what they say or to doubt their word indicates a lack of trust and a potential fracture in the relationship. When you can't entirely believe in the one whose side you are on, things begin to fall apart—the center cannot hold (to paraphrase Yeats). Suspicion and doubt come across as a form of betrayal.

Now I imagine you know where I'm going with this. Doubts about religion are frequently viewed in this way. To doubt the accounts of the Bible, let's say, or to question the tradition, to be skeptical about religious truths is perceived by many to be an act of unbelief, which translates into disloyalty and unfaithfulness, implying a loss in the relationship one has with God. Those who are devoted to what they believe is absolute Truth are very critical of those who don't embrace it in a similar way, i.e., those who may have reasonable doubts about it.

When questions are raised and skepticism displayed, this critical evaluation of the stories as they have been handed down through the ages is perceived as undermining divine revelation and one's relationship with God. From the earliest times, doubt has been scorned among the faithful as an act of disobedience and betrayal, which explains why scoffers are stigmatized in the Book of Proverbs and Dante's *Inferno* is the fate for heretics and nonbelievers. Doubt is merely the first step in the slippery slope toward disbelief. Disbelief is disloyal—it's the ultimate betrayal.

For this reason, the character of “doubting Thomas” has been excoriated down through the ages by those who define orthodoxy within the Church—referenced usually as an important warning to those who might question the integrity and authority of the text, the tradition, or the clergy who proclaim it. Thomas, who indelibly represents all the skeptics, cynics, and doubters of the world, ends up being saved only by the patient mercy of Christ who offers him firsthand proof of the resurrection, resulting in Thomas’ abject remorse for his unbelief. That, according to the pillars of orthodoxy, is the template for recovery of one’s belief: to repent for ever questioning God, for ever doubting the Truth, in order to return to faithfulness by the mercies of Christ.

Now, you might think I’m overstating this. I’m not. From the ancient Church Fathers to Popes to modern traditionalists (both Catholic and Protestant), Thomas has been the poster boy for the dangers of doubt and unbelief. The great Protestant reformer, John Calvin, set the tone for generations to come when he wrote:

The stupidity of Thomas was astonishing and monstrous; for he was not satisfied with merely beholding Christ, but wished to have his hands also as witnesses of Christ’s resurrection. Thus he was not only obstinate, but also proud and contemptuous in his treatment of Christ. Now, at least, when he saw Christ, he ought to have been overwhelmed with shame and amazement; but, on the contrary, he boldly and fearlessly stretches forth his hand, as if he were not conscious of any guilt; for it may be readily inferred from the words of the Evangelist, that he did not repent before that he had convinced himself by touching. Thus it happens that, when we render to the word of God less honor than is due to it, there steals upon us, without our knowledge, a glowing obstinacy, which brings along with it a contempt of the word of God, and makes us lose all reverence for it. So much the more earnestly should we labor to retrain the wantonness of our mind, that none of us, by improperly indulging in contradiction, and

extinguishing, as it were, the feeling of piety, may block up against ourselves the gate of faith. ¹

In other words, doubt and you'll be damned! Calvin likely thought he was being kind and merciful by issuing this warning. Much of the Protestant Reformed tradition (including modern Fundamentalism and many within Evangelicalism) continues to echo Calvin's unrestrained contempt of the doubt Thomas displayed.

I suppose, then, this explains why so many fail to grasp the true intent of this story. When I read it, I don't think Thomas' skepticism is being viewed with disdain by either Jesus or the Gospel writer. For one thing, in his defense, Thomas wasn't questioning Jesus or divine revelation; it was the reports of Jesus' resurrection from the other disciples which he considered dubious. He was questioning their accounts of what they had purportedly seen.

Honestly, Thomas had every reason to doubt those reports. Even decades later when the Gospels were written, the stories didn't match up! Firsthand eyewitnesses frequently contradicted each other over details such as who arrived first at the tomb and whether or not Jesus was recognized—whether it was a phantom-like presence or a physical body. As a body of evidence, there was room for reasonable doubt. Besides, what they were proclaiming wasn't just extraordinary and incredible, it was also without precedent! Any reasonable person could have questioned the accounts of the resurrection even if they had seen it with their own eyes!

That's why I can't buy the argument that doubt is somehow morally wrong—that it is a slippery slope toward unbelief. Is faith

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary on John's Gospel*, vs. 20:27.

supposed to be just a matter of blind trust? Is there no room for disagreement—over what one person accepts as believable, while another cannot? Does it have to be viewed as a loyalty test?

Who is it that we're believing or not believing—God or simply another human being? Are we not allowed to question what doesn't make sense—what we don't understand? It seems to me, one would be more of a fool not to use the powers of discernment when trying to sort out facts. If faith is just a matter of loyalty alone, of believing something because we're told to, would that not just make us naïve and obedient automatons?

If one's faith has no basis in fact, then doubt is what saves us from foolhardiness and delusion! In this story, Thomas' questioning wasn't an act of disloyalty at all; instead it was an act of *faithfulness*, because he wanted to be certain beyond a reasonable doubt that what he was asked to believe was, in fact, authentically true!

Actually, that was the point of this story, I believe. I don't think it was intended to be an example of potential denial and unbelief—it was representative of every person who heard this gospel story down the line but wasn't an eyewitness to the event itself. By the time John's Gospel was written, that would have been everyone! None of the original apostles were living then; no one was providing firsthand accounts 70-80 years after the events in question. Thomas' doubt, then, was representative of the second and third generations all the way to our present time who have to depend on mere stories to convey the message of something quite extraordinary—stories that make little sense to rational inquiry.

This story plays a vital role in the conveyance of the Easter message. Thomas' skepticism of his peers is what challenged the accusation that the stories about Jesus' resurrection were delusional, or that the risen Christ was merely a phantom—devoid of any connection with his bodily existence. Thomas' doubt was legitimate and necessary for those who were convinced that Jesus' resurrection was the real deal—that it was his body that was raised from the dead and not merely his spirit. Otherwise blind allegiance would require the suspension of natural laws and a person's cognitive and rational powers. It would not make sense to ensuing generations if Thomas didn't express incredulity at the prospect of Jesus rising from the dead and ask for proof of it. Without Doubting Thomas, the resurrection of Jesus would have been reduced to the hysterics and hallucinations of a handful of people.

That's not to say our wits and wisdom aren't challenged by the incomprehensibility of the resurrection today. It doesn't make sense to rational analysis which, of course, is only one way to evaluate it. There are other ways to comprehend it that make perfect sense. But the response to anyone's natural disbelief is not to scorn the skeptics or debunk the doubters, as if it all boils down to a loyalty test. No, the expression of someone's doubt is what makes them curious and motivates them to explore what it all means. Doubt is what moves people to marshal their mental and imaginative and emotional resources to investigate the clues and find answers to questions that pique their interest or need response. Doubt makes us curious and can lead us to wonder, why doesn't this make sense? What does this mean?

As Baptists, we should know this better than most. We don't depend upon church tradition, or creeds, or pastoral authority to determine our beliefs. Individually, we're free to explore these questions ourselves and come up with answers that make the most sense to each one. Often we will resolve doubts in similar ways, but we're not mandated to do so. Soul liberty means allowing your doubts to make you curious enough about your faith that you'll seek answers, trusting God's Spirit will guide you to a better understanding.

Doubt is our asset in spiritual matters; it's what leads us to become spiritual pilgrims, instead of settling with righteous rhetoric. As Paul Tillich said, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith." Or as one of my favorite agnostics, Henry David Thoreau, wrote: "Faith keeps many doubts in her pay. If I could not doubt, I should not believe." Or even better, what Vaclav Havel, the Czech writer and political leader, wisely observed:

Isn't it the moment of most profound doubt that gives birth to new certainties? Perhaps hopelessness is the very soil that nourishes human hope; perhaps one could never find sense in life without first experiencing its absurdity.

Isn't this true about Jesus' resurrection? That's the value and dignity of doubt!

This is why I think reasonable doubt is the gift of God to those who yearn to know and understand, recognizing that faith is found not in having all the answers, but in asking the right questions with an openness to new insights and a willingness to rethink all that we know. Divine revelation is not static and anchored only in an ancient worldview. Rather, it is dynamic and compelling in the present; often

it will surprise us, disturb us, and inspire us to live into the mystery which is our life of faith. In my experience, doubt and skepticism are what can save us from *unbelief*—from giving up altogether on a centuries' old religion that is losing relevance in a modern paradigm. The essence and spirit of Christianity is much more real and enduring than the ancient stories and accounts can present it.

So, as far as I'm concerned, you can place me in that story with Thomas, right there with him asking for more evidence to satisfy my curiosity and to answer my reasonable doubts—not because I'm agnostic or a cynical critic, but because I sincerely want to believe. I want to understand to my best ability. I won't simply accept it because I was told to believe it under threat of punishment.

And God willing, with study, reflection, insights and imagination, I will find an answer that will make sense to me and I will be eager to embrace beyond a reasonable doubt. For that is exactly what true convictions require.

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