

## Doubt, a Path to a Deeper Faith

John 20:19-29

April 8, 2018

A Spanish novelist and philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, once said, “Faith which does not doubt is dead faith.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, doubt is not the opposite of faith; rather it is a part of the faith journey.

Have you ever doubted the existence of God, or God’s care for you, or about your salvation? If you have, you are not alone. In every generation, conscientious people of faith had doubts at times - Moses, Thomas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Mother Teresa, Pope Francis, C.S. Lewis, just to name a few. They all struggled with doubt, fear, and multiple questions about faith during their lives.

I am sure there is a kind of doubt that is entirely negative and destructive, which puts faith in jeopardy, but I suspect that the kind of doubt we have is the kind that asks questions and won’t be satisfied with unconvincing answers. This kind of faith is actually healthy and helpful. A faith that does not ask questions is not worth having.

Pope Francis, for example, spoke about his personal doubt during his General Audience in St. Peter’s Square in 2013. He said doubt was part of our life journey, and we should not feel ashamed or condemned because this is just a part of being human. Pope Francis said, “Who among us has not experienced insecurity, loss and even doubt on their journey of faith? Everyone! We’ve all experienced this, me too. Everyone has. It is (a) part of the journey of faith; it is (a) part of our lives. This should not surprise us, because we are human beings, marked by fragility and limitations.”<sup>2</sup>

The archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who is head of the Church of England, recently made a comment that at times he questioned the existence of God. He told an audience at Bristol Cathedral that there were moments where he wondered if there were a God. If there were, where was he? Then he was asked from the audience if he harbored doubts. He responded, “It is a really good question. ... The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God, ‘Look, this is all very well, but isn’t it about time you did something, if you’re there?’ This is probably not what the archbishop of Canterbury should say.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/faithquotes.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/galleries/5-famous-christians-who-struggled-with-doubt.aspx?p=3>

His comment drew a lot of attention. Much of the reaction to his comment was somewhat immature. Some said, “Even God’s earthly emissary is not sure if the whole thing is made up!” The Australian atheist columnist Peter FitzSimons tweeted “VICTORY!” The International Business Times called it “the doubt of the century.” Another journalist wrote “Atheism is on the rise and it appears as though even those at the top of the church are beginning to have doubts.”<sup>3</sup>

They say these things because they equate doubts with unbelief. Doubt, however, is not unbelief. It is a tentative and unsure belief. The 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, James H. Snowden, described doubt as “uncertain belief.”<sup>4</sup>

Christopher Lane who teaches at Northwestern University in Illinois wrote a book called “The Age of Doubt.” In that book, he says that during the Victorian era many Christian thinkers openly raised questions of faith. By doing so, they transformed the idea of doubt from a sin or lack of faith to necessary exploration.<sup>5</sup>

Any reasonable thinker would know that doubting and questioning are part of searching and discovering. We often identify Thomas as the doubter. “Doubting Thomas” has been his nickname.

But there are a few things we need to learn from Thomas. Thomas was not afraid to ask questions or to express his doubts. When it comes to faith matters or spiritual matters, people who have doubts don’t want to express them. They are afraid to express them because they are unsure how people would think of them, but Thomas was not like that at all.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html>

<sup>4</sup> James H. Snowden, *The Place of Doubt in Religious Belief* (1916). Dr. Snowden was a professor of systematic theology at Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.  
<https://archive.org/stream/jstor-3142911/3142911#page/n1/mode/2up>

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt*, (Yale University Press: New Haven & London) 2011, p. 3-4

<sup>6</sup> John 14:1-4.

Then Thomas jumped in and said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How do we know the way?”<sup>7</sup> Thomas was not afraid to ask questions or express his doubts.

I suspect that all the disciples thought the same thing. They all had the same question. I am pretty sure they did, but none of them dared to ask.

It was only Thomas who had enough courage and boldness to ask the question. Because he asked that question, Jesus gave the greatest foundation of faith. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>8</sup> If Thomas had never asked the question, Jesus might never have said this.

Thomas was not the only one who questioned and doubted Jesus. John the Baptist also doubted Jesus. He asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”<sup>9</sup> John the Baptist asked this question not because he wasn’t sure if Jesus was the Messiah. Rather he asked this question because Jesus did not fit his expectation.

We are not sure what John’s expectation of the Messiah really was. We can assume that it was pretty similar to that of his contemporaries. Whatever it was, it is clear that Jesus did not satisfy John’s expectations. That is why he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come; or shall we wait for another?”

Jesus never rebuked anyone who had questions or doubts. He did not rebuke Thomas, or John the Baptist, or anyone else who had questions or doubts.

I believe this is so because doubts are a part of a faith journey. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; unbelief is. Doubt is simply uncertain belief.

Honestly, we all have doubts time to time. Raising honest doubts and asking inquisitive questions can often lead to some of life’s most profound understanding.

One thing we need to do when we have doubts is to investigate the facts. This is another thing we need to learn from Thomas. When he had doubts, he did not leave the doubts alone. He investigated them. Someone once said, “When

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<sup>7</sup> John 14:5.

<sup>8</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 11:3.

does doubt become unbelief? Answer: When you let it.”<sup>10</sup> If you nurse the doubt without investigating it or without searching for the truth, then that doubt can change to unbelief.

Before you decide either to believe or not to believe, you need to investigate the facts when you have doubts. There is a difference between doubts and unbelief. Doubt asks questions while unbelief won't even listen to the responses, suggestions or answers.

Honest doubters want to know the answer. They say, “I doubt that it is true, but I want to know the facts.” They investigate the facts, but dishonest doubters, the ones who do not want to believe, do not want the facts. They say, “I have made up my mind not to believe. So, don't confuse me with the facts.” Truth seekers may doubt but they don't ignore the facts.

In verse 26, we read, “A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.” For a week, everybody believed, except Thomas. He was the only doubter in the room, but the amazing thing about Thomas is that he stuck around. The inquisitive doubter says, “I will stay and investigate the facts.” Unbelief walks away and says, “You believe what you want, but I am out of here. I don't want to know whether I am right or wrong. I am not going to believe it.” That is unbelief.

There is nothing wrong with doubt, but there is something wrong with doubt that refuses to investigate.

Do you know why a lot of people do not confront their doubts? It is because deep down in their hearts they are afraid that their doubts might be true. They don't want to give up what they have been believing. They don't want to struggle to discover the truth, but I can assure you that confronting your doubts honestly is the way to cultivate and strengthen your faith.

An English journalist and a lawyer by the name of Frank Morrison, was an atheist. He didn't believe in God. He thought the Bible was a joke. He did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection story was a ridiculous tale, he thought. He wanted to prove that Christianity was a hoax by exploring the passion and the resurrection story of Jesus.

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<sup>10</sup> Cited by R. C. Sproul, *Doubt and Assurance* (Grand Rapid: Baker, 1993) p.22.

He examined the historical evidence, with all of his legal mind, his judicial experience and his investigative expertise. He sifted through every possibility that might account for the disappearance of the body of Jesus Christ. It was an honest investigation.

After all his research and scrutiny, the only explanation he could come up with was exactly what he found in the Bible. In the end, he surrendered his life to Christ and wrote a book called, “Who Moved the Stone?” It is a wonderful book about his research and his conclusion.

Do you have your doubts about God, Jesus Christ, his resurrection, and about your faith? Bring your doubts to the Lord. Be honest about them, and investigate the facts to find the answers. Don’t just ask other people for their opinions. You investigate it yourself. You study the Scripture. You do the research. If it is important for you to know the truth, you do the investigation. You evaluate the evidence. When you do that, you will come to a deeper understanding and stronger faith.