

**SLD11.15.09 33 Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Mark 9:14-24**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **Does Doubt Diminish Faith?**

You know, doubt has often gotten a pretty bum rap in Christian circles throughout the millennia, and for good reason, I suppose.

When the church was young, things may have been more dangerous for your average “believer,” but faith-wise, they were a good bit simpler. You know how when you’re young, how black and white things seem? How confident you are about what is and isn’t true? Well, that’s how it was for the earliest Christian church. As in the early stages of anything, back when there were just eleven scared disciples huddled in a room, you knew and loved Jesus Christ and believed in his resurrection, or you didn’t. (To be fair, the first disciples mostly didn’t until Jesus came back and straightened them out.)

In any case, you had your believers and you had your unbelievers. And in case there’s any question about how one felt about the other, you see comments all over the New Testament like “if an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go...” (I Cor 10:27) Or, “anyone who doesn’t provide for their family...is worse than an unbeliever. (I Tim 5:8) Or, “he who doubts is like a wave of the sea.” (James 1:6)

But as the church grew and matured and spread to other groups and countries, things got a little more complicated. Groups started organizing themselves around different leaders and differing beliefs. You had your believers and then you had your *other* believers, and not everybody got along. Certain fussy theological details reared their ambiguous heads, like was there really just one God? And if so, was this God a God of love or of a God vengeance? Was Jesus the same as God? If so, was he

really human? That sort of thing. Add to that those questions the power that comes when people imagine you know what you're talking about, along with an unwillingness to share that power, and you get a bunch of competing voices declaring who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out, who's orthodox and who's not. In the case of Western Christendom, the "in-house" bickering reached such a pitch that 4<sup>th</sup> century Emperor Constantine stepped in and asked the loudest and most powerful holy players to get together, figure it out, and quiet down as he had an empire to run. At which point the church father penned the Nicene Creed and thus were born the first heretics – that is, those who didn't go along with it.

And you know how it went. The consequences of questioning orthodoxy got pretty severe. Those who couldn't refrain from speaking up getting ostracized, expelled, killed, or catapulted to new countries, while others simply learned to keep their doubts and questions to themselves. In fact, to this day, even after the institutional church has fallen from its central position in Western society, people of faith are *still* reluctant to share the doubts and questions with which they live every day.

But doctrine and orthodoxy are not the only voices through the ages, even within the church. Voices of judgment, exclusion, and control have not always dominated the faithful. Indeed, the place of doubt and its attendant ambiguity has often been lauded through the centuries as an authentic component within the dynamic of grace.

Hear this from 4<sup>th</sup> century African Christian theologian, St. Augustine:

**B. "...if (a human) doubts, he lives. If he doubts, he remembers why he is doubting. If he doubts, he has a will to be certain. If he doubts, he thinks. If he doubts, he knows he does not know. If he doubts, he judges he ought not to give hasty assent.**

16<sup>th</sup> century father of modern philosophy Rene Descartes, like Jesus' disciple Thomas, accepted only ideas which could be proved by direct observation. Starting with universal doubt, Descartes concludes there is only one thing that cannot be doubted, doubt itself. From this postulation comes his famous phrase echoing St. Augustine's position: *Cogito, ergo sum*. "I think, therefore I am."

Historian of science and poet Jennifer Michael Hecht suggests that doubt and its virtue of questioning what seems given has always driven human life and faith itself forward.<sup>1</sup> In a recent program of *Speaking of Faith*, Krista Tippett interviews Hecht about her book, [Doubt, A History](#), to learn the place of doubt in scientific and religious inquiry over the ages. To the question of why doubt has such an important role in the development of genuine inquiry, Hecht replies

**H. "We have an almost violent desire to understand things; our brains seem to take the whole of life as a puzzle."**

In her book Hecht shows how non-belief, skepticism and doubt have paralleled, and at times, shaped the world's great religious belief systems, by quoting some of the most prominent figures of medieval philosophy whose authority and thought have had a lasting influence. For example, in Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, he mentions that

**B. "I was scarce 15 when, after doubting by turns at separate points, I began to doubt of revelation itself. Some books again Deism (or the existence of God) fell into my hands. It happened that they wrought an effect in me quite contrary to what was intended by them, for the arguments of the Deists, which were**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/doubt/kristasjournal.shtml> for this and the following quotes.

**quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much strong than their reputations. I soon became a thorough Deist.”**

19<sup>th</sup> century American social reformer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, describes her encounter with a free-thinking doubter of her age, the abolitionist, Lucretia Mott:

**H. “I found in this new friend a woman emancipating from all faith in man-made creed. Nothing was too sacred for her to question. It seemed to me like meeting a being from some larger planet to find a woman who dared to question the opinions of popes, kings, senates, and parliaments, recognizing no higher authority than the judgment of a pure-minded, educated woman. When I first heard from the lips of Lucretia Mott that I had the same right to think for myself that Luther, Calvin and John Knox had, and the same right to be guided by my own convictions,...I felt at once a newborn sense of dignity and freedom. It was like suddenly coming into the rays of the noonday sun after wandering with a rush light in the caves of the earth.”**

Because of the importance of doubt in the development of thought and belief, Hecht points out in her book that the modern terms *atheist*, *agnostic*, and *believer* are no longer the most interesting or useful ways to divide thought (on the topic of religious belief.)

“According to common usage,” she says, “the term agnosticism holds that we cannot reasonably make an assessment on the question of whether God exists. Agnosticism often ends up being a catchall term for those who do not think there is a God, but who harbor a tiny allowance that there might be some force that creates meaning and makes possible an afterlife.

“But what’s the difference between belief and atheism?” she asks. “There have been mystics and philosophers aplenty who have said they believe in God, but did not believe anything about the universe that was different than how the atheists described it. They just called something about it “God.” If your idea of God is a being that thinks, does things, or even exists,” she remarks, “you would have to re-classify a great many self-titled believers as atheists.”

If instead, what divides belief and atheism is that believers have a taste for religion and atheists think it’s dangerous bunk, then what of the great atheist religions (such as Buddhism and Shinto)? Believer mystics and believer philosophers have more in common with atheist mystics and atheist philosophers than with those who accept a Creator God is aware of us and does things.”

For example, as one “believer” testified,

**B. “On the Scale of Doubt quiz I am identified as an agnostic, but that does not correspond to my self-identification. The reason is that my idea of “God” is close to that of Carl Jung, who said he didn’t *believe* in God, he *knew* God exists. His experience and mine lead to a concept vastly different from anthropomorphic gods, humanlike individuals with mind and will like other individuals in the universe.**

**“I say I am an atheist in the sense that I don’t believe in a theistic god. ...Yet I have no doubt that I experience *Something* beyond ordinary reality, *Something* that classical science could not posit but that a new scientific paradigm seems to be moving toward. I call my spirituality generic, eclectic, secular, and sometimes even atheist.”**

Concludes Hecht, “It might be easier to be clear if we avoid using terms like *believer*, *agnostic*, and *atheist* and just try to say what we believe about what we are and what’s out there.”

So, does doubt diminish faith? Or, as 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic, Thomas Merton suggests, does “faith mean doubt?”

**B. “Faith means doubt. Faith is not the suppression of doubt. It is the overcoming of doubt. And you overcome doubt by going through it. The person of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a person of faith.”**

Maybe you agree, maybe you don’t. We can talk about it more after worship in the Fellowship Hall.

Meanwhile, let’s hear some blog responses to Tippet’s program and Hecht’s book on the topic of doubt. Writes one listener:<sup>2</sup>

**B: “The question is, “Can a *true* Christian doubt God at the most *fundamental level*?” The person asking said she often envies Christians who don’t ever doubt. I told her that there is no such thing. All people doubt! And by doubting at a ‘*fundamental level*,’ I mean a Christian can doubt to such a degree as to even doubt the very existence of God. I have, and sometimes still do. ...I don’t think belief should ever be conceived of as ‘black and white.’ ...the strength of peoples’ beliefs varies from time to time. Belief goes up and down. In other words, belief is not something you either have or you don’t. ...In a fallen world with fallen people – and Christians who are still battling the flesh – should we expect anything else?”**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**H. “I lived for so many years doubting as religion was crammed down my throat, and watched those very same people live in hatred and judgment. Now I know that Christ is not about rituals and dogma; I was so relieved to find out it was okay to question!”**

**B. “I so wish that religious people could really hear this and stop framing MY views from within their narrow religious frameworks. I am not an Agnostic, a Doubter, a 'non religious person', and I'm definitely not an 'Atheist.' I just want to look at the Universe as it is, as I experience it, not with a bunch of stories forced on top of it.”**

I rather like to think of the rich history, tradition and practice of the Christian faith over the millennia as something more than “a bunch of stories forced on top of a particular way of looking at the Universe.” Especially as I, myself, experience and witness those stories, and that Way, continuing to yield fresh wisdom, guidance, comfort and revelation.

Yet, is there, *should* there be, a place for doubt in one’s personal faith journey? In the explorations of a community of faith?

According to the historical principles of our Presbyterian denomination, the answer is “yes.” As it reads in G-1.0302 in our Book of Order (currently being studied by our new elders), “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of all persons” And in G-1.0305, “we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which persons of good character may differ.”

Am I or the Book of Order saying “anything goes?” Y’all, we’re Presbyterian; you know better than that.

But perhaps our own church's identity statement says it best: "Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, we invite you to travel along with us." Although we define ourselves as a Christian, Presbyterian church, we acknowledge the omnipresence of ambiguity, diversity, pluralism, and downright disbelief both outside *and* inside our communion. And although we don't profess to have all the answers, we believe that questions of faith are worth exploring together, in community. As a communion of seekers, we not only tolerate but welcome doubt, debate, questioning, and any other form of authentic wrestling with faith.

So what, you might ask, holds us together as a body of Christ? Some might say habit, convenience, duty, long-standing relationships. Others, our love *of* God and *for* one another. Some experience personally the all-embracing arms of Christ Jesus. Others prefer a more arms-length relationship with a revivifying Holy Spirit. And still others haven't quite decided yet just *what* it is about this church that's so compelling. If you're not quite sure yourself, you'll just have to stick around and see.

20<sup>th</sup> century British scholar and novelist C.S. Lewis remarked that "faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods." But I wonder sometimes if faith isn't more the art of allowing God to be bigger than any of us imagine. Is doubt just a mood? Does it diminish faith or is it an essential and enlivening purifier to human certainty, religious or otherwise? Or ask yourself this: which finally requires more trust, more courage, more humility - to surrender to certitude or to mystery?

Let me close with a story from the field of archeology. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a universally accepted tenet of archaeology is that the first Americans, known as the "Clovis People," trekked across a narrow isthmus of land from Siberia to Alaska

around 11,500 years ago and then spread throughout the Americas. In North America, their descendents developed a distinctive type of fluted stone projectile points that became known as “Clovis points.”

Regarding the Clovis culture, most archeologists adopted a set of intellectual blinders that became known as the “Clovis wall,” before which any alternative theories about earlier settlements were summarily dismissed. The first inhabitants of the Americas were the Clovis Culture and that was that!

But recently, archeologists digging along the Savannah River near a prehistoric rock quarry in Allendale County, S.C. were astonished to discover artifacts buried so deep they must be 12,000 years old or more! Said Smithsonian Institution anthropologist Dennis Stanford, “until recently, no one would have accepted the idea of artifacts this old. Until this evidence, I simply didn’t believe it could be there.”

As this crack in the Clovis theory spread, archaeologists have been returning to previously excavated sites to dig a little deeper. “The problem is, says Stanford, **“if you never look for what you believe won’t be there, you’ll never find it.”**

As we conclude our worship together this morning and move out into the complexities, ambiguities and challenges of our lives, may we all hazard a return to sites of old doubt and questions, in order to dig a little deeper. It might get messy, but as Stanford says, if you never look for what you believe won’t be there, you’ll never find it.

For this we pray to God, “Lord we believe; help thou our unbelief.”

To the glory of God. Amen.