

# “Starting with Doubt and Ending with Faith”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief’”  
(Mark 9:24).**

There is an article in this week’s *New Yorker Magazine* by Jim Holt entitled “Unstrung.” It deals with what is called in Physics “the String Theory.” It is a notion that is being promoted by a number of scientists who believe that the smallest constituents in matter are not particles such as “atoms,” but rather “strings”-- strands of energy which vibrate in certain ways and produce matter in the same fashion that violin strings vibrate to produce music. If the so-called “String Theory” holds, it will be--like Einstein’s theory of relativity and Quantum Physics--one of the most revolutionary theories of the past hundred years.

One of the interesting observations about the proponents of the “String Theory” is that they are people who are willing to look at the universe in new ways. Or, put another way, they have the capacity to doubt.

## I.

In the vocabulary of religion the word “doubt” has always had a bad stigma. Often, we preach about faith. Jesus said to a woman who touched his garment, “Your faith has made you well.” The writer of Hebrews assures us that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence of things not seen.” And the author of I John affirms that “faith is the victory that overcomes the world.”

But what about doubt? Is there any place in the language of faith for “doubt?” In Mark’s gospel there is a remarkable healing story that raises this issue. Mark tells us that immediately following the experience of Jesus, James, and John on the mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus encountered a hard situation. A father had brought his epileptic son to the disciples of Jesus to be healed. But the disciples were not able to heal this boy. So when Jesus arrived at the scene, he found a great deal of chaos present. The crowd was angry with the disciples because they could not heal the boy. The disciples were confused because they could not cast out the demon that was present in this boy.

Finally, the father of the boy turned to Jesus in desperation and said, “If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus replied, “If you can. All things are possible to him who believes.” At that point the father of the boy cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief.” Thus we confront the issue of faith and doubt.

## II.

One of the things that needs to be said is to affirm the importance of “doubt” in the life of a Christian believer. The capacity to doubt is one of the noblest powers that God has given to us. To be sure, it can be misused and abused. But the power to think critically is one of the most important gifts that any of us can have.

Certainly, this is true in science. In the Sixteenth Century people believed that the earth was flat and that the sun rose every day and set every evening. But Copernicus began to question this. Through the study of physics and through his observations with telescopes he advanced the theory that the earth revolved around the sun and not the sun around the earth. One of Copernicus’ contemporaries was the great Reformer Martin Luther. Luther vehemently denied the Copernican Theory. Luther believed that Copernicus was a terrible scientist and made fun of what Luther thought was a ridiculous notion. Luther, however, was wrong and Copernicus was right. It is a powerful reminder to us of the tenuous relationship between science and religion.

But it is not only true of science. It is true in religion as well. Jesus was a magnificent doubter. He had the capacity to call into question many of the rigidly held beliefs of his own day. Most people believed that the Jewish Messiah would be a military leader who would rid the Jews of the hated Roman rule. Jesus challenged that view. The Law of Moses dictated that people were to return “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus repudiated that. In fact, he went so far as to teach that we are called to love our enemies and to go a second mile with those who ask us to go one mile.

To be sure, we ought to praise those great believers who have held fast to the faith. But we also ought to give thanks for those who had the courage and strength to challenge popular ideas that were totally wrong.

### III.

There is another dimension to the tension between faith and doubt and it is that most often the strongest faith comes from those who have come face to face with doubt. There are only two ways that people come to the Christian faith. One is to inherit it, borrow it, and swallow it without question. There are many people who do this, but this is not how real faith is fashioned. Real faith comes when people wrestle with doubt, disappointment, rejection, and the dark night of the soul. Anyone who does not understand this does not understand the Bible. It is a book of faith, we say. To be sure it is. But it is also a powerful witness to men and women who wrestled with their doubts and unbelief.

Listen to Gideon, one of the ancient judges of Israel crying, "If the Lord is with us, then why has all this befallen us?"

Listen to the Psalmist:

"My tears have been my food day and night,  
While they continually say to me,  
Where is your God?"

Listen to Job complaining to God: "I cry unto you and you do not listen to me" or hear the prophet Jeremiah calling God "a deceitful brook" and "waters that fail."

Or listen to the words of Christ on a cross, crying, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

This morning I am speaking to someone who is struggling with his or her doubts. The Bible is not your enemy. It is your friend. All of its faith was hammered out on the anvil of doubt.

Many of us know about the faith of some of the great believers of the church. We may not know as well some of their great struggles. John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer, was a man of faith and courage, but remember as well the time he wrote that his soul knew anger, wrath, and indignation, which it conceived against God to call all his promises in doubt." Most of us know about the faith of Martin Luther, who wrote the great hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." But we might not be as familiar with the same Luther who wrote in his diary, "For more than a week Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy against God."

The noblest faith of the church has come out of that struggle. No one really possesses the Christian faith until he or she has fought for it.

So how does faith overcome doubt?

#### IV.

To be sure, many people struggle with what it means to believe in God and Christ. Often the objections seem so powerful. There is so much tragedy, so much suffering in the world. How is it possible, people ask, to believe in a loving God when there is so much injustice and senseless killings.

This past spring, when I visited my daughter Lucy in Washington, D.C, I visited again the great Lincoln Memorial there on the Washington Mall. As I read on the carved stone the immortal words of the Gettysburg Address, I was moved by the sheer power of these words to energize and move our nation past a bitter Civil War.

Most of the people who were present at Gettysburg on that November day in 1863 were not impressed by the President's remarks. After all, he was not the featured speaker. To many his remarks were an afterthought. A newspaper editor in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, thirty-five miles away heard Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. He wrote in his paper: "We pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation we are willing that the veil of oblivion be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of."

Here was a man who stood in the presence of greatness and disbelieved. It was he, not Lincoln, who was blind and now the years have proved this editor terribly wrong.

The older I grow I ponder Judas Iscariot. He came so near to not betraying Jesus. He was a loyal disciple. Jesus trusted Judas with the money of this band of disciples. It took courage to do what Judas did, but something happened along the way to Judas. He began to doubt. What kind of messiah, he wondered, is this man who will not stand up against the Romans? What kind of man is this, pondered Judas, that teaches people to love and not to hate their enemies. So the doubts grew, and Judas betrayed his master. He came so close to not doing what he did, so that after he had betrayed Jesus, he hanged himself in shame. If only he had not doubted.

This morning I have spoken about the power of doubt and critical thinking, and certainly we need it today. But how much more do we need people of faith, who have moved from doubt to faith--faith in the possibility of the Christian Church and its saving gospel, faith in what God can do in us and through us, faith in the witness for Christ in the heart of Charlotte.

That is faith. May we all doubt our doubts until we get it!

Amen