
Reasonable Doubt
The Reverend Wesley Barry

Primary Scripture: John 20:19-29

Secondary Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

Subject: Doubt

Date: May 5, 2010

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of serving on jury duty. My roommate from college, now a lawyer, had promised me that as a minister there would be no chance that I would serve; something about us being too opinionated. Alas, he was wrong, and I got to serve on a small trial for two days.

I actually found the experience fascinating. It was like a social experiment to watch group dynamics as twelve people argued in a room.

In the end, we swirled around the question of “Reasonable Doubt” and what that means.

Just before we left the courtroom, the judge read us this instruction, which I found fascinating and thought that it could be applicable to our faith journey as well. In the courtroom, the judge said: “The State does not have to prove beyond all possible doubt, nor to prove to a mathematical certainty. When we say a reasonable doubt, we are not talking about a capricious, whimsical or fanciful doubt, but just use your common sense, founded upon a good, sound, sensible reason.”¹

That is the question I want to us to consider today. What is reasonable doubt in our faith life?

1.

The reading I shared from John’s gospel is often referred to as the doubting Thomas passage. So, the question is, was Thomas’ doubt reasonable?

Now doubt is not a hindrance to faith. It is actually something that can cause our faith explorations to grow and to deepen. In fact, we are told at the end of Matthew’s Gospel during the great commissioning (Matthew 28:16-20) that the disciples worshipped Jesus, but that some doubted. Just before Jesus sends them out into the world to be the church, they still had doubts. So worship and faith can coexist with doubt. However, looking at this passage about Thomas, it makes one wonder if Thomas doubt was reasonable.

Thomas had been given this adjective because of his demand that “Unless I see the mark of the nails in Christ’s hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my

¹ This is not the exact reading given to us by the Mecklenburg County Judge, rather this was accessed on May 5, 2010 at <<http://bulk.resource.org/courts.gov/c/F3/58/58.F3d.1541.94-6573.html>>.

hand in his side, I will not believe.” He wanted forensic evidence before he would believe.

Just before this passage, we are told that the other disciples were able to see the resurrected Jesus. Jesus showed them his hands and his sides. They were able to visibly witness, firsthand, that Jesus Christ—the one who had been crucified and pierced in the side—was alive and walking around.

So it certainly was reasonable that Thomas would want that same experience, to be given the same privilege as the other disciples who got to see the nail scarred hands of Jesus. To hear that his friends had this experience, it seems reasonable that he too would need that.

How could he be expected to give up his livelihood, to possibly give up his family, to face persecution, to join up with this new movement of people who were calling themselves the Way and later identified as Christ Followers, if he did not get the firsthand, direct evidence the other disciples had witnessed?

Notice, however, that his stipulation is slightly greater than his friends. In John 20:20 it says that the other disciples were shown Jesus’ hands and sides. Thomas’s statement is that he must touch the physical body of Jesus otherwise “I will not believe.”

Imagine that the 10 disciples have returned from their encounter with the rising Lord, and are telling Thomas what they got to see. Thomas, maybe with a twinge of jealousy wants to one-up them, or maybe he is the central negative, the cynic one in the group who is thinking they probably just saw a ghost, or he views himself as the most intelligent, most rational of the group and he will need physical proof before he can believe. He is setting himself apart from the rest of them, making a special demand for himself.

For Thomas, to merely view the wounds is not sufficient, what was reasonable proof for the other 10 disciples will not work for Thomas. This, I believe is where Thomas starts to take his demands beyond the level of reasonable doubt. He is seeking absolute proof, without the slightest hint of doubt.

2.

It is in this context that the resurrected Jesus appears once again to Thomas and the disciples. He appears among them in a locked room. How does he do this, we don’t know?

What we do know is that the disciples have locked themselves away, out of fear or doubt or uncertainty, they have secluded themselves from the world.

It says that this happened on the first day of the week, Sunday, the Lord’s Day. When they should be gathering to publicly worship Christ, they are hiding themselves out of fear. They have secluded themselves from the world. For Thomas, he not only has physically secluded himself but also in a sense he has barricade his heart from believing the Good News that Jesus Christ is Alive. Thomas and the disciples have refused to engage the world, refused to share the news of Christ with their peers.

Amazingly and graciously Jesus Christ comes to them and to Thomas specifically and says to him “put your finger here and see my hands, reach out your hand and put it in my side.” Mercifully, Jesus humbles himself and invites Thomas to touch the wounds. Jesus knows the barrier that Thomas has built in his heart, the demands that he has placed in order to believe. And Jesus is willing to meet that burden of proof.

Having told Thomas to touch his wounds, then Jesus says, “Do not doubt but believe.”

This line is where we get the adjective for Doubting Thomas, yet this really is not what Jesus is telling Thomas. Jesus is not chastising him for his doubt and his uncertainty.

Remember at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, even while they are being sent off to serve God, some of the disciples doubted, yet they went anyway. So Jesus is not chastising Thomas for his doubts rather it is because Thomas had been establishing different levels of proofs, these hurdles that he was making God clear in order that Thomas would believe and put his faith in action.

The Greek word translated as doubt, is not the one used in Matthew’s Gospel, rather it is the same word that Jesus uses throughout the Gospels to describe the Pharisees. Every other time it is translated it is used as “Faithless.” Jesus frequently calls the Pharisees “The Faithless and Perverse Generation.” Unlike the term used at the Great Commissioning that does mean doubt, this word is the opposite of “Faith.” What we lose in our English translation is that Jesus is really saying “Do not be faithless but faithful.”

What he is telling Thomas is do not be like the Pharisees. The Pharisees were always wanting more and more proof. That after turning water to wine, or calming a storm, or healing a sick woman, or helping a paralyzed man walk, the Pharisees were always demanding more and more evidence that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. They were never satisfied. Their reasonable doubts had turned into unreasonable absolute demands.

3.

Are we not similar in our own faith life? Trying to stall God’s call on our lives by putting up barriers? Figuring until we have all the answers, we cannot invite a friend to worship, or lead a Bible study, or challenge our culture’s emphasis on power and money. And so we make “If...then...” deals with God. “God if you do this, then I will do x...” If you give me a family, then I will come to church. If you give me a healthy child, then I will have time to serve you. If you give me job stability, then I will tithe.

We continue to create barriers between us and God, between us living out our faith.

This is what Jesus chastises in Thomas, and says rather strongly, “do not be faithless but faithful. For blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

John’s Gospel is actually vague as to whether Thomas got to touch Jesus’s wounds. Perhaps, this admonition by Jesus was sufficient, or perhaps he did accept Christ’s offer. Either way scripture reports that only a handful of disciples, and a few close followers of Christ got to visibly see the wounds. Yet within a few short weeks, these few men and women would be moving from Jerusalem, to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the Earth reporting the amazing news that Jesus Christ was crucified and buried, but that he conquered death and was bodily resurrected.

This message and promise of eternal life has started from an unlikely band of 12 has grown into the biggest movement in human history, and has come for each of us. For

we are blessed that we have come to believe, to have faith, even though we have not been able to see the wounds of Christ visibly.

Therefore, let us not set up the barriers and demand more proof from God, but boldly live our faith

Before we went off to deliberate, the judge read us that definition of reasonable doubt. We do not have to prove beyond all possible doubt, nor to prove to a mathematical certainty. When we say a reasonable doubt, we are not talking about a capricious, whimsical or fanciful doubt, but just use your common sense, founded upon a good, sound, sensible reason. As we have seen in the disciples, a level of doubt and uncertainty should be expected in our faith, but we should not become like the Pharisees who were never satisfied. Instead, we should be like the disciples, who while still having doubts heeded God's call to go into the world living out the good news of Jesus Christ.

What is amazing is that mercifully, and graciously, Jesus Christ is willing to come stand before us and allow us to touch and to see his nail scarred hands and feet. For he invites each one of us to come, and taste, touch, and see that he is good.