

Annoying Skepticism

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John 20:19-31

“Do not doubt but believe.”

Movement 1 – Faith Issues

We all practice acts of faith. We all practice believing, accepting, and hoping. We all practice acts of faith. For example, we practice an act of faith when we plan our lives around a weather report, hoping that it will be mostly accurate. When we participate in the mayhem of the stock market, or by even participating in our economy, we are performing an exercise of faith that we will end up with more money than which we started, that the market will not fluctuate too much, or that it will not crash. If we trust a broker with our money, if we invest in any fund or account, we are placing a certain amount of faith in our broker, fund or account that our blessings will increase – monetarily of course. I believe that computers have strengthened the faith of humanity. Every day you turn on a computer, it is an act of faith that the computer will in fact turn on, will not crash, will not be suffering a virus, or is not inflicted with any other malfeasance or abnormality. It is an act of faith that the computer will not eat your paper, that your project will work, and that your presentation will go smoothly. We all practice acts of faith.

The fantastic and overly referenced movie *The Matrix* is focused and fixed on the idea of faith. A premise of the movie is that humanity has blindly accepted the belief that what we see is real (remember last week’s message). We believe we are all living in this world, that we are all autonomous individuals, when in actuality we are living years in the future, we are used as energy for machines, and we are only fed images into our mind of what we see. It is a fanciful consideration and exercise of Descartes’ philosophies, specifically the “mind in a vat” idea; how do we know that anything is real? In *The Matrix*, humanity believes that the world is real, and the main characters need to unlearn that faith and believe that things are in fact not what they seem to be in order to survive. They have to practice an act of faith.

Every day we practice acts of faith, we trust, we hope, and we believe. William James wrote that “faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is theoretically possible.” It is possible that the computer may erupt into flames; it is theoretically possible that the stock market may crash tomorrow, and it is theoretically possible that the meteorologist may be wrong, even if he is wearing a bowtie. Yet we suspend the doubts and we believe. We practice acts of faith.

Movement 2 – The Annoying Skeptics

There are those who like to practice unbelief. There are those who like to question, there are those who like to doubt and find holes in those things which everyone else just accepts. There are those who like to practice their skepticism, they like to dig a little deeper, they like to push the envelope, and at the same time keep people grounded in reality; even when it becomes annoying. There are those who like to practice unbelief.

In 1895 Lord Kelvin, a British mathematician and physicist said, “Heaver-than-air flying machines are impossible.” In 1943 Thomas Watson, the chairman of IBM said, “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.” These are skeptics who saw a trend and doubted that it would amount to anything. These are people who liked to practice unbelief, and not dream but keep to reality. We can look back with our historical hindsight and laugh at their obviously

wrongheaded doubts, but their past doubts should awaken us to the many today who still doubt in our world; there are many who live with skepticism.

Maybe you know some of these individuals. Maybe you know someone in a high school or college class who was the skeptic. Maybe you remember someone in a class who liked to question everything that the professor said. This student will not take the words and the ideas of the professor as the truth, but must always doubt, must always find reasons to question and challenge the ideas of the lecturer.

Maybe you know that overly cautious consumer who looks a little more closely at the product on the shelf, the fruit in the stand, the offer on the table, not believing that only what he or she can see is true. This is the consumer who looks for the flaw, the problem, and the fault in the product. The individual who you never want to go shopping with because he or she will always challenge the price of the product, will challenge the quality of the product, and will more often than not be asked to leave.

Maybe you know that person who watches a magic show not to enjoy the mystery of the performance, but instead to find out how everything is done and in what way it was done. This is a person who tries to solve every imaginable trick that he or she sees and is always whispering audibly during the show "I know how that is done." This is an annoying skeptic.

There are the conspiracy theory individuals who question everything. Like Bill Gribble the paranoid neighbor on *King of the Hill*, or Dan Aykroyd's character "Mother" in the early 90s movie *Sneakers*, an individual who lives, breaths and believes in all conspiracy theories, including the idea that the moon landing was staged, and that Kennedy was shot, but is still alive. There is a comic book character known as *The Question* who doubts and questions everything. He believes that everything is connected and that nothing is what it seems. While these kinds of characters are amusing plot devices and occasional comic relief in television shows and movies, in real life they can be annoying. It is annoying to have everything about you endure a question and a level of disbelief. It is annoying to have everything in your life challenged. The high degree and constant skepticism is annoying.

I wonder if Thomas was a skeptic all of his life. I wonder if Thomas was someone who questioned everything, who challenged everything and who hesitated to follow and believe what he saw and heard. Maybe it was his skepticism that led his doubt and his unbelief when he heard from the other disciples that they had seen Jesus. Maybe Thomas remembers hearing from other fanatical groups rumors of resurrections and returned messiahs. Maybe Thomas heard of the body missing, of a tomb opened up and wondered if it was just a part of a vast conspiracy to continue to push the idea of Jesus as the Messiah. It isn't that unconceivable that the followers of Jesus could be paid off or duped into believing that Jesus had returned. It isn't that unconceivable that the followers have conspired to say they had seen Jesus in order to convince others to believe and to keep the movement alive.

The whole story was hard to believe. It wasn't just that the disciples saw Jesus, it was also what Jesus did, and his actions that made the scenario seem so fantastic. The disciples claimed to have not just seen Jesus, but to have received the Holy Spirit. They claimed that Jesus breathed on them in the same way that God breathed life into humanity (Genesis 2:7). Could one truly believe that Jesus was reclaiming and making things new in the way that God created in the beginning of time?

The disciples claimed that Jesus offered peace to a community that was in turmoil. They claimed that Jesus offered assurance to a gathering of people who were hiding behind closed and locked doors, fearing for their own lives. Is such a peace believable to a community that was on

the edge of oppression and persecution? Could peace be granted by the very one who suffered and died a violent death by the same ones that the disciples feared?

The disciples claimed that Jesus gave them the authority to forgive and retain sins. They claimed that this community, this gathering of followers was now a place that could offer grace; it was a place of peace, and a new creation. Can all of this be believed? Just seeing Jesus was enough. Just trying to believe that Jesus did rise from the dead was beyond the realm of comprehension for Thomas. Yet Thomas is told that the followers are transformed as well. Thomas is told that Jesus is making all things new. Maybe you can understand why Thomas would look at the other disciples with skepticism, protecting his own sense of sanity. Perhaps skepticism was the most prudent path to take, especially if he wanted to survive. Thomas decided to be steadfast, stubborn and annoying in his skepticism, setting the bar high and assuming that the disciples would fail in proving him wrong.

We face these skeptics in our own lives, in our faith, and even in ourselves. It is enough to take a moment, to suspend our doubts and to try to believe a supreme being that we call God. It is enough to go the next step and believe in Christ as God incarnate, and in his resurrection. It is enough to believe that God is always with us through the Holy Spirit. Even now, I wonder if doubts at time sneak into the corners of your faith. Even now I wonder if you have found yourself questioning and doubting from time to time. Perhaps it is enough to hold in our faith. Yet we are asked to go one more step, and to believe that Christ brings peace to us, to the community of believers trying to understand what to do and how to live after the resurrection. We are asked to believe that we are made new and that our community, our fellowship is made new through Christ. We are a community that has a history of excluding others that has a history of hurting others that has a history of doubting others, fighting, distrusting, and sometimes even being mean to others. Can we truly receive peace? Can we truly be a community that forgives the sins of others? Can we be a community that practices this forgiveness? Can this community truly be made new? When we think of how churches have acted, how they are very real, human institutions, perhaps the skepticism grows and we wonder and doubt the actions of Christ. We act with skepticism when we hedge our faith in each other and in Christ. We perform acts of skepticism when we try to be realistic and cautious with our planning with our ministry and with our resources. Ask us to take a leap of faith that could be dangerous and maybe we can find ourselves siding with Thomas, demanding a true sign of faith, demanding a reality that we can touch, rest upon and embrace before we truly believe. Maybe the skepticism of Thomas rubs off and we find ourselves doubting and questioning and wondering.

The world is full of those who question, doubt and disbelieve. These are the loud voices, the alarm clocks in our lives, waking us up from our dreams and bringing us back to reality. The world is full annoying skepticism and we often trade in its commodity and follow its practices. There are many who live practicing unbelief, and many times we can relate.

Movement 3 – Annoying Believers

There are also those who blindly follow any faith they can find. There are those who just believe, no matter how amazing, no matter how fantastic, and no matter how unbelievable. This is the person who has such a faith in humanity that no one can ever be wrong or tell a lie. This is the person who has such a faith in life that everything seen must be true and real. There are those who blindly follow and who blindly believe.

Think of how life might be for a person who blindly follows and believes. Every time the phone rings with a marketer the person would accept the offer. Can you imagine how many

times he or she would refinance, would subscribe for a newspaper, or would go on a cruise? No matter what is offered, it would be believed.

This is a person who would blindly follow any charismatic leader that came along. From joining a movement to saving the whales, to following someone who hopes to give every puppy a sweater, to someone who runs a cult, if the leader has that appeal, then the person would simply follow.

Think of Pinocchio as an example. He was someone who would believe anything that he heard. When he was on his way to school, he was led astray by J. Worthington Fowlfellow, and then captured by Stromboli, and then lured to “Pleasure Island,” believing the deceptions and the guile and the lies of the villains of the movie. He was someone who believed everything that he saw and that he heard, and it led him into trouble.

Maybe you know people like this, or you can imagine these “yes” folks of faith. Just say the word and we will believe. Just tell us where to sign and we will. Nietzsche characterized most Christians in this way; as a herd of people looking to be led, blindly accepting whatever we are told. Perhaps this is the kind of faith that we are to aspire to embrace – a blind, never doubting, never questioning kind of faith. Perhaps we are to just leave our minds at the door, just leave our reason at the door and eat whatever doctrines are put on our plate and shoved down our throats. Maybe Thomas viewed the rest of the disciples in this light, as a bunch of blindly believing buffoons accepting what they had been told no matter how unbelievable and not questioning even in the slightest degree.

We can imagine those who blindly believe. Maybe we know those who blindly believe and follow any faith they can find.

Movement 4 – The Dissonance of Stances

We can find ourselves stuck in-between the two stances. We find ourselves at a crossroad of faith, with two paths to walk and neither road seems favorable. We don’t want to walk the road of skepticism and doubt, because then we do not leave any room for that faith which calls us to suspend our doubt and reason. Nor do we want to walk the road of blind belief fearing that we can be misled, lied to and taken advantage of and hurt. It feels like we are at a place of dissonance between reason and experience. It is like looking at a plate full of good food, a juicy stake, an ice cream Sunday, or any other tasty treat that might tempt you. You stare at it, and you know that it isn’t anything that you might need. You know that you really should just keep on walking and not partake of the joys before you. Your mind says, “No,” because you know the repercussions for indulging in such a delight. Yet on the other hand, it would taste so good, it would be so delightful to taste and enjoy the delicacy before you. It would be a slice of heaven. There is a dissonance between your heart and your head. There is a conflict.

It is like buying a lottery ticket or any other form of gambling (which I do not recommend, but if you do, and if you win, remember to tithe). Maybe as you buy the ticket, you know that the odds are against you. Maybe you know that there is a slim chance you can win, and your money is better spent elsewhere. Yet on the other hand, you want to believe that you might win. You want to believe that this might be the winning ticket, this might be the roll of the dice, and the roulette table may favor you today. You want to suspend your skepticism and believe.

It is a tension, it is a dissonance within ourselves that we wrestle and struggle with. It is like there are cracks in the foundation of our faith; our doubts and our questions are threatening to take away our belief. Or, on the other hand, it could be seen as cracks in our foundation of our

rationalism. Our desire for something more, for something greater than what we see and what we are go beyond our belief. The atheist praying in the foxhole crumbles all that we know and understand as rational and reasonable.

Maybe this is Thomas' dilemma. He had walked with Jesus as one of the original twelve. He had seen so many things that he never thought he could see. His belief and his faith had grown and grown despite what he thought was reasonable and rational. Yet the crucifixion brought him back to earth. Christ's death put on the brakes of the wild ride of faith with a harsh and jarring stop. He hears about Christ's resurrection, but can he commit again to believing after being so profoundly disappointed? Can he again suspend his reason and believe, or will he take the safer road and rest in what he can see and believe?

One of our greatest theologians, Augustine of Hippo, faced a similar tension before his conversion to Christianity. He had been studying the Bible, he knew about Christ, but something held him back. Something kept him from fully accepting Christ as savior, and fully believing. In his book of his confessions Augustine described the tension as a debate. "This debate in my heart was a struggle of myself against myself." He could not suspend his reason in order to embrace faith. Yet he could not abandon faith which he so greatly desired to attain.

Do you question and yet believe? Do you wonder if there is room for doubt and if there is room for faith. Do you wonder if you can be rational and at the same time believe? Which road do you walk? What path do you take? We are in-between two stances of belief and of skepticism and are stuck between the two.

Movement 5 – Leaping off of a Foundation of Doubt

There is room in our faith for skepticism. There is room for questions, for wondering and even for doubt. There is room in our faith for a healthy, guiding and growing skepticism.

Think of the way you would raise a child. You give your child boundaries, guidelines, and direction. You try to guide your child, and reign in your child when he or she goes to far. The doubts and questions in your life can act the same way to your faith. Your skepticism can guide your beliefs, give your faith boundaries, and at times reign in your faith when there is a danger of being lead astray.

Think of reading the Bible, what we ascribe to be the Word of the Lord. We can take the Bible at face value. We can blindly follow and believe the scriptures no matter where they lead us. Yet the Bible is a book of complexity, a book of depth and of wisdom. Our questions can push us to embrace a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the Holy Scriptures. Our questions can push us to have a greater understanding of the Word.

Think of your interaction with the church. You can blindly accept the practices and the traditions the church. You can close your eyes and just follow along no matter what. Or you can ask, "Why," you can challenge, and you can push the church to continue to grow and change.

There is room in our faith for skepticism.

The Baptist movement emerges from questions and doubt. The movement came out of a group of people who read scripture with a seriousness that challenged the practices of the church. They read about baptism, and questioned if the church was actually staying true to the intent of the early church that began in Acts. They considered infant baptism and wondered if there was still room for an individual to make the proclamation of faith that seemed so essential for one's journey with Christ. John Smyth, one of the first Baptists felt that the succession of baptisms needed to be connected in a pure way. He questioned the baptism of the Anglicans, the church from which he emerged. He questioned other's baptism and decided to start fresh and baptized

himself. Later he still questioned that, and continued to push his own understanding of church. Questioning is a foundation of the Baptist movement. The early Baptists had a healthy amount of doubt and skepticism that pushed their understanding of baptism, of how to be a church and their relationship with God.

Augustine's faith was driven by a question; he constantly asked, "what do I love when I love my God." It was a question that focused on his relationship with God and that pushed his relationship with God, skeptical of anything that seemed to be faulty and weak. His faith was lead by his questions.

There is room in our faith for our questions. Like aerating a lawn, our questions make space for our faith to breathe and to grow. When we question the church, we push the church to new levels. When we question each other, with charity and humility we push each other. When we question ourselves, we push ourselves. So perhaps there is room for Thomas' skepticism. Perhaps there is room for the unbelief, challenging us and pushing us to grow and develop in our faith.

Movement 6 – The Ultimate Proclamation (very Baptist)

And with our skepticism we can proclaim our faith. With our doubt guiding and leading us, we can proclaim our belief. There will be that moment when we are called to suspend reason, when we are moved to suspend rational and we proclaim our faith. Our doubts, our questions and our skepticism can lay the foundation for our proclamation.

It is that moment when you decide to throw reason to the side, when you decide to stop questioning for a moment and take the leap into the unknown; you take the leap into faith. You have let your questions guide you, focus your thoughts and bring you to the edge, and then, as Bonaventure suggests in his work *Journey of the Mind to God*, you suspend you reason, your knowledge and you leap into the unknown.

It is that moment when you pick up the scriptures and decide to embrace them as the place where the Word of God is revealed. You know about the complexities, you know about all of the challenges, but you decide to embrace the Bible as the authoritative guiding source of your faith despite all of your other questions.

When you give money to the church you are making an act of faith. You are saying with your contributions that you believe God will use your gifts for good and for glory. You are saying that you trust that God will still take care of you and provide for you. You are saying that what you have isn't yours to begin with, but ultimately comes from God. You are making a leap of faith.

This is what Kierkegaard calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." The ethical thing would be to save your money for your family, it would be to use a number of books to guide the morals of your life, and it would be to continue to search for answers. But we put our eyes on the Lord as the Alpha and the Omega of all of our actions, and that vision leads this suspension of the ethical. Trusting in God we let go of our doubts, we read the Bible differently than other books, and we give ourselves to the Lord. We suspend our questions and make a leap of faith.

Thomas makes this leap in the scriptures. He holds onto his doubt and his disbelief. But from that place of disbelief, Jesus approaches him and brings him in, pulling Thomas into his wounds. Jesus pulls Thomas into his life, and it is from a place of skepticism moving into a place of belief that Thomas can proclaim the Christological climax of the entire book of John. "My

Lord and my God.” This is the pinnacle of proclamations of Christ and if comes from the one who doubted. It comes from the one who wouldn’t believe.

My brothers and sisters, I am calling you to move to that place where you can make the same proclamation. I am not calling you to ascribe to any creed. I am not calling you to ascribe to any doctrines, just that Christ is your Lord and your God. When you are baptized in this church (and in most other Baptist churches) we only ask one question, “Do you believe in Christ as your Lord and Savior?” In essence, we are asking if you can make that same proclamation that Thomas made. Can you find yourself pulled into the life of Christ, pulled into the wounds of Christ crying out, “my Lord and my God?”

This isn’t something we just believe, but something we grow into with our belief. We walk, we question, and we doubt until the profound truth of Christ overpowers even our greatest fears. We walk until we find ourselves standing on our mountain of questions, and then jumping off we shout, “My Lord and my God.”

Come to that place in your faith. Suspend your doubts and believe that Christ can give us peace that Christ calls us as a community, and that Christ is your Lord and your God. Let your questions thrive and let your faith fly.

AMEN