

## **Doubting Thomas    April 23, 2017**

How would you define SKEPTIC? Wikipedia defines it as - 'a person inclined to question or doubt all accepted opinions. A cynic. A doubter'. I am wondering if you would refer to yourself as a 'sceptic'. Is that you? Are you inclined to question or doubt? Would others describe you as a skeptic? Is that a positive thing....or negative?

I looked for a good antonym for SKEPTIC....what is the opposite of being a skeptic? All I could find were the words –believer and gullible. I'm not sure those are good opposites.

Writing in the National Post, Joseph Brean on the topic of skepticism and doubt as it relates to our faith writes - "Skepticism has repeatedly shown its value as an intellectual tool, even for believers. Rather than an obstacle, doubt has been recast as, if not exactly a virtue, at least a stepping stone to faith. The stigma of doubt is weakening...."

I want you to think about you and your faith. Do you embrace skepticism and doubt, or are you ashamed that from time to time,

particularly on some faith topics, doubt sneaks in? Did Noah really build an ark? Did the animals get on board 2 x 2? Was Jonah really in the belly of a whale for 3 days until he was spit up on a nice sandy beach? Was Lazarus truly dead? Did Jesus really rise from the dead in human form? Is there anything about the Bible, or your faith that you are skeptical about or that you doubt....even a bit....or are you rock solid on everything that is part of the Bible and part of your faith?

At one point in our history, sceptics were scorned. They were immensely disliked and suspected of stupidity or ulterior motives. Today, sceptics are generally considered essential in the sifting out process, to get to the viability, and eventually the truth.

The first time I saw it, I was surprised. Reading through the PCC Statement of Belief called Living Faith, I came upon a section called Faith. It was immediately followed by a section called Doubt! Shocking! Is doubt not the dirty little secret of people of faith? I believe. I love God. I love Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. I am a

person of faith. I have no room for doubt.....and I sure would not want you to know about it,....that is, if I did doubt!

But there it is, in a document put together by men and women of faith, Biblical scholars, theologians, good Christians....section 6.2 Doubt!!

The opening line is shocking....how dare we good and faithful people admit this, "We are not always certain that God is with us." And it doesn't stop there..... "At times God calls us to live in this world without experiencing the divine presence...."

"At other times God seems absent....."

And then, how dare we..... "Questioning may be a sign of growth".

Really, we are encouraged to question – to challenge?

Comforting near the end, Living faith says, "The church includes many who struggle with doubt. Jesus accepted the man who prayed: "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

And yet, every Easter, after we have visited the empty tomb, we gather round to point and hiss at that other terrible disciple..... a real skeptic - Thomas. We call him Doubting Thomas, and it is not a term of endearment.

The traditional moral, according to Joseph Brean in the Post, is that Thomas had the wrong reaction. He was a man of faith. He was a follower of Christ. He should not have needed proof. Faith is a virtue precisely for this reason. Thomas was the odd one out – a skeptic and a doubter.

But remember...Scripture is clear that when Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples behind locked doors, Thomas was not with them. John tells us that the moment had come and gone. It was not by seeing with his own eyes, it was by word of mouth that Thomas heard the incredulous news. The other disciples, who were there in that locked room and saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears, they told Thomas what he had missed.....that they had seen the Lord! He

had risen indeed! But how could this be? Thomas had just seen him brutally killed on a cross. He had just seen him dead and buried. And now he is hearing this story.....He is alive....he came to see us!!

Well of course we all want to distance ourselves from Thomas. We all want to claim that we would have heard the story told to us by the other disciples and immediately believed it was true. We are people of strong faith. We would never imagine that perhaps our friends were trying to pull some sort of cruel, distasteful prank. Certainly we would have had more faith than that pathetic Thomas. Certainly, you and I, so unlike Thomas, we would not have needed to see and hear for ourselves. We are better than him!

It is 2017. Skepticism has repeatedly shown its value as an intellectual tool, even for people of faith. Rather than an obstacle, doubt has been recast as a stepping stone to faith. The stigma of doubt is weakening and as it does, Thomas is slowly becoming, centuries later - redeemed.

Joseph Brean concludes – “Doubt is a key part of the modern Canadian experience of faith...”

We are shy about acknowledging our doubt. We are reluctant to talk about it with each other. But we need not be. Doubt can be a very good and healthy ingredient in conversation, in relationships, and in our faith..

Those of you who are parents of children who are 20 and beyond.....do you recall that period when your children went from asking your permission to simply informing you of what they were going to do, or where they were going to go? During that period of uncomfortable transition, they were also going through a time of spiritual independence. Many of us did not even consider that and we did not engage them in conversation addressing their spiritual journey. Most of them began to reject the stories they had learned in Sunday School and the only thing that filled that gap was doubt. We didn't engage them in conversations about, well if God is not a grandfather, with a

long white beard and massive head of wild hair, sitting up among the clouds in a chair fitting his status, then who and what and where is God.

We didn't engage them in conversations about the presence of God in the midst of evil and the atrocities that are being visited upon His children. We didn't engage them in conversations about life after death, the concept of hell, what is sin and what is not.....and so that great void that was created by the rejection of former understandings, was filled with doubt or philosophies of their own making or their peers. Look around...they are not here. They needed us to engage them in more abstract and probably more valid ways of understanding God in our midst. We did not notice they were becoming skeptical and that they were full of doubt of juvenile teachings. We did not help them grow into a much more sophisticated, powerful, enduring faith.

Thomas needed to see for himself. He needed to engage. And guess what, it is Jesus himself who invited Thomas to engage, to touch his wounds, to put his finger here, in his side, to have a good look at the

nail holes in His hands. “Thomas don’t doubt...believe...it is real...it is true.” Jesus goes on to say , “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” But he never says, “Thomas you are a rotten disciple because you doubted – because you just had to see and touch for yourself, didn’t you. Go to hell Thomas!”

Not at all. Jesus was fine with Thomas’ doubt. He welcomed Thomas and his skepticism. Jesus wanted Thomas to believe...whatever it took.

Herb O’Driscoll says that this whole episode about Thomas is not about unbelief and doubt, but rather – The Deep Longing to Believe. That longing is often disguised by an outer shell of seeming unbelief.

The agony of Thomas is that of a man who has given his utter allegiance to somebody and has seen that person cruelly destroyed. As with anyone who has loved and lost, it is difficult to risk oneself to trusting and believing again.

Probably something you have never heard a minister say to you before  
-I want you to doubt. I want you to be a skeptic. I want you to read, to  
discuss, to ponder.

I used to be afraid that if I doubted, my tiny mustard seed of faith  
would crash. It has only gotten stronger. I know now what I believe,  
and what I do not believe. When it comes to my faith, I know what is  
negotiable, and what is not. My faith has gotten stronger in the  
process.

I encourage you to consider doing likewise. And if you want, I can help  
you with this.

Remember that doubt might well be a sign of your deep longing to  
believe!

Amen