

John 20:24-31, Thomas vss. 1-6

word count: 2,217

The week after Easter is called two things: First, pastors call it, “Cannon Sunday,” because the Sunday after Easter is traditionally the low Sunday of the year, when you could fire a cannon off from the chancel and no-one would get hurt.

Second, it is often called, “Doubting Thomas Sunday.” This is the Sunday when poor St. Thomas gets dragged up and humiliated in front of congregations everywhere because according to John, Thomas confesses some doubts. He is dubious when hearing that Jesus, cruelly tortured and then killed on the cross, is walking around visiting people three days later.

Why do I like Thomas and want to stick up for him? I happen to think that his response to this news is completely legitimate. The purpose of this story in part is to allow the listeners a certain smug satisfaction in knowing that were the sandal on the other foot, they would have believed completely and immediately without hesitation. There was a time when I fell into this camp. Do I believe in Jesus? Of course I do. Then, why doesn't Thomas? Silly apostle.

In fact, I think most people are taught to learn discernment, and are thus doubters by nature and instinct for survival. It may not be how we'd want to primarily identify ourselves, but really, we are skeptics, too.

A repeated theme I hear from people who have grown up in the church goes something like this: We grew up hearing the stories of healing, the sayings of Jesus, the parables that sound different each time we hear them—we accepted and loved the church as a place of truth and wisdom. But then, something happened along the way. Doubt crept in...our childlike wonder took on a more adult discernment. We left. And eventually, we came back to the community of faith, accepting and loving it once again, but with more maturity and insight.

Someone once said that, “Doubt is the beginning not the end of wisdom.”

And, “Any belief worth having must survive doubt.” (Anon.)

I think this is important to hear for this community today, because of who we are theologically. We are a community that includes people from all over the religious spectrum, meaning we occasionally hear the message in different ways.

Last week was Easter, and it was a beautiful service. We sang the old hymns and lifted up our progressive understanding of the day. Easter Sunday is the day when we reflect in wonder on the message from each Gospel writer—from Mark's empty tomb to John's appearance of the risen Christ. On this day more than any other, I think, we are aware of the fact that each of us hears not only the significance of Easter, but the message of what it means to be a Christian, in different ways.

I will come back to this later, but I think it comes down to this: Our focus as a faith community is about the development of Christian character—what it means to be imitators of Jesus; rather than it is about reciting a creed or ascribing to a doctrine. Is that Christian?

In this room, the Trinitarian sits next to the Unitarian, the former Catholic next to the Quaker, the Assemblies of God family breaks bread with the retired Episcopal couple. Evangelical deserters do mission projects with the member who insists she really doesn't believe at all. Vacationing Mormons share coffee on the patio with gay lapsed Southern Baptists. Sounds Christian to me. Does it to you?

The problem arises when we believe that we are required to be able to fit our theology onto a bumper sticker. It just doesn't work. How do we profess what it is we believe, if we are restricted to the model of creed or doctrine?

Shirley Lorenz shared with me a joke that was used here about twenty years ago: "What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with an IUCC member?"

"Someone who goes around knocking on doors, but then doesn't know what to say when someone answers."

It may come down to measuring the importance of trying to live a Christian life in the loving actions we take, rather than in the words about religion we are uncomfortable reciting with absolute certainty, given the openness and diversity of the community in which we find ourselves.

There were many Christian communities shortly after the death of Jesus, as there are today. Stories were handed down, sayings were catalogued, and gospels wove stories together that attempted, each in their own way, to capture the essence of Jesus. Those who knew and followed Jesus, including his disciples, had followers to whom the stories were passed on. Each community's stories depended on the memory and viewpoint of their leader. Only some of those faith stories were allowed to find their way into the Bible, and only in the last few decades have we been able to read others, thanks to discoveries in the desert at Nag Hamadi.

This Friday night and Saturday, IUCC is once again hosting the *Jesus Seminar on the Road*. You are a good audience to these scholars—they love coming here. This weekend, we are featuring, *The Fifth Gospel: The Gospel of Thomas and the Wisdom of Jesus*, with scholars Milton Moreland and Stephen Patterson, who will lead us through an understanding of this gospel account of the community of Thomas, which was discovered in 1945, in the Egyptian desert.

My New Testament professor, Dr. Greg Riley, argues that parts of the dialogue in the Gospel of John are written in communication with, and as a reaction to, the community that surrounded the disciple, Thomas. In fact, in the Gospel of John, when "Doubting Thomas," (the only place he is referred to as such) does not believe he is seeing the resurrected Christ, Jesus places his hand in his wound to prove that it is true. Riley says that this was in reaction to the Thomas community's focus, which was not on the resurrection, but on the knowledge that Jesus brought to his community about a way to live and be connected to God.

Listen to the differences in these two gospels; the canonical John, and the lost Thomas—the first is a demand for a set of specific beliefs, while the latter is an instruction manual on Christian practice—how to live your life with the knowledge that you are a part of the realm of God.

In Thomas, Jesus says, "When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living God. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

How did the earliest followers understand Jesus and what his life meant? Who did they say he was ...and were there dissenters? Were the early Christians' beliefs uniform?

Elaine Pagels wrote a book called, "Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas." Douglas Long, speaking to his UCC congregation in North Carolina, says that, Pagels grew up in a church, in her words, where she was one of "the true flock that alone belonged to God." (p. 50) That's what her fundamental upbringing explained. She was one of God's chosen. She was a part of the family of God.

Long unpacks some of Pagels' difficulties with the church. He says that a turning point for her came when she was 16 years old and a close friend was killed in an automobile accident. The leaders of her church sympathized with her grief, but also explained that since her friend had been Jewish, and therefore not 'born again,' the real tragedy was that he was eternally damned. The

inclusion she has been a part of had high costs. The leaders of the church she attended directed their congregation “not to associate with outsiders, except to convert them.” (p.51) Finding no room for discussion, Pagels left that church, and for a time, left the Church altogether.

She studied religion academically, and she was good at this as long as she was seeing the institution from a distance. Still, something moved deep within her.. restless and wanting. Her return to the church occurred years later when she sought grounding in the midst of her 18 month old son’s terminal illness.

Having rejected the church of her youth for its rigid exclusion, she now found herself within a congregation that expressed itself differently... “a community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.” (p. 4) And in the process of that experience, she began to look at the faith, and the statements of faith anew. “I am a historian of the religion,” she explained, “and so, as I visited that church, I wondered when and how being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs?” (p. 5)

Pagels knew from her academic study much concerning the earliest church. She knew the account of Tertullian, for example... “a Christian spokesman of the second century, who writes that, unlike members of other clubs and societies that collected dues and fees to pay for feasts, members of the Christian ‘family’ contributed money voluntarily to a common fund to support orphans abandoned in the streets and garbage dumps. Christian groups brought food, medicines, and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, banished to prison islands, or held in jail. Some Christians even bought coffins and dug graves to bury the poor and criminals, whose corpse otherwise would lie unburied beyond the city walls.” (p.7, 8)

In the face of plagues, when others ran from the sick, the Christian community sought them out, and cared for them. Death was not to be feared and so they risked their own lives to care for others. This caught the attention of many. Something was different about such self-giving.

“Jews and Christians believed that their God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race, and evoked love in return... and what God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help; even, or especially, to the neediest.” (p. 9)

I appreciate some of the Rev. Long’s observations, which I have included here. And so, returning to the church in the midst of her son’s illness, and finding a place of acceptance and warmth, Pagels’ question is an intriguing one indeed. When and how did being a Christian become virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs? Is Christianity, at its core, about belief (a right set of beliefs), or about practice (how we live)? Is it about doctrine, or love? Is Christianity a “noun” or a “verb”?

While I was at Confirmation Camp with our class last month, I participated in an exercise where all of the youth helped to understand and bring to light a part of our United Church of Christ heritage. The Christian Church is one of the four streams that make up our church today. It was made up of renegade churches that left their denominations over issues of autocracy, slavery, exclusion, gender inequality, and others too numerous to mention. When they found common ground in 1820, they made this statement, which underlies and colors our changing understanding of what it means to be the church:

“Jesus, the only head of the Church.

“The Bible, sufficient rule of faith and practice.

“Christian character, the only measurement for membership.

“The right of private judgment, interpretation of scripture, and liberty of conscience.

“The name “Christian,” worthy for Jesus’ followers.

“Unity of all Jesus’ followers in behalf of the world.”

At Easter and Christmas especially, we look at our faith accounts, and ask ourselves, “Given the diversity in our religious backgrounds, what is it that we believe?” The Jesus Seminar this weekend, the Living the Questions program, and our guest speakers, such as Bishop Spong most recently, might place the arrow closest to the bulls-eye in terms of the *theology* of many here in our church.

But more than that, I think the question has to come from the other way out—“Where is it that the only measurement for membership is our desire to lead lives in imitation of Jesus—where Christian character and our right to private interpretation of scripture, and liberty of conscience makes us welcome?”

According to Thomas, Jesus said “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Could Jesus have actually said that within us, there is an inner connection to God?

Again, from Pagels, “The strength of this saying is that it does not tell us what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.” (p. 32)

Perhaps what we have to bring forward from within is our saving grace—living as the children of God we are through our understanding of how our faith informs us to live our lives. Can we be those children of God? And in the end, any belief worth having must survive doubt...Amen

Sermon Resources

Douglas Long, “Doubting Thomas: A Disciple We Can Believe In! – Part I,” March 30, 2008, Umstead Park United Church of Christ

Elaine Pagels, “Beyond Belief : The Secret Gospel of Thomas,” (Random House New York) 2003
Page numbers refer to this book.

Scripture for Sunday, April 11, 2010

John 20:24-31

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

From the Non-canonical “Gospel of Thomas”

These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down.

(1) And he said: He who shall find the interpretation of the words shall not taste of death. (2) Jesus said: He who seeks, let him not cease seeking until: finds; and when he finds he will be troubled, and if he is troubled, he will be amazed, and he will reign over the All. (3) Jesus said: If those who lead you say unto you: Behold, the Kingdom is in heaven, then the birds of the heaven will be before you. If they say unto you: It is in the sea, then the fish will be before you. But the Kingdom is within you, and it is outside of you. When you know yourselves, then shall you be known, and you shall know that you are the sons of the living Father. But if ye do not know yourselves, then you are in poverty, and you are poverty. (4) Jesus said: The man aged in his days will not hesitate ask a little child of seven days about the place of life, and he shall live. For there are many first who shall be last, and they shall become a single one. (5) Jesus said: Know what is before thy face, and what hidden from thee shall be revealed unto thee; for there is nothing hidden which shall not be made manifest. (6) His disciples asked him and said unto him: Wilt thou that we fast? And how shall we pray? Shall we give alms? And what rules shall we observe in eating? Jesus said: Do not lie; and that which you hate, do not do. For all things are revealed before heaven. For there is nothing hidden which shall not be manifest, and there is nothing covered which shall remain without being uncovered.