

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 30, 2008, Easter I, dedicated to Susan Sanders and her lifetime of commitment and service to our United Church of Christ, and to Thomas Robert Caldwell and Maxwell Thomas Caldwell on their baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Is Doubting Faith Wrong If We Are Truly Seeking Truth for Our Lives?”

Acts 2, 14, 22-32; John 20, 19-31

Part VII of VII in the sermon series:

“Questions My Father Asked Me”

The short answer to the question is “No.” But, there is more to this doubting faith than a one word answer can provide.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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Last Sunday was Scene I in the great drama of Christ's Resurrection Story.

You remember Scene I. Mary goes to the tomb in the predawn hours of Easter. The tomb is empty. She runs to tell the others. They outrun her coming back. She returns in tears and meets the gardener whom she accuses of stealing the body of Jesus, only to find out it IS Jesus - her teacher!

Today Christ's Resurrection Story enters Scene II. It is now Easter evening. The Risen Christ appears to the disciples. Miraculously entering through locked doors, he

greeted them with the sign of peace and shows them his hands and feet. They see and believe. He blesses them with the Holy Spirit. His first lesson as a Risen Teacher is about forgiveness. Everyone in that room stands in need of forgiveness. Some abandoned him in his final hour of prayer. Others hid while he was persecuted and executed. Peter denied knowing him three times. There is shame in that room and the Risen Christ brings forgiveness and love to everyone there. All, but Thomas.

Thomas is nowhere to be found. We don't know where Thomas is. Perhaps he went out to get some food for everyone. Perhaps he needs a break from all the mourning, sadness and guilt. When he returns, Thomas refuses to believe his friends' declarations of resurrection. He needs to touch the nail wounds in Jesus' hands and feet. He needs to put his fingers in Jesus' side. Thomas won't buy what his brothers in Christ are selling.

The curtain rises on Scene III following eight more days. Christ appears again through locked doors. This time Thomas is there and Jesus tells Thomas to put his fingers in Jesus' hands and his hands in Jesus' side. We assume that this happens, for now Thomas declares his belief even louder than he declared his unbelief eight days earlier. The Risen Christ responds by lifting up and blessing those who have not seen and yet believe.

All Christianity since eight days after Easter represents Scene IV in Christ's resurrection story. **Ours is the story**

of those who have not seen and yet believe! We believe what others have seen and we believe those things to which they have borne witness. We are the believers of the post-Easter experience.

But, is this completely true? Are you one who doubts this and other Christian proclamations? Are you somebody who needs physical evidence in order to believe Christ was raised from the dead? Or are you somebody who can believe this without seeing evidence right in front of you?

Faith and doubt are twin truths. Herein, we experience one of the great paradoxes of Christian faith. In our faith there is room for those who doubt before believing and those who believe before doubting. We welcome faith and doubt. There are "double stories" in the resurrection of Christ, in our faith walk, and all over the place in our daily lives. In John 20, 1-18, and again in 19-31, there are witnesses of resurrection who see and believe right away - Mary and the 10 disciples. But, there are also those who, upon not seeing, don't believe - the two disciples at the empty tomb and Thomas. In Christ, there is a place for faith and there is a place for doubt. Throughout the Gospel of John, the evangelist shows there is faith based on signs and wonders AND there is faith that needs none; there is faith weak and faith strong; faith shallow and faith deep; faith growing and faith faltering.

In the Gospels, faith is not a decision made once but a decision made anew in every situation. So instead of being

a “Doubting Thomas,” we should see Thomas as a believing doubter. He is already a disciple. He is one of the chosen 12. But, as we see, he is the last convert to Christ in John's Gospel.

Our faith balances on the tightrope of the faith-doubt continuum. Imagine a line stretching from ultimate faith to ultimate doubt. We all move around on that line throughout our lifetime - sometimes throughout the day!

How many of you are honest to goodness well-cultivated doubters? You doubt lots of things including: the strength of your faith; Christ's physical resurrection; eternal life; what's been cooked into your lunch or dinner; what your next-door-neighbor is really like behind closed doors; who is telling the truth in advertising; who is really going to end the war in Iraq (before 2108)?

How many of you have felt guilty about your lack of faith? How many times have you felt that way? Have you found yourself at work or home (or at church) struggling with your "dark night of the soul" in which you moan and groan about God and life? Do you find yourself doubting and questioning the people around you? Do you think folks are lying to you or hiding things from you? Do you find yourself silently (or out loud) complaining about how hard your life is - and just then some super hero of faith (who usually goes to a fundamentalist church) walks in the room and says something so amazingly faith-full that you now feel even worse about your doubt? Maybe I am the

only doubter in this room, but I find myself moving along the faith-doubt continuum a lot.

On any given day, I have found myself doubting something or someone. Sometimes I have found myself lacking the faith I needed to get to and through a decision. Depending on how I have felt, I have found myself wondering why and how I should go on to the next step. While it is not my current tendency to drag God into the malaise of my mind and spirit, I am quite capable of spiraling downward in doubting times and questioning others around me (all of whom, I need to remind myself, have been "created in God's image"). In other words, I'm not a big "God doubter," but the ones God has created can face the music of doubt in my mind. From this rut, I am usually able to rise and to see that doubt can be really unproductive.

However, doubt about truths that are presented to us as facts can really mess with your head. Talk radio is really good at this. Whether left or right, the talksters will blast out their case about how heinous the other side is on any given issue. Whether prayer in school, abortion rights, immigration rights, gay marriage, or the latest punching bag of a politician (or politicians' pastors), the case will be made loud and long that the other side is foolish, crazy and wrong-headed. I know because I have been blasted in such forums. Lies and half-truths are spoken which bear no resemblance to what is actually the case. Doubt is embedded in the minds of the audience for the purpose of

creating faith in their point of view. It harkens to political ad campaigns and dirty tricks politics that plant seeds of doubt with no basis and questions about the character or belief system of another with no grounding. This groundless, divisive approach to information gathering and sharing has no place in church or society. But, doubt is created to make faith in a cause come to life.

There are actually paradoxical truths in life. A paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true. For example, it is true that America is a nation of immigrants who landed on our shores from every corner of the earth. With this foundation, I find the desire to end or stem the flow of immigrants to be paradoxical. In this belief system, Emma Lazarus' poem *The New Colossus* is for yesterday's tired masses yearning to be free, not for today's seekers of freedom and hope. But, I ask, isn't the American dream a dream for ALL peoples in every generation? And aren't we called through Scripture to welcome the sojourners and to open our doors to the outsiders forever? The paradox is this: we are the new colossus and we welcome the tired and the poor, but we also struggle to do it well and effectively.

We all struggle with twin truths. We know that faith lives in the public sphere. But, we also know this faith in the public sphere needs to be tolerant and inclusive. In church and society, in our personal lives and in our public lives, we live in the balance of paradoxical truths. Such paradoxical existence is the nature of faith and doubt itself.

It is a tightrope on which we balance every day.

Today, at our 9 a.m. service, we baptized two boys with Thomas in their names: Thomas Robert and Maxwell Thomas. As you know, the name Thomas means “Twin.” Like hundreds of millions of Christians through the ages, these two young men stepped onto the tightrope of the faith and doubt continuum. They joined the dance on the rope with the rest of us. From our two Thomases, let us learn again the paradoxical truth of Christ's resurrection - there is place for faith and for doubt in this church and in our lives.

So dad, you asked me, “Is doubting faith wrong if we are truly seeking truth for our lives?” You know the answer is “No.” You knew it the day you carried me to the fantastic waters of baptism when I was one month and one day old more than 50 years ago. That day, the waters poured over me as you promised to God to raise me as a Christian. You named me “Timothy” which means, “one who honors God.” As one who honors God, I have lived my life on the tightrope between faith and doubt. Thanks for raising me in this faith.

And, thank you for asking all these questions in these later years of our life together in Christ. And dad, may you stay forever young, and until your dying breath, I pray to God that you will continue to be inquisitive - always asking questions about this faith we seek to live. Amen.

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