

“Belief, Doubt, and the Search for God”

John 20:19–31

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April 16, 2023

In an article included in the current issue of *The Christian Century* (April 2023, p. 27), Episcopal priest Heidi Haverkamp says she dated an atheist before she went to seminary. He was a doctoral student in philosophy at the University of Chicago who specialized in ethics. He didn't believe in God and thought religion was a joke, but he couldn't stay away from church.

They met in an inquirer's class and got to know each other during a ride home after an Easter Vigil. The man was not hostile toward people he respected who believed things he could not. In fact, he felt like there was something good about church people and was drawn to them. He just didn't believe.

Haverkamp says he reminded her of the Jewish story about an atheist who attended synagogue every week. When asked why he did this, he said, “I don't believe in God, but I know old Mr. Goldberg does. I come to sit next to Mr. Goldberg. Goldberg talks to God, and I come to talk to Goldberg.” Maybe her ex-boyfriend was like this. Years after they went their separate ways, he attended her ordination liturgy, though he left at the end of the service before they could speak. There was something that kept his interest in faith, even if he didn't embrace it.

Haverkamp notes that she has known a number of atheists, agnostics, and doubters in the church who are like this. Some seem to have a harder time coming to believe, but they keep trying. Many long for a sign like Thomas in our reading from John, but Thomas gets one. Some people do not. She notes that Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe,” but she thinks there is a blessing for those who have not come to believe but keep trying to see.

I find this article intriguing because I have known many people who are like this. Some of them are not in the church for this very

reason. They are good people, they respect friends who claim to be believers, but they just can't believe that there is a God or that Jesus was God's son or that he was raised from the dead. And they would feel like hypocrites, they say, being among those who do believe.

And yet, like Haverkamp, I have also known many people in the church who struggle profoundly with their faith, whether they acknowledge this openly or not. Particularly on Easter, when everyone seems to be all-in on the joy and the reason for it, deep-down they feel conflicted because they are not sure they believe.

We might say they are like Thomas, the "doubter," we call him, but this is to sell both Thomas and doubt short. Thomas is no different than anyone else in our story from John 20. The other disciples are hidden away in fear, not faith, until Jesus shows up and they can see him with their own eyes, touch him with their own hands. Thomas just isn't there.

He's like those of us who have not gone on the churchwide retreat this weekend. Everyone will come back and say what a wonderful time they had, how close they felt to God and each other. And Dana and I can confirm that these retreats are wonderful, we found great meaning in the time in the mountains this weekend before we drove back this morning. But those who were not there grow weary of hearing about it.

Thomas misses the first meeting with Jesus and then asks to experience only what everyone else has. When he does, he believes. In fact, he makes the highest Christological confession found in the Gospels — my Lord and my God!

But not only do we sell Thomas short with the derogatory term "doubter," we sell doubt itself short. Frederick Buechner once said that doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it moving. Furthermore, he said, everyone doubts. Whether our faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if we don't have any doubts, we are kidding ourselves or asleep (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 20). It is the nature of faith, it involves mystery. God is ever more than we can comprehend. So, there will always be questions and doubts.

Thus, binary thinking is not helpful — thinking we are either the faithful or the doubters. We all experience a mixture of faith, doubt, and sacred ambiguity, as Kathleen Norris once put it. Acknowledging this is

not only honest, it is prerequisite to being helpful to those who struggle most to believe. Understanding is far more helpful than judgment. And it is wise to understand not just why others struggle to believe but what we mean when use terms like “belief” and “doubt.”

In recent years, many people in this culture have come to equate belief with cognitive assent to certain theological propositions. It’s all about what we think about God or Jesus. While faith certainly contains cognitive content, and Judeo-Christian faith is rooted in historical events, as opposed to traditions based solely on mythic ideas and concepts, biblical faith is much more focused on things like trust and relationship. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris says that the all-too-common head-over-heart approach to faith is impoverished (p. 62). “To believe” she says simply means “to give one’s heart to.”

One can believe certain things *about* God and Christ without having any personal involvement with the Divine, any trust in God or Jesus’ way of life. Does this constitute true faith, true belief? Christian faith involves more than this. Christian faith is about a way of life and it begins with a trusting relationship with the God who was in Christ. So, it is more a matter of the heart than the head.

Marcus Borg says the Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*, is literally the sound that a baby donkey makes when it is crying out for its mother (*Days of Awe and Wonder: How to Be a Christian in the 21st Century*, pp. 21-22). “To appreciate that, you have to say *emunah* so that it sounds like that... like a soft braying...” Borg says, “There’s something kind of wonderful about that... an element of confidence that the cry will be heard.” It is a beautiful and compelling image of faith. This is what we are talking about we use the term “belief.”

As a result, as Robin Meyers notes in his book *Saving God from Religion*, the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is anxiety (p. 106). The opposite of trusting in God is struggling to trust. This is what the disciples are doing when they are closed away in fear the evening after the resurrection. Jesus addresses their unrest by showing up, by offering them a word of peace, and by breathing Holy Spirit into their lives. He doesn’t compel them to sign on the dotted line to any propositions.

Faith is about trust, and doubt is a necessary part of it. Doubt helps us to grow. People can get lost in doubt and sometimes question traditional views while embracing all sorts of crazy ideas, like that a UFO is coming to take us away to heaven if we take our own lives. It is wise to question our doubts as much as our faith. But the willingness to be honest about our questions, like Thomas, is the best way to address the most genuine stirrings of our hearts and the realities of this world.

Barry Jones told me this week about a T-shirt a mutual friend in ministry has. It reads: “You call me a FREAK like it’s a bad thing.” Calling someone a doubter is like this, but it is not a bad thing.

Anglican monk Martin Smith notes “a widespread need in contemporary spirituality to find ways of praying and engaging with God, our selves, and one another that has room for simultaneous contradictions, the experience of opposite emotions. We need to find the sacredness of living the tensions,” he continues, “and to admit how unsacred, how disconnecting and profane, are the attempts at praying and living while suppressing half of the stuff that fascinates or plagues us... (*Amazing Grace*, p. 68)”

To be more specific, if we don’t believe a person who has died could come back to life, it doesn’t do us any good to pretend that we do. If we are skeptical but curious about such a possibility, naming this reality can lead to deeper understanding, as it eventually does for Thomas. If we question not so much the existence but the character of God, wondering why God allows our struggles or the suffering of others, or what good faith does if innocents still suffer and die, just keeping quiet about these questions doesn’t demonstrate a stronger faith.

On the contrary, keeping quiet may betray the fear that if we are honest, we may lose our faith entirely! A deeper, more genuine kind of faith is willing to name our questions and express doubt, trusting that the God we have sought will neither disappear because of our questions nor punish us for having them. I would much rather die with some honest questions than attribute to God qualities beneath God’s character.

So, perhaps, in the end, what we need most is a genuine yearning to know God and the perseverance to keep searching, no matter what.

God will bless that yearning. As Thomas Merton once put it, the desire to please God does, in and of itself, please God. The yearning to believe, trusting like a baby donkey that our mother will hear our cry, ultimately leads to belief, the kind of belief that matters most.

A U2 song declares, “Blessings are not just for the ones who kneel, luckily.” Blessings are not just for those who always believe, or say they believe, and never doubt. Blessings are for all God’s children who keep seeking God, truth, and understanding.

The ending of Goethe’s *Faust* illustrates this reality. Faust has made a deal with Mephistopheles wherein Faust gets whatever he wants on earth in return for his soul. He seeks love, knowledge, and wisdom, and experiences what he wants. Then, as he is dying, the Devil is about to take him to hell when the Virgin Mary and the heavenly hosts appear to whisk him off to heaven, singing, “Those whose seeking never ceases are ours for their redeeming (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, second part, act 5, line 11935).” A part of Faust, the most important part, wanted to be devoted to God, and that is what mattered.

John’s story ends with Thomas confessing faith, and that’s where we’d all like to end, but getting there may depend on our willingness to follow Thomas’ example. If we’re already there, we might hear a word of counsel about how we relate to those who are not. Keep searching honestly, we might say, God will honor that search, God will bless those who have not yet come to believe but keep trying to see.