



# “Belief and Doubt”

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

*a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Belief and doubt. They have been together since the earliest Biblical times. We see it in this passage from Matthew, but also in the story of Abram and Sarah, who doubted what God had told them of the blessing that was to come in the form of a child. We see it in the doubt and hesitation with Moses in his questioning of being able to go up against Pharaoh, and many others. People of faith who also doubt.

There are some Christian groups, and you may have grown up in one of them, that say a person is a weak Christian if they doubt; but the Scriptures never sugarcoated how difficult it would be to have faith without doubt. The writers of the gospels never tried to make the disciples anything more than what they were: human. Matthew didn't put halos around each disciple's head as they stood on that mountaintop in Galilee. The risen Jesus was there in the flesh; and while some worshiped Jesus, as they rightfully should have, there were others who doubted.

Those who doubted were part of his family, part of the original twelve disciples who had been with him for the past three years. What did they doubt? Did they doubt what they saw? Did they doubt this was Jesus? Did they doubt the continuity between the Jesus they knew and served before the crucifixion and the person they now saw?

As we know from the other gospels, after Jesus' resurrection he wasn't immediately recognizable. As we heard in the Emmaus story, people could spend significant time with the risen Jesus without knowing it was him. So did they doubt it was him? Doubt that he truly died after all, or that perhaps they were seeing an

apparition of Jesus from the other side, but not the flesh and blood Jesus?

We cannot say what they doubted, or why, but on this day, when the most famous commission of all time was given to the young Church - on this day when we are first told about the triune God, this amazing divine identity - on this very day, there was doubt. There was uncertainty, and perhaps a hint of skepticism.

I've heard non-Christians mock the concept of the trinitarian nature of God. It pushes beyond our understanding; beyond our intellect. And this is what I was trying to say last week, though, it was poorly worded. When I mentioned the Pentecostal church and talked of their emotionalism, perhaps a better way to have said it is that they are able to set aside rationalism to be open to the spirit. Now I've had no experience personally with the Pentecostal church, but the Bible is continually showing us that what Jesus said and did was not always in the realm of rational understanding. Despite being told that he would rise again, some of the disciples seem to have had their doubts. They were probably at that moment, living within their rational minds and not living by faith. So how do we know what we know? How are we authorized to do what we do? How can we claim what we claim?

Most of us have probably met people who said they would believe if we could prove to them that God exists. They want to see with their own eyes, but as we are told, this did not help the disciples who did see Jesus to have any more faith than what we demonstrate now. For, ultimately, faith is a mystery, whether we can bolster it with physical evidence or not. And, we know that even in the presence of worship tinged with doubt, Jesus is there and promises to be present with us to the end of the ages. Doubt doesn't disqualify us from being in the presence of Jesus. Instead, and in the mist of the doubt, Jesus is there; he brings to us the fullness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And, in that fullness, we are asked to move forward into still more ministry as we witness to God's name, and to God's gospel to the ends of the Earth.

It was not easy then to be a follower of the triune God. It's not easy now. We know that after the resurrection, the authorities bribed the Roman guards to spread false reports of grave robbery as a way to explain Jesus' now empty tomb. These false stories, debunking of various aspects of the whole gospel story, have been floating around from the beginning. Maybe by the time the disciples caught up with Jesus clear up in Galilee, a few of the disciples have themselves already been exposed to this or that false story. Maybe that was part of the doubt.

This is mostly speculation, of course. The text itself is pretty sparse. What we do know is that after the resurrection, Jesus gathered his remaining disciples, down from 12 to 11, and gives them this great commission to go into all the world and make disciples. The 11 disciples have been through so much since the time of Jesus, crucifixion until this moment on the mountaintop. Yet we know that, despite the doubt that some had, they were able to overcome that. How did that happen? How did Jesus give a command to these 11 men to go into the world and preach the gospel and have them accomplish all that they were able to accomplish, especially when some of them doubted? And how can we go forward when we also have doubts?

I think what it boils down to is authority. Jesus' ministry in the New Testament had to do with authority: "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me". However, Jesus creates a crisis because he offers an alternate notion of authority, one that the world cannot tolerate. It is the authority to doubt, and to forgive; to say that we are no longer going to be tested and measured by law, by competence, achievement, or success; that we can touch the wound of another without being made unclean. That we can embrace the Samaritan and both give and receive life.

This authority is not based on right conduct, but on patient openness that empowers people to speak to each other, to listen to each other, to trust each other, and to be changed by each other. This kind of authority provides us with a space to affirm one another as daughters and sons of God, who may not always have the right answers, or the only answers, yet share a sacred journey.

In Matthew, Jesus announces that it is time to go to Jerusalem to meet the authorities, and even to die. He offers his disciples a journey to life not bound by legalisms. It's a journey of alternative routes from those that are expected by society.

Faith and belief requires that we witness to what we believe on the way. We may not have perfect understanding, but we never will in this life. We do what we can to share the love of God within the understanding and the faith that we have at the moment. We share the Good News through the authority of Jesus Christ, which he gave to us. The journey of faith that we are on is a rhythm of celebrating mountaintop experiences and victories, as well as spending time in valleys and doubts. The places of belief and disbelief become the standing ground for authority, and provide us with a space to exercise our yes and our no. It provides us with a place to learn, and to discern. Doubt should not be discouraged, but rather be encouraged to be used as a motivator to question and to explore and

dig for answers, for understanding, which is part of the process of growing in faith. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Unbelief is the opposite of faith.

If we allow doubt to defeat us, then we squander the hope and authority that Jesus gave to us.

The best way to deal with doubts is to name them, to engage with them, and allow them to breathe. For it is in this process that growth occurs. What are your doubts? Are you going to let them sit within you without using them as an opportunity to grow? Grapple with those doubts, and use them as an opportunity to grow in faith. We will always have doubts. We will lose some along the way and gain new ones, but we shouldn't be afraid of our doubts. We should always use them as a motivator to learn and to grow, as an opportunity to encounter God in a new way. Despite their doubts, those disciples along with the ones who worshiped Jesus, on that mountain top, were able to continue to find God, despite whatever doubts they might have initially had. Those 11 men were able to live out the commission that Jesus gave to them on that mountaintop. They were able to go out into the world and spread the good news of Jesus Christ. They were able to go out and lay the foundation for what would become the church as we know it today. They went forth with the authority that Jesus Christ placed upon them. While they may have been daunted by the task asked of them, they never wavered from what they were called to do.

This is the challenge for us Christians today. We need to claim the authority that Jesus gave to us in order to effectively share the good news; and we need to embrace our doubts, because our doubts are not unique to us. By grappling with our doubts, while also embracing the Holy Spirit, we will grow in faith, and be able to help others through their grappling with doubts.

As we look to the future and all the changes this church will be going through, we need to remember that we go forward with the authority granted to us, and with the power of the Holy Spirit which dwells within us; the triune God is in us, with us, and among us as we live out our faith in the context of being the church. So as you go through this week, I encourage you to grapple with your doubts while asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the truth that you need to learn. But also, go through your week knowing that you have been given authority and wisdom and power to share the good news of Jesus Christ to fulfill the commission that was given to us to make disciples and to share the love of God. You can do this, because God is always with you. Amen.