

St. Andrew's Church - April 11, 2010

Sermon "Faith strong enough to doubt" - The Rev. Doug Kendall

Lord God,

May the words of my mouth,
and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts,
be acceptable to you, Our God and our redeemer. AMEN.

Quote: Living Faith 6.2 Doubt

It is interesting that every year on Easter Sunday,
we celebrate Jesus resurrection,
And every year, one week later,
the suggested reading is about doubting Thomas.

Is there something to this juxtaposition of faith and doubt?

I can remember as a teenager doubting almost everything people told me,
until I could prove it to be true or false for myself.

Not just religious teachings and religious tenants,

I doubted almost everything.

I doubted the laws of physics and gravity,

And that those laws of physics applied to me when I rode my motorcycle...

Until I rode my motorcycle around a corner too quickly,
And found myself sailing gracefully
over what had been an oncoming car a moment earlier,
as my motorcycle ground to a halt under said car.

I also doubted as a teenager that my parents knew very much at all.

I subsequently learned that on occasion parents are right about some things,

and I also learned that they are also wrong about things sometimes.

I love the line "When I was sixteen I couldn't believe how dumb my parents were,

And when I was 21 I couldn't believe how much they had learned in 5 years."

I also doubted that the church's teachings and the Bible

were very relevant for my teenage life,

especially the way they were presented to me in my church.

Eventually I did learn that the laws of physics and gravity do apply to me,

My parents were not as dumb as I thought,

And the church's teachings and the bible could be relevant and useful
even to a teenager,

despite the way I was exposed them at church
on Sunday mornings many weeks.

Through doubting and challenging all of these things,

I came to a greater acceptance of many of these things for myself.
...especially a greater respect for the laws of physics and motorcycles.

Doubt and acceptance, doubt and belief, doubt and faith.

But how far can we go with our religious doubts?

Do they go away when we get older, or do we get new doubts?

Are religious doubts just a lack of faith?

Should we believe all religious teachings

And everything the church teaches us,

Even when it is our nature to be skeptical of other things in life?

The latest thing in the past few years seems to have been the new Atheism.

With people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris
and Christopher Hitchens.

They are not only presenting an atheistic position,

but one filled with a vehement anti-religion rhetoric.

Is what they are offering religious doubt, or something else?

Of course it is not surprising that many people

are questioning the role of the church today.

It is not difficult for people to give up on the church these days.

Certainly as we hear about child abuse scandals

and apparent cover-ups in the church

that may or may not reach all the way up to the Vatican and to the Pope,
it makes you wonder about the church.

And in our own denomination as well.

Our own historic involvement in native residential schools,

Our slow movement to finally ordaining women as elders and clergy.

And there are many other issues.

And even when we are not wrestling with these major issues,

We are not all that good at dealing with each other in the church.

Dealing with conflict and disagreement and theological differences,

in respectful and constructive ways.

It is disheartening to see the way people treat each other in the church sometimes,

And that can not help but affect how we see and understand God.

Does our perspective affect how we see and understand God?
Does the new Atheism cause us to question who we are as the church?
Who Jesus was?
How do these doubts fit in with our faith?
Of course these are not just new ideas, new doubts.
I was quite fascinated to hear about the Gospel according to Judas,
released just before Easter a few years ago.
An authenticated, carbon dated, early second century papyrus from Egypt,
Apparently giving us new insight
into the relationship between Jesus and Judas.
I read a copy of the Gospel according to Judas,
You can find the full text on the internet if you want to read it for yourself.
I discovered in that unpublished Gospel,
that apparently Judas was not such a bad guy after all.
This new evidence shows that he seems to have been Jesus favorite,
And Judas only betrayed Jesus in order to free Jesus soul,
From the prison of his earthly body...
And it was all Jesus idea.
The other 11 disciples, Jesus seems to have had no patience for,
In fact apparently they were all following
and worshipping a lesser God of some kind,
and really didn't understand Jesus the way Judas did.
All revealed in the new gospel of Judas.

And so we have the state of the church today with our scandals,
The new atheists, and the gospel according to Judas and...
What next?
What doubt does this cast on our faith?
Faith and doubt...

As you can see, I have not entirely given up my doubting nature,
In fact I believe that it has served me quite well in many ways,
And continues to serve me well.
If you can read the new Atheists, and the Gospel of Judas,
with a skeptical and doubtful eye,
They are not all that dangerous.
They become mostly amusing.

But is it right to take that doubting nature,
And apply it to our church life?

Can we read the Bible the same way?

And Thomas said,

***"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."***

To have doubts is natural and healthy.

To challenge the commonly accepted views of the church
can even be a good thing.

Remember at one time the orthodox view of the church,
was that it was O.K. to burn heretics at the stake,
that slavery was God's will for humanity,
that the world was flat,
and that the Roman Catholic church was the only one true faith.

The reformation happened,
because someone had the nerve to doubt and challenge
the church's teachings,
and our denomination, the Presbyterian Church was born.

Slavery has been abolished throughout much of the world,
because people began to doubt that it really was God's will
that we should treat other human beings as possessions and property.

We stopped burning people at the stake,
when someone doubted that our faith and our beliefs,
could be threatened by another person's words,
and began to believe that judgment on these matters was better left to God.

Faith and doubt.

The quote I read at the beginning of this sermon about doubt
is from "Living Faith" our Church's most recent statement of what we believe.

Right in our own faith statement, we talk about doubt.

We talk about doubt as being a part of a growing faith,
a changing faith.

Sometimes through doubt, can come to a new and strengthened faith.

Often we think of doubt as being the opposite of faith.

Either you have faith in something, or you doubt it.

Is it possible though, that there is a difference between faith and belief,
and that sometimes we get the two mixed up?

Is it possible to have faith in God,

to have faith in Jesus Christ as our risen Lord and Saviour
and yet have doubts in the beliefs of the church?

Sometimes I think it is easier to substitute our beliefs for our faith.

It is easier to hold steadfastly to the teachings we grew up with,
to the worship traditions that are familiar and comforting,
to the beliefs that are historic for us,
than it is to risk having faith in God
who is teaching us new things all the time.

Faith is not about having an absence of doubts,
faith is about trusting God?

I have known many people with great and strong beliefs.

People who have a very clear understanding of how the world ought to be,
of what is right and what is wrong with our world,
people who have very clear answers to the problem of evil,
the problem of suffering,
the problems of life.

I have known people like that and at times envied them,
because my world is not so clear cut.

I do not have simple answers to life's complex problems.
And sometimes I wish I did.

At one time I considered this to be a lack of true faith.

I felt that I could never consider being a minister,
or even a good Christian for that matter,
unless I had that kind of faith, those kind of beliefs,
those kinds of clear answers to life's problems.

In fact it was one summer when I was on staff up at Gracefield
when I was in the middle of doing my B.A.
and wrestling with my call to ministry
that I encountered a program director at Gracefield,
who had just such clear cut beliefs about God and our world,
who had very simple answers to life's complex questions.

I looked at her beliefs and how strongly she held them
and how everything was so clear in her mind,
and thought, "my world is just not that clear,
and if it is not that clear, if I have doubts,
I could not possibly be called to be a minister."

So rather than finishing my B.A. and going into seminary,

I headed off to Europe for a while instead.
And it was only in traveling and seeing the world,
That I began to see that perhaps I did not have to have all of the answers
to be a minister.

That perhaps faith in God, and beliefs were something different.

That perhaps faith is something more
than only having a clear and simple worldview.

Isn't faith more about trusting God,
about believing that God loves us and wants us to love one another,
trusting that God walks with us through everything we face.
more than about having a specific belief system?

Isn't it possible to have faith in God's love and God's grace
and even God's judgment,
and yet still have doubts about the teachings of the church?

This is where the new atheists, and books like the Golden compass

And the daVinci code fall apart for me,

And why the Gospel of Judas does not damage my faith.

They assume a church that dictates what we think and believe,

A church where science and religion are at odds with each other,

Where evolution and creation are "either/or" options.

Where faith and doubt cannot exist together.

Where tradition and innovation cannot live together.

This is not the church I know and love.

I am sure God has given me a doubting faith.

A questioning faith,

a faith that needs to ask questions and be challenged,

and continue seeking answers to life's difficult questions,

and to wrestle with the fact that sometimes I won't have those answers.

When Thomas was confronted with the other disciples,

all telling him that Jesus was risen from the dead,

he had doubts, he had questions,

he was honest enough to admit that he did not believe the way they did.

Thomas said to the other disciples,

***"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."***

What was Thomas doubting?

Was he doubting the existence of God or the validity of Jesus teachings?

Was he doubting that Jesus was the Son of God,
the Messiah, the chosen one?

No, he was doubting the story being told to him about Jesus appearance to them,
by the other disciples.

And what did he say he needed to do?

Exactly what Jesus had offered to the other disciples who had seen him.

To see the wounds and to understand that he was physically with them again.

To prove the resurrection to them.

Now here is the important part of Thomas's doubting.

What did he do after he heard the story from the disciples?

Did he go off on his own and do his own thing?

Did he leave these other people and seek his own spiritual path?

Did he give up on God and ask, "Why wasn't I there to see Jesus too?"

Did he write a best selling novel

about how the other disciples had a conspiracy to fake Jesus death,
and how Jesus had not really died at all,
but that he and Mary Magdalene had just eloped,
and we living happily on a Greek Island somewhere?

We don't know exactly what Thomas did,

except that the next week he was still there
with the other disciples in their upper room.

One week later.

One week after Jesus first appearance,

one week after his resurrection,

Thomas was in community with the other disciples.

Questioning and wrestling with what it meant to believe, to have faith,
to be a community and to be the new emerging church.

And that is when Jesus appeared again.

Jesus came offering peace to the troubled disciples,

and offering Thomas the opportunity to prove his belief in the resurrection.

We don't actually know,

the text is not clear as to whether

Thomas went so far as to put his hand in Jesus side,
and to touch the wounds in Jesus hands.

But we do know that Thomas' response to Jesus presence was to say,

"My Lord and my God!"

Thomas's doubts were taken away, by him seeing Jesus for himself.

He was lucky, or blessed, or unique.

We do not have the opportunity to have Jesus appear in person to us,
to take away all of our doubts.

Wouldn't it be wonderful in some ways if we did.

Jesus knew this as well.

Jesus said to Thomas,

"Have you believed because you have seen me?"

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

This is the day when we hear about the disciple
who dared to doubt the resurrections.

The disciple who wanted to see for himself that Jesus was alive again,
and that the other disciples were right.

The disciple who, when he had doubts and questions,

stayed within the fellowship and the community of the other disciples.

Sometimes doubt and faith are tied together, and work together to bring faith.

In Jesus name, may we learn from Thomas, AMEN.