

# Benefit of the Doubt

Laurie Haas



Matthew 28:16-20

With the focus this past week on identifying my broken parts and asking for healing, there was one little word that jumped out at me from the passage today: **doubt**.

Doubt can be crippling, even paralyzing. Doubt for a Christian - feels like kryptonite for Superman.

Tahereh Mafi wrote in her novel *Ignite Me*, “For so many years I lived in constant terror of myself. Doubt had married my fear and moved into my mind, where it built castles and ruled kingdoms and reigned over me, bowing my will to its whispers until I was little more than an acquiescing peon, too terrified to disobey, too terrified to disagree. I had been shackled, a prisoner in my own mind. But finally, finally, I have learned to break free.”

We all have our doubts, don't we? From silly things, like in our house, before Friday we doubted that the Cavs would win a game against the Warriors to serious things like we doubt that the world will ever be a safe place again.

Did you see the movie called *Doubt* starring Meryl Streep and the late Philip Seymour Hoffman? Brilliant acting...and since it was released nine years ago, I feel safe in sharing a bit of a spoiler.

The movie *Doubt*, set in a 1964 working class Bronx neighborhood, opens during Mass where Father Flynn played by Philip Seymour Hoffman finishes his sermon by talking about the crises of faith that sometimes enter into everyone's lives and that whenever people feel lost, they should not feel alone because even the bravest and the most faithful have doubt from time to time. Sister Aloysius played by Meryl Streep gathers enough tidbits of information to come to the conclusion that Father Flynn is acting

inappropriately with the first African American boy to be in the school. She is stoic, joyless and doing her duty to protect the children and to make sure that justice is served. As you watch the movie, you have some doubts. You don't really know if Father Flynn is doing anything wrong or not. Sister Aloysius is like a dog on a bone as she badgers, torments and finally gets Father Flynn dismissed from their Parish. She is so confident, so zealous in her pursuit of this jovial Father.

Only at the very end of the film does she confess to another Sister that she lied about calling his previous school where she supposedly corroborated her claims about her beliefs about his inappropriate behavior. Sister Aloysius confessed that even she has doubts, “such doubts.”

As tragic as this was, these doubts were about a person and his behavior. They weren't doubts about God or faith.

The late, great Theologian, George Carlin once said, “Tell people there's an invisible man in the sky who created the universe, and the vast majority will believe you. Tell them the paint is wet, and they have to touch it to be sure.”

The message I hear is that it's okay to doubt paint being dry, not okay to doubt God.

In fact, when you Google images for doubt, you see pictures of a guy far away from the cross, sitting on the edge of cliff with the Title “Doubting God.” If you are doubting God, you are far away from Christ holding your head in shame. Or you find signs that say things like Trust God and never Doubt or “Doubt isn't sin, but it's a temptation to sin.”

Yet in the Bible we see that the disciples doubted a fair amount. In fact, all four Gospels talk about how the disciples doubted. At the end of Mark, in chapter 16, Mary Magdalene is telling the guys how she had seen the resurrected Jesus. We read in verse 11, “But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.” Jesus appeared to two disciples as they were walking, and then in verse

## “Doubt is powerful. It challenges us to stay in relationship with God and to move towards a deeper trust in God.”

13 “And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.”

In the Gospel of John, of course we have doubting Thomas who says “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.”

The best is in Luke 24, when Jesus appears to the disciples and they think they are seeing a ghost. Jesus says, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” I just love verse 41, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” The Risen Christ with the scars of his crucifixion is standing right in front of them and yet they still have doubts.

What about Peter, who jumps out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus. In Matthew 14 we read that as soon as a strong wind comes up, Peter became afraid and started to sink. Jesus reaches out a hand to save him and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And then two short chapters later, Jesus say “You are Peter, the rock on which I will build my church.”

Doubt did not disqualify him.

Since Bible times, the world has been filled with brilliant, faithful people who had their doubts.

Look at Martin Luther - the father of the Protestant Church. This year we will be celebrating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Along with Luther's legacy of being a reformer and a father of Protestantism, Martin Luther is also remembered for a less grand, and a much more relatable trait: doubt.

Luther's primary doubts about faith didn't necessarily rest on the question of God's existence, but on God's character.

Ultimately, Luther's legacy is one of reform, and a reliance on grace. He is remembered for his impact on the Church, but even a church father of his stature still suffered from moments of doubt about his salvation, calling and what God thought about him.

Or how about our very own John Calvin - the father of Reform Theology and our Presbyterian roots.

For Calvin, doubt wasn't something Christians should fear. Instead, it was something we should even expect, and not be surprised by when it creeps into our lives: “Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.”

Calvin understood that doubt was a part of the faith experience, because human nature itself finds ideas about God and His goodness so outside of what we can understand: “For unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful.”

Let's not just stay with the Protestants, let's look at a couple of famous Catholics as well.

Since he was elected as leader of the Catholic church in the spring of 2013, Pope Francis has been wildly popular and massively influential both inside the Church and to the broader world. He was named *Time* magazine's “Person of the Year” for 2013. He's

undoubtedly been the most popular Pope in recent memory.

But Pope Francis has spoken openly about the role of doubt in faith.

“Who among us has not experienced insecurity, loss and even doubts on their journey of faith?” he told the crowd at a general audience “Everyone! We’ve all experienced this, me too (says the Pope!). It is part of the journey of faith, it is part of our lives. This should not surprise us, because we are human beings, marked by fragility and limitations. We are all weak, we all have limits: do not panic. We all have them.”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta is primarily remembered for her selfless service to the poor and sick, but a book of letters printed after her death revealed that even she struggled with doubt.

The letters showed a different woman than the symbol of Christian love and unwavering faith that much of the media portrayed her as. She frequently wrote of loneliness, not hearing from God, personal hypocrisy and doubts about her own faith. She wrote: “Darkness is such that I really do not see - neither with my mind nor with my reason - the place of God in my soul is blank - There is no God in me - when the pain of longing is so great - I just long and long for God ... The torture and pain I can’t explain.”

Even though she experienced long chapters of loneliness and feelings of isolation from God, her devotion to her calling never wavered, and today she’s remembered for her love of the poor and heeding of Christ’s command to care for them.

Do you see the pattern? God used these great men and women of faith - in spite of their doubts. And that’s what I heard when I read the scripture passage for today. Jesus commissions not perfect disciples, but people who both worship and doubt.

When the travelers meet the living Jesus, some worship. Others doubt. Both responses are possible from the same group. Among these disciples there is both worship and uncertainty, both devotion and hesitancy. One might expect something clearer and unequivocal. They are in the presence of the living

Christ, after all. But this mixture of faith and doubt seems to characterize discipleship.

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, (said to all of them, even the doubters) “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go...and make disciples.*

How does Jesus respond to this mixed group of worshipers and doubters? He gives them all the same commission: “Go and make disciples.” One might have expected Jesus to do something else, like calling for the uncertain to get things figured out, and for the hesitant to answer their unanswered questions. But instead, Jesus simply speaks to them all in the same way, “Go and make disciples.”

And I wonder...maybe doubt isn’t a brokenness that needs to be healed, but really more of a benefit. Could it be that doubt is a gift? Thanks to a huge cerebral cortex, we are capable of quite amazing abstract thoughts, pondering the deep mysteries of life, ultimate meaning and faith. The capacity to form thoughts about God, our place in the world and how the two come together is actually a gift from God. So I wonder how we would feel, knowing we have permission to ask questions and to have doubts. Knowing we don’t have to hide our doubts from God or from one another...even here in church. And that church just might be one of the best places to be honest about our doubts, because here we can hold each other up. Together we have enough faith, on our own, sometimes...not so much.

While doubt can feel unsettling, disorienting and even feel a little like the scary monster under the bed, I believe that doubt can actually move us closer to God rather than farther away. Peter Enns says, “Doubt is divine tough love. God means to have all of us, not just the surface, going-to-church, volunteer part. Not just the part people see, but the parts so buried no one sees them. Not even us.”

Doubt is powerful. It challenges us to stay in relationship with God and to move towards a deeper

trust in God. When we have doubts, we acknowledge that we don’t have all of the answers about our faith or about God.

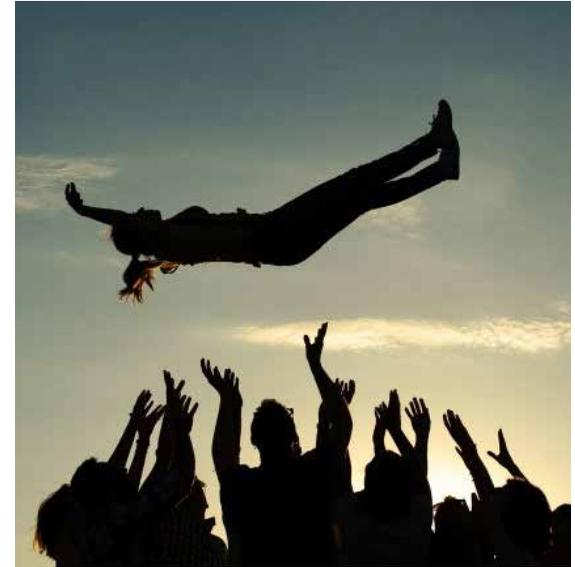
Yet we can choose to trust God with childlike trust in spite of our doubts. Mike Yaconelli writes, “In a healthy family, children’s questions are not about answers - their questions are about relationship. Children intuitively know their questions are welcome, appreciated. Safe. And not only are children’s questions welcome, but they are welcome. In a welcoming environment where questions are safe, children are infected with curiosity - a fascination with truth, an unrelenting hunger to know and be known, to capture and be captured, to touch and be touched. When these children finally fall asleep at night, they are secure in the knowledge that the one who loves them is bigger than all their questions.”

The God who loves us is bigger than all of our doubts and questions.

So if we don’t have all of the answers, suddenly, we have a bit of humility, don’t we? The best kind of doubt is the kind that springs from humility - from an acknowledgment that we haven’t got God all figured out and from a willingness to admit we can be wrong.

And humility is a fine companion to take on the road, because nobody likes a know-it-all. So when Jesus tells us to **go** (doubts and all), we should go with a heart full of love and a kind & generous spirit - bathed in humility.

And remember we never go alone.



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Church of the Palms

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