

## ***“Doubting Thomas”***

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church

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When I was interviewing for the position of minister at Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church twenty years ago, I was showing them all the materials I had gathered for my resume, which told something of who I was, what kind of Unitarian Universalist I was, what my personal life was like. In that interview I thought my biggest hurdle would be the fact that I had chosen to be an openly gay minister. In those days that was a big deal. (In fact, it turned out that I was the first openly gay minister to be called to a congregation in any denomination anywhere in the Pacific Northwest, in 1990. So it was a great big leap of faith for them to do what they did back then—a real leap of faith.)

As we went over the resume I realized they weren't asking about the gay issue. What they had trouble with was the fact that in all my materials, including several sermons already written and delivered, I kept talking about *God*, of all things. I had sermons in there that quoted the Bible! And they said, what's that all about? So, I had to wade through all that. And over the years we've gone back and forth over that issue.

Here's the story of the origins of “Doubting Thomas”, from the Gospel Book of John: (This story takes place after the resurrection, on “Easter Sunday.”)

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fears of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands [where the nail scars were] and his side [where he had been stabbed]. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord...*

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”*

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

*Now Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing, you have life.*

(John 20:24)

Throughout my ministry, when people ask how it is that I am a Unitarian Universalist, I say somewhat jokingly that because my name is Thomas, I carry the Doubting One's legacy. So when asked about the belief in the resurrection (surely a basic component of Christian beliefs), I say, “I doubt it”. So here I am, a Unitarian Universalist.

Furthermore, this story from John is instructive in the larger issue of *faith* or *believing*. It establishes the “faith formula”: requiring “evidence” is not having faith. Instead, as St. Paul later declared, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen.”

To believe is to accept and act out on an idea, a vision, even a commandment, which you *cannot* see and which has no verifiable evidence to its truthfulness. And this is where the phrase “blind faith” comes from. I would add, it is also “true faith”. You don’t have the evidence to prove what you believe.

We remember faith as defined by Mark Twain’s country schoolboy who said, “Faith is when you believe something that you know ain’t true.”

For us Unitarian Universalists, believing stuff we know ain’t true simply doesn’t come easy. We are all doubting Thomases in our own way, and doubting is, in truth, a basic element of our identity as religious people.

Our theological traditions emerge, not so much from the Bible stories which speak of faith and believing, but more from the Greek school of philosophy called “skepticism”, which is a group of doubters, not of the resurrection per se, but doubters of “the human possibility *to know* real knowledge”. The skeptics said, we really can’t *know* things. The school’s founder was Pyrrho, who taught his followers “to inquire and to reflect” on the great philosophical questions.

Truly, those of us in the liberal religious traditions love to inquire and to reflect, to discuss things, to doubt things, to say it can’t possibly be that way, on the great questions, but let’s talk about it. That’s what we do.

Thus it is that we live our lives with quite a dose of skepticism leading us on. As with faith itself, skepticism is a *choice of a way of living*.

Our history is studded with great doubters. The Hindu god Brahma in Emerson’s great poem by the same name, declares, “*I am the doubter and I am the doubt.*” We like that. Alfred Lord Tennyson, in his famous eulogy *In Memoriam*, wrote: “*There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.*” He asks us to believe him, to have faith in his words.

Another of our favorite historical characters is Rene Descartes, who was a doubter. “Doubting Rene”, they used to call him. —No, not really. He created a philosophical method in which everything was doubted. And then he came to realize that if you are doubtful of everything, you must nevertheless exist in order to do the doubting. Hence, his famous formula, which is something of a beginning point, ‘*Cognito, ergo sum.*’ To say, ‘*I think; therefore, I am.*’ is to assert at least one proposition which can stand against the skepticism of doubt. Descartes went on to build an entire philosophical system on this foundational belief, and that system is still in use today in Western philosophical systems.

Which brings us to another philosopher named Pascal and his famous Wager, which had to do with believing or not believing. This is “Pascal’s Wager”: “Humankind must either believe or not believe that God exists—so what will you do? Your *human reason* cannot satisfactorily answer that question. A game is going on between you and the nature of things, which at the Judgment Day will bring out either heads or tails. “Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you should stake all you have on heads (God’s existence.) If you win in such a case, you gain eternal bliss; if you lose, you actually end up losing nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God,” said Pascal; “for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, any finite loss is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain. At bottom, what have you to lose?”

This approach is, of course, the *gaming-table* approach. Not all of us wish to base our lives on such a thing. *Or do we?* Can you imagine giving yourself over to a *cosmic bet*? And yet, isn't it often true that we do end up taking many actions which are based on very risky philosophical premises? The whole notion of risk (calculated or foolhardy) is, in the final analysis, quite surely connected to the idea of faith.

But we Unitarian Universalists want to be *reasonable* about all things, especially such an idea as belief. So let us turn to another 20th century philosopher who studied this issue as a science, namely, William James, (who is most famous for his book called *Varieties of Religious Experiences*.) James put forth the idea that humans have a built in “will to believe,” which is the name of a delightful essay he wrote on the subject. The question he studied was, How do you accomplish that which you have the will to do; that is, how do you come to the place you *can* believe? When do you get to the edge of the cliff, and say I do or don't want to do a certain thing?

Just drive down any two-lane road at 1:00 am on Sunday morning and notice that you are headed toward a missile coming at you at 120 mph and will only miss a collision with it by two or three feet. We have *faith*, we all *believe* that we'll be all right. But let's face, the evidence is pretty thin, especially on Saturday night at 1 am.

James went on to say, “Our belief in truth itself, that there *is* a truth—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up.

And so this will is *utilitarian*—we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use. We are quite willing to believe facts and theories and even theologies if we find that they, in fact, do have some kind of use. So the faith comes in handy, we want to believe because it makes sense—it is of use to believe.

Each member offers a trust in other members, in order that the Community of Faith can happen. And that belief in each other turns out to be useful. Believing in each other. People chose to be in relationship with a group of people who believe together in what can happen.

That's my belief about you and it's been that way for these past twenty years. I believe in you. I believe in your goodness. I believe in your inherent worth and dignity. You are part of this community of faith. I believe that, and even though I've gone in and out of doubt and faith, today I declare to you, I believe.

Science can tell us what exists, as indicated by empirical tests and data, but to compare the *worth*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart, as he says, “*The heart has reasons that reason knows not of.*” If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one.... It is surely true that skepticism will satisfy the head's play-instincts much better than any rigorous idealism can.”

We believe, not solely as a reasonable thing to do, but because believing has its rich rewards. A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member offer duty to that group, with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. James said, “Wherever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the faith in one another of those immediately concerned.”

This is what's going on right here at Shoreline Church, and it has been going on here for 45 years since the congregation's inception back in 1966. This place exists because the members here believe in it. They have faith in the community and in the people who live here. This church exists

as an act of faith—of countless acts of faith—which come from its members. Faith in the possibilities of goodness here is why people attend, why they choose to commit themselves to its welfare, and even why people love one another.

People choose to be in relationship with the people here, all of whom believe. That’s how our congregation keeps going and how it has sustained itself over the years: people believing in the quality of this beautiful place and its people.

That’s what I believe in, for I believe in you. It’s been this way throughout my time here. I believe in you and in your goodness, in your inherent worth and dignity, and I believe in your faith, which says to the whole world, “Whoever you are wherever you are on your life’s journey, you are part of the very life of this Community of Faith”.

Here is the ending of the statement which began my relationship with this congregation. This is what I believe to this day, and do not doubt:

The Holy is real; the responsibility exists. That which is sacred is that which dwells within us and among us, and our living, breathing bodies give us a splendid access to the inviolable, the incorruptible. The Spirit and Flesh are made One, unitary, universal. Our actions and our words must, finally be One; our ministry is the living epistle which is nothing more than the manner of our everyday lives.

At our best, we can be *forgiving*. We can also be *for trusting*, *for loving*, as well as *for giving*. We can unite to give strength to the weak, to give relief to the suffering, to calm the fearful, visit the lonely, love the unloved—even when the weak ones, the sufferers, the fearful, those alone, and those who are unloved are unloved are *none other than ourselves*.

I believe that and I will never doubt it.

Amen and Amen.