

Good Christians Don't Doubt?

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Exodus 17: 1-7 and Mark 9: 14-24

I want to tell you a little about my Grandfather. Born in 1899, he would have been 112 years old this past Monday. My grandfather was an emotionally, and maybe physically abused child. For some reason, which I will probably never know, his mother kicked him out of the house at age 16 and he lived at the YMCA in Oak Park for his last year of high school. After living at the Y and graduating from high Oak Park/River Forest High School, at age seventeen my grandfather lied about his age and enlisted in the Canadian air force during WWI.

My grandfather adored me. I was the first grandchild and I loved him because he loved me – a lesson I will never forget. Never mind that he drank alcoholically and verbally abused and alienated everyone else in the family but me and my younger sister. He loved me and therefore I absolutely adored him.

My grandfather was a man of unquestionable faith. He sang in the choir of the Methodist church in River Forest for his entire adult life. Because he and I connected, somehow I knew, even as a child, that he believed in God. When everything else had failed, when my grandmother walked out on him, when he was fired from yet another job for drinking, when his own children stopped speaking to him, what saved him was the fact that he knew God was there for him.

It seems as if this was the kind of faith that almost everyone used to have in the olden days. Maybe I have a naïve nostalgic view of the past, but it seems as if most people didn't question the Bible or the existence of God. It's almost as if we know too much now to have that kind of blind faith. We have too much knowledge - too much which can be proved or disproved by study and scientific method.

I received my Master's in Divinity degree from the Chicago Theological Seminary which is right across the street from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. When we were studying the Old Testament, I remember how thrilled I was to find that some of what we were studying could be seen and documented

at the Oriental Institute. During that semester of studying the Old Testament, I often went to class in the morning then popped into the Oriental Institute in the afternoon and looked at what was being talked about in class. I first discovered I could do this when we were studying the Book of Kings. I was thrilled to find a tour of Biblical history at the Oriental Institute. Part of the tour is actual documentation of the Kings that are named and remembered in the Bible. So I have no problem literally believing the Books of Kings.

But I have a harder time believing scripture such as our scripture this morning. My logical mind wants to say, “Oh, come on! This is stupid. How could Moses touch a rock with his walking stick and magically have water appear?”

A book that I’m reading right now is Martin Thielen’s *“What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be A Christian?”* This may sound like a strange book for a clergyperson to be reading but it is the current rage among clergy. I suspect this is because we clergy have conversations all the time with people who doubt the literalness of some of the stories in the Bible. Most of the time these are people who think of themselves as good Christians. But, when they doubt the Bible they feel like bad Christians. I want to tell you a secret – most good Christians at times still have doubts.

One of the points Rev. Thielen makes is that some people believe that religious questions, struggles, and doubts are a sin – but they are wrong. Doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of faith. The British Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson was right when he said, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” And when author Madeleine L’Engle was asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubts?” she replied, “I believe in God with all my doubts.” Her response reminds me of our Markan scripture this morning when the father says, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” Most of us can relate to that. We do believe, but we also have times of unbelief. That has always been true for people of faith, and it always will be true.

Take for example the resurrection of Christ. Most people consider that belief in the resurrection is the heartbeat of the Christian faith. But when God raised Jesus from the dead, skepticism about his resurrection abounded. In fact, doubts about the resurrection are recorded in all four gospels. When the early followers of Christ heard about the resurrection they struggled to believe it. Matthew 28:17 says, “When they saw him (after the resurrection), they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Mark 16: 11 says, “When they heard that Jesus was alive and had been

seen by Mary Magdalene, they would not believe it.” Luke 24: 9, 11 says. “Returning from the tomb, they told all this (about the resurrection) to the eleven and to all the rest...But the words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” John 20: 25 says, “The other disciples told Thomas, ‘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.’” Eventually Christ’s followers affirmed faith in his resurrection, but they had to work through their doubts, questions, and struggles to get there. The gospels tell us that it is OK to ask hard questions about God, that you can be a thinking person and still be a Christian. Again I say, doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of authentic Christianity.

I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago with the mother of a family looking for a new church home. This family has a particularly precocious and inquisitive grade school age child. Most of my conversation with this mother focused on the need of this boy to question what he was being taught in Sunday School. She wanted to know if we were the kind of church where her child would be allowed to ask questions and verbalize his skepticism when something in the Bible seemed too totally impossible to be true. In other words, she wanted to know if this is the kind of church that would cram her child with church doctrine that he would be forced to swallow hook, line, and sinker. I assured her that this is not the kind of church that we are. I’m pleased to report that this family is now exploring the possibility of joining St. Peter’s.

What struck me about this conversation was the wonderful, inquisitive curiosity that a 10 year old child was gifted with. Unfortunately, it is so easy for a church to quench in a child, or in an adult for that matter, the kind of questioning doubt that helps us explore and grow in our faith.

The ultimate issue boils down to these questions, “What kind of universe do we believe we’re living in? Is it a closed universe, limited to what we can conceive of and understand with our logical, scientific minds? Or is it an open universe, wondrous, unexpected, and far beyond anything we can comprehend?”

True faith is a mystery - a fun but challenging mystery that we struggle with and wrestle with and try to make sense of. Faith is like reading a really good mystery novel. We have limited glimpses into what really happened. We have clues sprinkled throughout the book as to how it’s all going to end. Sometimes we get so anxious reading the mystery that we want to skip to the end and read the last

few pages just to see how things are going to turn out. But it's not until we get to the end, to the very end – the very last page - that we know, we finally know that everything is going to be all right and that all is well.

Mystery, doubt, uncertainty. These are not the enemies of faith but part of being an authentic Christian. It is OK to ask the hard questions about God. Science and religion are compatible with each other. You can be thinking person and still be a Christian. Along with the great heroes of the Bible, I've learned that it is more than OK to say, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

Amen.