

WHY DID YOU DOUBT?

Sermon preached by
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY
at Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church,
August 13, 2017

Readings:

Gen. 18:1-15 & Matt. 14:22-33

Sermon

I have such awe and appreciation for Peter.

To have the faith and courage to step out of that boat in the first place and start walking on the water toward Jesus. Wow! I doubt I could have done it. If the apparition walking on the water says he's Jesus, that's good enough for me. I don't need to walk on water to believe it's him. And Peter doesn't sink, at first! Jesus isn't the only one who walks on water. Jesus somehow transfers that ability to Peter.

Yet ... while Peter is out there walking on the water, all of a sudden he becomes aware of the strong wind. **That** is the moment he became afraid and started to sink. Now panicking, he called out for Jesus to save him. Like many of his time, Peter probably couldn't swim. Peter just couldn't sustain his faith. What a letdown after actually walking on water. Peter loses his confidence and doubts.

Sarah is a doubter too. When she hears the prediction she will have a baby in a year, she doubts big time. Abraham is reportedly 99 years old and she is no spring chicken either. She doubts so strongly that she even laughs out loud.

Such doubting was not appreciated by their guests who just predicted the semi-miraculous conception and birth. Remember, long, long ago, these folks didn't understand the biological processes of reproduction the way we do today. Such an unusual conception could have happened through divine intervention. That wouldn't be unreasonable to them at all. Yet Sarah still laughs.

Sarah knew that she shouldn't be laughing at the words of her guests – that would be disrespectful. So she denies laughing. But she was called out and caught in her lie by the guest who says, "O yes you did!"

Please notice, in both these stories, neither Peter nor Sarah **choose** to doubt. It just happens to them. Peter becomes afraid of the wind and doubt is right there to question his ability to walk

on water. Sarah laughs as a reaction to what she is hearing. For most of us, laughter is a spontaneous response to a comical situation. Sarah didn't decide to laugh, it just happened.

This is what makes Jesus' reaction to Peter so interesting. Jesus asks, maybe in an accusatory tone, “Why did you doubt?”

To open up that question, let's first look at the Greek word that usually gets translated in this passage as doubt. The word is *distazo* (dis-TAD-so). It is a compound word of *dis* – two or double and *stasis*, “stance or standing.” Expanded translations include, “going two ways, shifting between positions, to waver, to vacillate. It describes being uncertain at a crossroad and refusing to choose one way over another, wanting to have our cake and eat it too, to halt between two opinions, views or beliefs (ref <http://biblehub.com/greek/1365.htm>)

This word gets used only **twice** in the Bible. The first is in this passage. The second use can be found in Matthew 28:17 where Jesus appears in Galilee after the resurrection to his followers. The text reads, “And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some **doubted.**”

Doubt isn't a big deal in the Hebrew Scriptures. What you think isn't all that important. What matters is what you do and don't do. Beyond proclaiming God is one and following the Law of Moses and especially not worshipping false idols, what you think doesn't much matter. Sarah can doubt all she wants that she will have a baby. What is offensive is that she laughs, thus expressing her doubt.

Jesus appears to be criticizing Peter's thinking process, that he becomes afraid and then doubts. His sinking reveals that he is doubting. Peter wants to do the right thing but his own mind undermines him.

Belief and doubt play big roles in Christianity. From the beginning the Jesus movement, the nature of Jesus was problematic. There were no direct eye-witnesses to the resurrection I remind you. We have no sacred text that explains what happened and how he came back from the dead. If he somehow didn't die in the first place, let's say he wasn't dead when they took him down from the cross, then he wasn't resurrected from the dead. Since we know people generally don't come back from the dead, especially three days later, this belief **does** require a leap of faith.

Jesus was a Jew and never repudiated his religion. In Judaism, the worship of one and only one God is of paramount and **defining** importance. Yet, if Jesus does indeed come back from the dead and is actually somehow both the son of God AND co-eternal with God, therefore part of a Trinitarian formulation, believing this is true becomes a **defining feature** of membership in the Christian community.

And it differentiates you from regular Jews who would refuse to accept this to be true because believing this story would violate the idea of worshipping one and only one God. Jews would not be willing to worship Jesus as God. Christians would be willing to do that for they would understand Jesus as the **same being** as God.

Throw in virgin birth and you've got a lot of believing **built in** to being a Christian.

Unitarians (and their heretical ancestors before them) have always had trouble with belief in Jesus being co-eternal with God. They loved Jesus and even saw him as an elevated, divine figure – just **not** God incarnate. Their rational, analytical minds interfered and wouldn't allow them to believe this. As the Arians would chant, “There was a time when He was not.” They thought Jesus was created by God not co-eternal with God.

When Christianity was a scrappy, outlawed religious sect that wouldn't sacrifice to the Roman Gods, there was a lot of diversity in belief about Jesus. All that started coming to an end once Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of Rome. The Emperor had little tolerance for theological diversity. He needed Christianity as a **unifying force not a divisive one**. With the power of imperial authority, faith in the Holy Roman Catholic Church became as important as the faith in Jesus.

That lasted until 1517. We're coming up on the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Church door at the end of October. Luther didn't doubt Jesus. He doubted the church. In the Bible, Luther found an anchor for his faith in Jesus that didn't depend on a very fallible institutional church. He claimed scripture **alone** was enough to secure one's faith. And with the advent of the printing press, non-conforming churches could have **their own** Bible to read and interpret, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Yet just as institutional churches can betray the message and spirit of Jesus, so can the text. Unless you read Hebrew or Greek, you are dependent on a translation to make sense of the Bible. There are no original versions of any of these texts. Each one is the copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. As we've found discovering ancient copies of these texts, copying errors have crept in. And even if the texts were faithfully transmitted, they are recordings of oral history and stories. They are not eye-witness accounts or scholarly history. The purpose of each text is to argue and persuade people to think or believe one way or another. Their purpose is to support faith not undermine it. They don't make room for doubts.

Yet doubting happens anyway. As with Peter and Sarah, doubt can choose us as well.

I've repeatedly had people join Unitarian Universalist congregations I've served because doubt chose them. This is especially true of those who came from Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christian backgrounds, religious traditions that say, “Either it is all true or it is all false.”

Jane was one such person. She was quite happy in her church, actively involved, singing in the choir with a number of friends. But one day reciting the creed, she asked herself, “do I really believe this?” She had started doubting. She didn't want to doubt. She would have been happy to stop doubting. But the doubting wouldn't let her go. Every time in the service she began to say the creed, she became very uncomfortable because she realized she didn't believe it anymore. Her sense of integrity wouldn't let her profess a belief she no longer held. Her process of questioning led her to doubt even the existence of God.

Unitarian Universalism doesn't require a belief in God (or a rejection of belief in God). We are a value centered rather than belief centered religious tradition. She found a religious home with

us, a home where she could enjoy much of what she liked about church without the cognitive dissonance of professing or rejecting beliefs.

Now I’m not here to criticize a church having a creed, nor am I even here to sow seeds of doubt. In fact, my exploration and study of Buddhism and my over thirty year practice of Buddhist insight or mindfulness meditation, has shown me the problematic nature of doubt.

In meditation instruction, there are **five** big hindrances that interfere with, undermine and stop the practice of meditation. The goal of meditation practice is to know what is happening in the body, the mind and the emotions as they arise and pass away while developing a concentrated and focused attention. As any of you will know who’ve tried it, this is really difficult to do.

Five mental processes interfere with having a clear mind to witness moment to moment experience. Sleepiness and restlessness are easily understood as interfering with our ability to concentrate and observe mental processes. Intense cravings and strong aversions are also easy to recognize as mental disturbances. Those are the first four. But the last of the five is doubt, the worst of them.

Doubt is insidious. It undermines the meditator’s commitment to the practice itself. It asks disingenuously,

“What good is all this? My knees are hurting. My back aches. Why don’t I just quit now and go get a nice cup of tea. What is the point of all this endless sitting anyway. Who am I to think I could get enlightened? I’m just not cut out for this meditation thing. Why don’t I try yoga. That would be way more fun. And maybe that bhakti style chanting. That would be just so intoxicating filling my heart with bliss.”

You get the idea. Doubt weakens the meditator’s resolve and confidence. One needs a lot of confidence, a lot of faith, to sit down, experience discomfort and practice meditation. It isn’t easy at all. And like Peter and Sarah, doubts will attack a meditator unbidden, against their will.

For Buddhist meditators, the antidote to doubt is to become aware that doubt is happening and recognize it as a hindrance that has arisen. Instead of fighting with it or engaging the content of the doubt, the meditator, after noting that it is present, returns to the object of concentration practice, usually the breath, and lets go of the content of the doubt. It is the same practice as accepting and releasing cravings and aversions, sleepiness and restlessness. Return to the breath.

Let us return now to Jesus’ question to Peter, “Why did you doubt?”

In the spirit of Buddhism, I wonder if Jesus meant this question as a koan, a question that doesn’t have a rational answer. Jesus asks Peter to examine the process of doubting that caused him to lose his faith.

We know there are times when doubt is very appropriate. When someone gives you that proverbial free lunch, watch out. When institutions and institutional leaders act in bad faith, abuse their members, and squander resources, they need to be questioned and held to

account. Though the result was incredible disruption, destruction and death, the Reformation was an important corrective to the abuses of power by the Roman Catholic Church lo those many years ago. Doubt can be a signal to us to wake up and see what is wrong.

Yet doubt can be an incredible hindrance to our development of authentic, life affirming faith. Doubt can keep us stuck in narcissistic tendencies avoiding loving relationships with our neighbors. Doubt can disable our ability to put the good of the whole in front our selfish interests. Doubt unexamined can prevent the development of a robust religious faith that opens the door to a genuine love of God; a love that springs from the heart un-coerced.

The critical word of the sentence is “why.” Examining doubt for its value is crucial. Like any quality of our minds, it can serve us or disable us. Doubt is especially powerful and must be handled with much care. In fact, it may be too powerful for us to individually examine. We may need the help of a trusted friend or religious professional who can help us examine it in an unbiased way. The “why” of the doubt reveals its value or its liability.

Through awareness of the results of doubting we will know that value.

So to question, may ... or may **not** be ... the answer. Asking why and observing the results of doubting may help us find out.

So be it, and amen.

Benediction

Let us close with the inspiring words of American Universalist Minister, Hosea Ballou:

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, No other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.

Go in peace, make peace, be at peace and return in love.