

“Doubters Are Welcome Here”
Rev. Bill Freeman
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Menifee United Church of Christ

A man is on trial for murder. All the evidence says that he did it, but no body has ever been found. So the defense attorney, in his closing argument, said, “I have a surprise for the jury. In just one minute, the man who supposedly was murdered is going to walk through that courtroom door.” The jury all looked at the courtroom door. After a minute, the defense attorney said, “I was just kidding. But, if you looked at the courtroom door, that’s reasonable doubt. If you looked at the courtroom door, expecting the supposedly murdered man to come through that door, that’s reasonable doubt and you have to find the defendant not guilty.” So the jury went out to the jury room and deliberated and came back in just a few minutes. They found the defendant ... guilty. Afterwards, the defense attorney went to talk to the jury and said, “How could you find the defendant guilty? You all looked at the door. That’s reasonable doubt.” The jury foreman said, “Yes, we all looked at the door, but the defendant did not.” “Reasonable doubt” is a courtroom term. Scientists doubt. I think scientists are natural born doubters. Natural born skeptics. Scientists propose hypotheses that other scientists try to prove or disprove. A hypothesis is eventually called a theory. Global warming is called a theory, which causes some people to think, “Oh, well, then that’s just someone’s opinion.” But gravity is a theory. You probably don’t want to try to disprove gravity by jumping off the top of a 10-story building. So, courts have doubts. Scientists have doubts. And religion has doubts.

So, Pastor, what is doubt in religion? People who are religious people are supposed to be believers, not doubters. They’re supposed to believe in the leaders of their religion. So Buddhists are supposed to believe in Buddha and Jews are supposed to believe in Moses and Christians are supposed to believe in Jesus. Religious people are supposed to believe in the lives of the religious leaders that they follow. So, Buddhists are supposed to believe that the Buddha became enlightened sitting under the bodhi tree. And Jews are supposed to believe that Moses parted the Red Sea. And Christians are supposed to believe that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. But not everybody does believe. Some people do have doubts and it’s OK to doubt. As far as I know, and I don’t know all that much about Buddhism and Judaism, but as I understand it, if somebody is a Buddhist and doesn’t believe that the Buddha became enlightened underneath the bodhi tree, they can still be Buddhists. They aren’t kicked out of Buddhism. Jews aren’t kicked out of Judaism, even if they don’t believe Moses parted the Red Sea. Christians aren’t kicked out of Christianity just because they don’t believe Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. Just ask Thomas. Doubting Thomas.

Doubting Thomas gets his nickname from the gospels. According to the gospel of John, the disciples are all locked in a house on that first, what came to be known as the first Sunday of Easter. All except for Thomas. The disciples are all locked in that house for fear of being arrested, tried, convicted, crucified and killed like Jesus was. So, they’re all locked in the house. Suddenly Jesus is in the midst of them. Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” Now, how did it happen that Jesus could just be in the midst of them in a locked house? Well, I’m going to demonstrate it to you. I learned this in seminary. I learned how Jesus was able to walk through the walls of that locked house. (Rev. Bill goes up the stairs onto the stage as he is talking and walks to the side of the stage, where there is a cement block wall.) He stood back, and you can’t see me on the other side of this block wall, and Jesus walked through the wall. (Rev. Bill runs into the wall.) Oh! OK, well, I apparently have forgotten how to do that. That’s what happened to a lot of Greek that I learned, too. Anyway, Jesus walked into where the disciples were and said, “Peace be with you.” They looked at his hands and saw the holes in his hands and saw the hole in his side and they were pleased to see Jesus. But Thomas wasn’t among them. So, after Jesus tells them, “Peace be with you,” Jesus left. Then Thomas came. The disciples all said, (in a sing-song voice) “Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah. We saw Jesus and you didn’t.” No, they didn’t do that. They said, “We saw Jesus.” Thomas said, “Well, I have my doubts. Until I see Jesus and see the holes in his hands and the hole in his side, then I’m not going to believe.” A week later, all of the disciples were together this time, including Thomas. They, again, had Jesus in their midst. Jesus said, “Peace be with you.” Then Jesus said, “Hey, doubting Thomas, look at my hands. Look at my side.” Thomas put his fingers through his hands and put his finger in his side and said, “Oh, my God, my Lord!” and he believed. Then Jesus said, “Of course you believe because you see me. Blessed are those who believe who haven’t seen me.” Now who can blame Thomas for doubting? Who among us has ever seen somebody raised from the dead? Well, I suppose the disciples saw Lazarus raised from the dead by Jesus, but they say that he was raised to life, whereas Jesus was raised to eternal life.

So, Pastor, why didn’t the disciples kick Thomas out for being a doubter? Good question. But, in order for the disciples to do that, they would have had to have been hypocrites, because the disciples themselves were doubters. They were all locked in that house because they were afraid of being arrested, tried, convicted, crucified and killed. So, they were hiding out because they doubted that Jesus was going to be raised from the dead. It was the women, it was Mary Magdalene and others, that went to the tomb and saw that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But the disciples were hiding out in the house. Not the finest hour for the disciples. Not their profile in courage. But it’s OK to doubt. We all sometimes have doubts. Who among us hasn’t doubted that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead, at least for a little while, at least a little bit? Who among us hasn’t doubted that Jesus caused a blind man to see, at least for a little while, at least a little bit? Who among us hasn’t doubted that Jesus was able to walk on water, at least for a little while, at least a little bit? Now, you may not believe this either, but I’ve walked on water. It was on a little pond in Michigan and it was the middle of winter and the pond had frozen

over. That's about the closest I've come to duplicating a miracle of Jesus. Who among us hasn't questioned the existence of God, hasn't doubted in God, at least for a little bit, at least for a little while? Who among us hasn't doubted the existence of God for allowing the Holocaust to happen? Who among us hasn't doubted the existence of God for allowing wars to happen? Who among us hasn't doubted the existence of God for not stopping a child from being shot in Chicago, and killed? Doubt is not a sin.

Paul Tillich knows that doubt is not a sin. Paul Tillich was one of the most influential theologians in the 20th century. Paul Tillich was a German-born American theologian. Paul Tillich is the one who said: God is the ground of all being. Paul Tillich is the one who said: Faith is our ultimate concern. And Paul Tillich was the one who said, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith. It is one element of faith." So, it is OK to doubt because doubt is one element of faith. So, nobody gets kicked out of Christianity for doubting that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, because doubt is one element of faith. Nobody gets kicked out of Christianity for doubting that Jesus was able to heal a blind man, because doubt is one element of faith. And nobody gets kicked out of Christianity for doubting that Jesus walked on water, because doubt is one element of faith. And nobody gets kicked out of Christianity for doubting that God exists because God didn't stop the Holocaust from happening. And nobody gets kicked out of Christianity for doubting that God exists because God didn't stop wars from happening, because doubt is one element of faith. And nobody gets kicked out of Christianity for doubting that God exists, because God allows a child in Chicago to be shot and killed, and didn't stop it, because doubt is one element of faith.

But, Pastor, I thought doubting was a bad thing. I thought it was bad to be Doubting Thomas. Well, remember: Doubting Thomas only doubted for a week before his faith was restored. If only all people could only doubt for a week and then have their faith restored. When people's faith is restored. Their doubt is diminished. When we see somebody doing good, we can have our faith restored. In humankind and in God and Jesus. I know my faith was restored this week, because last Sunday, when I usually pick a sermon title based on the lectionary passages, I picked out a sermon title. Then on Monday I thought: I got nothin'. I can't think of anything to say about this sermon topic. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Then on Tuesday, I bumped into a conversation on Facebook that talked about this topic. I tripped over a song on the radio about the topic. By Tuesday, voila, I had a sermon. Now, some people might say, "OK, Pastor, but that's just coincidence." I don't believe in coincidence. I believe in Providence, so when this sermon came to me, I believe it was God giving me this sermon. Or Jesus. And it bolstered my faith.

Tim Russert bolsters my faith. The late NBC newsman, the host of Meet the Press, died a few years ago. I saw his funeral on MSNBC live. One of his best friends, Mike Barnacle, was one of the people who gave a eulogy for Tim Russert. He told the story of how the Russerts and the Barnacles were driving out west for vacation. Along the way, they were in separate cars, they both got pulled over by the police. The police officer said, "I'm going to give you each a ticket for speeding." Then he opened his ticket book and he only had one ticket left. Mike Barnacle, who you probably see on MSNBC's Morning Joe, said, "To show you how helpful Tim Russert was, he said to the officer, 'Well, officer, I was just following Mike, if that helps.'" I tell you that story to tell you this: Something happened that day, the day of Tim Russert's funeral, that hardly ever happens – a double rainbow appeared over Washington, DC! Chris Matthews, also on MSNBC, said, "That almost never happens, for a double rainbow to appear over Washington, DC." Tim Russert, as you may know, was a devout Catholic. For the people who attended his funeral, that must have bolstered their faith, when a double rainbow appeared over Washington, DC. It bolstered my faith as well. Now, you might think: "Well, Pastor, that's just a coincidence that there was a double rainbow that day." But again, I don't believe in coincidence, I believe in Providence. I believe that God or the Holy Spirit or whatever you want to say, put that double rainbow over Washington, DC on the day of Tim Russert's funeral.

So, Pastor, if God loved Tim Russert so much, why didn't he keep him from dying? Good question. I don't know. All I know is, God doesn't cause bad things to happen. God didn't cause the Holocaust to happen. People did that. And people stopped it. God doesn't cause wars to happen, people do that. God doesn't shoot a child in Chicago. People do that. God gave us free will to not do bad things. Hopefully, eventually, people's faith will be bolstered, people's beliefs will be bolstered, and they won't do bad things. They won't cause a Holocaust or start a war or enter a war or they won't shoot a child in Chicago. When people do the right thing, that bolsters my faith.

Music bolsters my faith. I heard a song on the radio this week that bolsters my faith. It's a song by LeeAnn Womach. You've probably heard it. "I Hope You Dance." LeeAnn Womach sings, "I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean. Whenever one door closes, I hope one more opens. Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance. And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance. I hope you dance." I hope you dance! I hope your faith is bolstered by whatever you see. When I see the ocean, my faith is bolstered. I see the beauty, the majesty, the awesomeness of the ocean and my faith is bolstered. Now, it would have been nice if God hadn't put sharks in the ocean, so that I wouldn't be afraid to go swimming in the ocean. I did go swimming in the ocean in the Bahamas, where you can see the bottom, you can see for blocks, so I could see a shark coming at me, so I did swim there. I did swim in Lake Michigan, which is shark-free. My faith is bolstered when I see Lake Michigan, too. My faith is bolstered when I see a sunset – over the ocean, over Lake Michigan, over the mountains. The beauty, the majesty, the awesomeness of the sunset bolsters my faith.

What about you? What bolsters your faith? Does a double rainbow over Washington, DC bolster your faith? Does a sunset over the ocean bolster your faith? Does somebody helping someone else bolster your faith? The way to diminish doubt is to have your faith bolstered, so if you can see another human being and see the image of God in that human being, that should bolster your faith. If you see someone helping someone else, or if you help someone else, and see Jesus in the person you are helping, that should bolster your faith in Jesus. You may not see the risen Jesus. You may not put your fingers into the holes in his hands, but if you see Jesus in the face of another, that should bolster your faith and diminish your doubt. It's my hope that every day you see things that bolster your faith and diminish your doubt.

Let us pray.
God of love,
Help us to have our faith bolstered every day.
Help us to have our doubts diminished every day.
And help us to help others to have their faith bolstered every day.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*