

## I've Got Issues – I still have doubts so I can never become a Christian

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Psalm 34:8, Mark 1:14-20, John 20:24-29

The last few weeks we have talked about a lot of issues that people raise with regard to the Christian faith – issues that are important and worth talking about:

- Where is God when people suffer?
- How can Christians say that Jesus is the only way to heaven? What about other religions?
- Isn't Christianity the enemy of science and of personal freedom?
- How can you believe a man rose from the dead?

And so on . . .

I haven't pretended to know all the answers. My intention was not to give you a definitive Christian response to each issue that you could wrap up and take home with you. In fact, my messages may only have raised even more questions for you. If that's the case, that is all to the good; if I stimulated your thinking about matters of faith, then I will have succeeded.

But here is the point I want to make this morning: the good news is that you don't have to have everything figured out before you can start following Jesus. You don't have to have your every intellectual question answered and every doubt dispelled before you can start out on the journey of faith.

I remember one particular fellow who started coming to MPC. He was seriously considering Christian faith and was full of questions. He would raise many of the issues we have talked about in this sermon series and we had some good discussions. He was a thoughtful man, and, being an engineer, was quite analytical in his approach to matters of faith. He was honestly searching, and was so close to making a decision to follow Christ, but he just couldn't get beyond his questions. He couldn't come to certainty on some of his issues. I remember he had a hard time, as we all do, with the idea of how a good God could allow innocent people to suffer. Somehow he felt like he had to have all his intellectual loose ends tied up before he could become a Christian – maybe it was the engineer in him - and as far as I know, he never did make that commitment.

How many others feel attracted to the message about Jesus, who are moved by the great gospel promises of forgiveness and newness of life, and yet who are in the end blocked by their doubts and hesitations? How many people have missed the adventure of the Christian faith because of unresolved issues?

How much do you have to have figured out before you can start following Jesus? Do you have to give your full assent to the *Apostle's* and *Nicene Creed*? Do you have to believe every page of the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*? Do you have to have figured out the meaning of every verse in the Bible?

How much did the disciples know about Jesus and the life of discipleship when they started out? Peter, Andrew, James and John had really very little idea what they were getting into when they responded to Jesus' invitation to follow him. They felt the draw of his personality; they felt the pull of his words. Some said he was the Messiah. They knew enough to drop their nets to follow, but they certainly didn't suddenly drop their questions or their doubts or their uncertainties.

The gospel accounts are very honest in their portrayal of the disciples as people who had a really hard time understanding what Jesus was about, even after being with him for some time. They had a hard time figuring out what Jesus was saying. They were puzzled by his behavior. They doubted Jesus even after the resurrection. Thomas was a prime example. The disciples may have had their issues, they may have had their doubts, but they didn't stop following Jesus. They never stopped putting their trust in him, even if they didn't always understand him or his ways.

John's gospel tells about a time in Jesus' ministry when he was teaching some pretty hard stuff. He was talking about "eating his flesh" and "drinking his blood" as a way to describe what it means to abide in him. Some of the other disciples who were following just didn't get it, and they said to themselves, this is too tough for us – we're leaving. And they stopped following. Jesus turned to the twelve and said, *"Are you leaving also?"* Chances are, the twelve didn't get what Jesus was saying either, but they continued to follow Jesus just the same: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? We put our trust in you."*

And that's the heart of the matter. You see, the journey of faith is about knowing and trusting the person of Jesus in spite of all our questions and issues. *"Come, follow me,"* says Jesus.... *"Walk with me. Let me show you what life is all about. Watch me in action. Study my life. Ponder my words. Put them into practice and see if it works. Go ahead, put me to the test. You are not going to understand everything all at once. Bring to me your questions, your doubts, your unresolved issues – you and I can deal with these things together.... I only ask that you trust me as best you can and seek to follow with an open mind and open heart..."*

We will never arrive at a place of complete certainty; our intellectual issues and our spiritual struggles will never be completely resolved this side of heaven. Our spiritual journey will always be a mixture of faith and doubt. If it is any consolation, some of the greatest believers have been great doubters as well: Abraham doubted God's promise. Moses doubted God's authority. Elijah doubted God's power. Job doubted God's justice and sense of fair play. As I mentioned, *all* Jesus' disciples were great doubters -- not just Thomas. In more recent times, no less than Mother Teresa, has been found to be a great doubter. Recent letters have come to light where she talked about undergoing a prolonged dark night of the soul and how she agonized over a sense of God's absence – of "no longer feeling Jesus' presence" – in spite of her life of sacrificial service.

It's human to doubt. This may seem strange to say, but I would wonder about a faith that was never disturbed by doubt.

I think of the words of the novelist Madeleine L'Engle:

*Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself.*

Since faith is about a personal relationship with God, that relationship will – like all relationships - ebb and flow. Sometimes we will be at peace with God, and sometimes we will be impatient and even angry with him. Sometimes we will feel close to God, and other times, we will feel distant. Sometimes we will question God's purposes and feel completely abandoned by him. Our faith is not dependent upon our feelings, any more than it is dependent on getting all our questions answered. We keep on following God, hanging on in faith in spite of our doubts. We have to walk by faith and not by sight.

To be sure, I have my own questions and doubts. At times, God's ways seem utterly mysterious to me and I have to remain content to live in the mystery. I get frustrated when God doesn't always supply the answers I want or think I need. There are times when God seems to withdraw from me – times when I keenly feel his absence. Faith doesn't always come easy for me – in spite of my polished halo and my saintly presence in the pulpit.

When I begin to be plagued by doubt - when I begin to lose a sense of the Lord's presence, all I can do at such moments is remind myself of what I do know – that God is good, that God has been faithful to me in the past and I therefore I have no reason to doubt his faithfulness in the present or in the future. I try to continue to obey and serve in spite of how I feel, and I pray that the Lord will help me deepen my sense of trust in him, even in his apparent absence. I pray that the Lord will help me get to the point where I doubt my doubts more than I doubt my faith. I can only say with the father of the epileptic in Mark's gospel: *"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."* When I go through such times, as difficult as they can be, I wind up with a faith stronger than before.

You and I are never left alone in working through our doubts. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us and reveals to us the truth we need to know, and helps build the faith we need to have. But again, what is required is an open attitude on our part. *"Seek"* he says, *"and ye shall find... Knock and the door will be opened...ask and it shall be given to you."*

The Lord is patient with our questions and our doubts. He was patient with Thomas. Poor Thomas – he is known to us as the greatest of all doubters, and yet, he was, at the same time, one of the most loyal followers of Jesus. It is said that he carried the Christian faith to India and died a martyr's death. Jesus didn't cut him out of the discipleship band because he doubted or because he had intellectual difficulties with the whole resurrection thing. The Lord helped Thomas, giving him the kind of physical evidence he longed for. That was an act of mercy on the Lord's part.

Thomas had a huge advantage over us. He could actually put his fingers in the flesh wounds of the Risen Christ. We are not able to physically see Christ or touch him today, but the Spirit of Christ promises to reveal himself to us in a way that is clear and unmistakable, that is, if we are open to his spiritual presence and try to see with the eyes of faith.

We may not have all the answers to our questions, but we have him to lean on. That's the most important thing. It is not so much *what* we know, but *whom* we know. In the end, it is the experience of his presence that stills our doubts and makes way for faith. "*Blessed are those who have not seen,*" said Jesus, "*and yet believe.*"

Let us pray...