

HOW TO WORSHIP WHEN WE DOUBT (Matthew 28:16-20)

Thus ends the gospel of Matthew – with a commission and a promise. But important as those are, there’s something else in that reading that intrigues me. It’s where it says, “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted” (v. 17).

What’s that all about? There’s Jesus, raised from the dead and standing right in front of them. So what is there to doubt? It seems the old saying, “Seeing is believing” doesn’t apply in this case.

This is one of those times when Eugene Peterson’s more colloquial version helps. He translates that verse this way: “The moment they saw him they worshipped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about *worship*, about risking themselves totally” (*The Message*). It’s not that they think their eyes are playing tricks on them. It’s more that they’re not sure how to respond, not sure what they’re supposed to do, not sure how much they ought to commit themselves.

Here’s the really important thing, though. Their doubts, their uncertainty, their caution and timidity don’t matter to Jesus. He goes right ahead and gives the apostles their charge to carry on his work.

It seems to me that something really important is going on here, that we’re being told something about what it means to believe in Jesus and be a disciple. And that “something” is important because it speaks to *us*, at least to those of us whose faith may leave a little something to be desired, to those of us who may find doubts creeping in once in a while.

If that’s not you – if you never have any doubts, if you find believing easy – then congratulations. Feel free to tune out. The rest of what I have to say is not for you.

If you’re at the other end of the spectrum, though – if you think religion is just superstition, just so much wishful thinking, if you are an utter disbeliever – what I have to say isn’t for you, either. Of course, if that’s you, you’re probably not here anyway.

There’s a lot of room between those two extremes, between absolute rock-solid faith and total skepticism. And I suspect that somewhere in between is where most of us find ourselves – hesitant, wavering, an uneasy mix of doubt and belief. We’re a lot like the father who turned to Jesus for help and could only plead, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mk. 9:24).

I want to be absolutely clear and even confessional here. When I say “we” and “us,” I am including myself. I hope that doesn’t shock any of you. There’s a reason “doubting Thomas” is my favorite disciple. My parents didn’t know it, but they named me well. I’m with Frederick Buechner: “If you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving” (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 20).

As a matter of fact, I get a bit nervous around true believers – zealots who are 110% sure they’ve got the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

They make me nervous because those are the people who build bonfires for heretics or fly airplanes into buildings.

I'm more comfortable around folks who are restless when they come to church, restless because they bring something that seems out of place, that's unwelcome, that shouldn't be there – and that something is Doubt.

Do you ever start the invocation and wonder, "What am I saying?"? Or listen to a scripture reading where Jesus performs a miracle and think, "That can't be"? Or listen to a sermon and the whole Christian story strikes you as slightly implausible? Does the preacher really believe what he or she is saying? But then you look around and everyone else looks perfectly calm. No one looks upset or uneasy. Do they really buy what they're hearing? Do they really believe in what they're doing? Or are they just good actors?

If you're like me, you can't say "I'm a 60% believer or 30% or I'm a 90% believer. The balance changes constantly. One day I believe and the next day I'm not so sure. It goes up and down.

Paul Tillich said there's an "element of uncertainty in faith [that] cannot be removed" (*Dynamics of Faith*, p. 16). Faith has to be uncertain because faith relates to God, who is infinite, while we are human and finite. We can't fully grasp the object of our faith, which is God, who is a whole lot bigger than anything we can even imagine.

Tillich goes so far as to say that "serious doubt is a confirmation of faith" because it shows that we take serious questions seriously (*Dynamics*, p. 22). A serious doubter is different from the village atheist who mocks religion without understanding what religion is actually all about. And I include in the "village atheist" category critics like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens who imagine that science has reduced religion to the status of irrelevant superstition.

I could go on and on about Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens and the like. But my point this morning isn't to get in an argument with them. I'm more interested in us – in we who are here in spite of our doubts – or maybe even because of them.

Worship can be a challenge when doubts are gnawing away at us. But today's reading from Matthew makes it clear that worship isn't just for folks whose faith is rock solid. Whatever doubts Jesus' disciples may have had, they didn't get in the way or keep them from worshipping him.

Did that make them hypocrites – believing one way and acting another? Not at all. They were acting on whatever faith they had, whether it was big or small. And that's all we can ever do. Act on whatever faith you have and you just may find your faith growing.

You may know Max Beerbohm's tale of the "Happy Hypocrite." It's about a wicked man who wore the mask of a saint to woo the saintly girl he loved. Years later a former girl friend caught on to his ploy and challenged him to take off the mask in front of his beloved and show his face for the ugly thing it was. He did, and lo and behold, beneath the saint's mask, his face had become the face of a saint.

It's one thing to feign piety for personal gain – like the politician who goes to church hoping to get votes from religious people. But if we pray or worship

despite our doubts and because we want to grow in faith, that's the farthest thing from hypocrisy. "I believe; help my unbelief" is not the prayer of a hypocrite but the prayer of someone who takes the risk of living in faith to give belief a chance. Practicing faith while waiting to believe is a step taken in trust and is, in itself, an expression of faith.

The United Church of Christ prides itself on being a church where everyone is welcome, no matter where they may be on their journey of faith – and that means everyone is welcome no matter what doubts they may bring with them. Doubt is not forbidden, it's welcomed. Doubt is not swept under the rug, it's explored.

We worship because there's something even more unrelenting than doubt, and that's our persistent hope for a deeper relationship with God