

# “Doubt”

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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Matt Matthews

I grew up thinking that when it came to faith, doubts were bad. Faith was good. Doubt was not good.

I equated doubt with faithlessness. As I got older, I was becoming a better doubter than believer. I had doubts. And, sometimes, it seemed, doubts had me.

- Was Jonah really swallowed by a giant fish?
- Did God create the whole cosmos in six days?
- And what about dinosaurs?
- What about those plagues?
- Would God really expect Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? What kind of God require that? What kind of father would even consider that?
- What about the virgin birth? The bodily resurrection?
- How could God call different people to have different opinions about the same things?

I had belief. But I also had unbelief. I had doubts.

Perhaps you know what I’m talking about.

I kept these doubts at bay until I took a world religion class my senior year of college. All the world’s religions all made a certain kind of sense to me. I wondered if my friendliness to other religions made me a lukewarm Christian.

I was terrified, that because of my doubts, I was letting God down. I feared I was, in all of Christendom, *The Weak Link*.

I called my pastor. He agreed to see me after my late afternoon class. He said come, no matter how late. I asked if I could come after Hill Street Blues. He said, sure. He liked that show, too. Tap on the door, he said; don’t ring the bell. Don’t wake up Mrs. Andrews. He didn’t say this, but he might have been thinking it: You don’t want to see Mrs. Andrews without her teeth.

I left Richmond got to Rev. Andrews’ house in Hampton near midnight. I tapped on the door. We went into his study. He was doing what preachers do late at night. He was working a crossword, drinking a diet Coke, and watching a baseball game on TV.

To me, Mr. Andrews was the font of all wisdom. He walked the faith. In him and his wise counsel, I would find all answers.

When my dad had bypass surgery, Mr. Andrews sat in the waiting room with us all day long. When the doctor finally came out of surgery and said dad did well, Mom and Uncle Bob melted into tears and Mr.

Andrews prayed to God like he and God were old friends. Then he took me to the cafeteria for a milkshake. It was a good day. My dad was alive and my pastor bought me a milkshake.

Mr. Andrews had faith. He had answers. You could count on Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Andrews greeted us on Easter morning at the sunrise service. We'd gather in the cold church yard before dawn. At sunrise, we banged on the church doors, which had been padlocked. Mr. Andrews would lead us in a chant, "Death come out!" (Say it with me.)

About this time, a member of the youth group wrapped up in a white table cloth would appear to us from the church ROOF. He'd lean over the gutter and deliver his one line: "*Why do you seek the living among the dead?*"

Then, Mr. Andrews would produce a key, unlock the chained doors, and we'd spill into the sanctuary for glad worship.

(Can you imagine what our insurance agent would say nowadays about a member of the youth group on the roof wrapped in a white table cloth?)

Mr. Andrews had all kinds of faith.

Each week, Mr. Andrews made the Christian faith fit nicely into twenty- or twenty-five-minute sermons. He resolved suffering, war and pestilence, and human tragedy with prayer. *We trust you God. Not my will but your will be done. We believe.*

Mr. Andrews, I thought, stood like a rock.

One night while working at the church on a term paper on the secretary's IBM Selectric typewriter, the kind with the white spool of erase tape, I caught our copy machine on fire. Smoke was pouring out. I hated to call Mr. Andrews at midnight, but I had no choice. He said, "Unplug the copy machine, get a knife from the church kitchen, stick the knife in the feeding tray, and pull out the smoking pieces of paper. Be careful," he warned. "It might be hot."

Mr. Andrews was full of faith. He not only believed in God, he believed in me.

On that late Thursday night after the world religion class had shattered my faith, I admitted to Rev. Andrews my doubts. I knew he would set my mind at ease. I didn't know how this would happen, but I knew that it would. I knew he would make all things clear.

In fact, he did not.

Do you know what he said?

He said, "I have those same doubts."

He said, "You're asking the right questions."

He asked, "Are you talking to God? God can handle your questions?"

He asked, "Are you listening to God?"

And he added, that doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is certitude. If you're certain about everything, first of all you're wrong. Second of all, if you're certain about everything, you stop growing. You don't need to learn anymore, because you already know everything. Certitude is the opposite of

faith, not doubt. Faith is a messy, growing, two-steps-forward one-step-back kind of thing. Faith was a live. Certitude is not. Faith is a busy train terminal. Certitude is a graveyard.

Doubt is, actually, good for the faith. It's like manure. It helps faith grow. And doubt is natural. Doubt is normal. God gave us our emotions. God gave us doubt. Doubt must be part of God's plan.

It was like dragging the needle across a brand-new Seals and Crofts record.

Rev. Andrews had doubts?

My minister didn't have all the answers?

I couldn't talk for a while. We watched a little baseball. He groaned when the second baseman overthrew first base on an easy double play. I wondered, *How can he watch a baseball game at a time like this?*

We ended up talking a long time that night.

Here's what else he had for me that night, and this is what I needed. This is what saved my life.

He had a relationship. Yes, he trusted God. Yes, he loved God. But, no, he didn't fully understand God. His theology books didn't have all the answers, though they thought they did. His Christian doctrine did not hold everything together perfectly. He had a million questions. He wondered about tons of stuff. *And this delighted him. Faith was way, way bigger than his brain. God was bigger than the cosmos.*

He was filled with wonder and awe and curiosity and gladness.

He knew God loved him. That was the essential thing, I guess. He believed God created the cosmos; he had no idea how God did it. Science didn't ruin his faith, it deepened it. But science didn't explain God. Theology attempted to that, and theology was an approximation at best. Theology was an art, not a science. God didn't invent theology, we did.

Mr. Andrews knew God in the person of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. He found the expression of faith in Christian doctrine and the Christian story to be, for him, the way, and the truth, and the life.

As for the diversity of world religion. That was above his pay grade.

God certainly had spoken to the Muslim, and to the Taoist, and to the Jew, and to the agnostic differently and uniquely. But for Louie Andrews to be faithful, he needed to be a Christian. This was his calling. He was certain about that.

God's heart was so big there was room for everybody—even for him.

And what Louie Andrews did not say out loud, but that I knew on that night it was true: God's heart was so big there was room for everybody—even for Matt Matthews.

Louie Andrews trusted God to hold, to help, to save, to heal, and to use him. Jesus was his Lord and his great teacher. The Apostle Paul was his theological sparring partner; and they did not always agree. The prophets carried his life's marching orders. The psalmist expressed praise and lament and doubt and anger and every other emotion in ways that gave Mr. Andrews the language to express his own lament and doubt and anger and praise.

For Mr. Andrews, Jesus wasn't so much the answer, as he was the person who walked with us through every season, including our seasons of doubt.

It was a hell of a night.

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How refreshing then and now to be confronted with our friend Thomas. He had doubts.

Thank God for the doubters, for the Mary Magdalenes and the Thomases, for the anxious college seniors and the old preachers. Thanks be to God for the doubts and the doubters.

“The greatest and deepest literature in spirituality, from Augustine to St. John of the Cross to Teresa of Avila to John Bunyan, comes from persons who did not speak from the hubris of certainty about the Christian life, rather, [they spoke] from the depths of their wrestling with God and the angst of the vagaries of faith” (Israel Galindo is Associate Dean for Lifelong Learning at the Columbia Theological Seminary.)

These saints and all the saints who experienced and still experience doubt remind us that Frederick Buechner is correct. “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.”

*[I]f 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 awake and  
moving. (Wishful Thinking)*

When doubts come, as they most certainly do and will, may we be open to the possibility that our doubts may lead us to deeper things—things like awe and wonder and appreciation for the mystery of God. Serious doubts led Thomas to a serious faith.

Doubts about God could be a gift from God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

John 20:19, 24-29            19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, “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.”

26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but

believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Doubt, Certitude, and Faith/By Israel Galindo

At a recent conference, I shared that, “The opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certitude.” A participant e-mailed me afterward asking me to expand on the concept. He said “I’m trying to get my arms around this concept.” He seemed to be an eager and responsible learner since he even looked up the word “certitude” in the dictionary. He said that Webster’s defines it as “Freedom from doubt, especially in matters of faith.”

My comment was meant to address both a misunderstanding about faith and some of the assumptions we tend to have about what constitutes educating in faith. The popular misunderstanding often translates to the sentiment, “If I have faith, I will have no doubts and will have an answer to all of life’s questions, the problems I experience, and the issues in the world.”

It’s an example of a cognitive-oriented propositional faith that assumes that faith is equivalent to holding the right beliefs. Education then is about giving people all the right answers. In terms of faith formation, we run the risk of shaping persons who have little capacity for mystery, learning (since they have the answers), or for challenge which leads to growth.

Taken to the extreme, this stance becomes a form of insanity—one’s perspective of the world is so narrow and lock-step integrated that there is no room for rationality or for different points of views (if you’ve ever been in the presence of a person suffering a schizophrenic episode, you may know what I mean). This mentality is a characteristic of extremist religious cults.

But if the nature of faith is that it is a quality and a relationship, then certitude (having “so much faith in God that there is no room for doubt”) is not the issue. Faith is about our relationship with God. The more we mature, the more we tend to realize that we know less than we thought we did, and the fewer things we become absolutely certain about even in the Christian life (but those FEW things we are certain about tend to be the ones most worthy of it).

The interesting thing is that lack of certitude does not lead to despair, because a mature faith has the capacity to live with the ambiguities, paradoxes, and mystery of the spiritual life and of the human experience. In fact, we know that a mature faith is a critical faith. It can reflect on its own experience of faith, and it can examine, challenge, and question its own beliefs, assumptions, and prejudices.

A mature faith has the capacity to appreciate where God ultimately cannot be “understood” or “comprehended,” and that isn’t the point anyway. What God desires is a redemptive loving relationship with us, not “good students” who know all the right answers. What God requires of us is trust and obedience even when we do not understand—perhaps, especially in those times.

So, one flaw in so much of what we tend to do by way of Christian formation education is to lean toward reinforcing people's beliefs, seeking to provide comfort and assuage doubts, rather than, when appropriate, challenge and provide the kind of dissonance required to help people grow in their faith.

The greatest and deepest literature in spirituality, from Augustine to St. John of the Cross to Teresa of Avila to John Bunyan come from persons who did not speak from the hubris of certainty about the Christian life, rather, from the depths of their wrestling with God and the angst of the vagaries of faith.

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