

**January 29, 2017**

**TEXT: Matthew 28:16–20**

**TITLE: Admitting Doubts**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

If you attend a 12-Step meeting, like Alcoholics Anonymous, there is a custom to introduce yourself by saying, “My name is so-and-so and I am an alcoholic.” It dates back to the earliest years of AA and puts into words something that needs to be named and admitted. In my role as pastor, one of the most common conversations I have is with people who confess to me they have doubts about the Christian faith—in particular, doubts about whether Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of God. They share this confession as if no one else doubts but them, when, in truth, I’d wager that everyone in this sanctuary today has some doubts—some questions about Christian doctrine and the identity of Jesus—which you are possibly afraid the person next to you in the pews will someday find out.

So I’m going to break the ice. “Hello. My name is Randy and I have doubts about Jesus.” I do. I wonder about what it means to truly say Jesus is human and divine; I wonder about the miracles and how the resurrection story fits into my modern understanding of how the world works. Now, the beauty of my calling is that I get to grapple with these questions every week. I get to look at the world with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other and try to make sense of it all. I know I don’t have all the answers. That’s why I hope we will always be a church that asks hard questions and admits that we all have doubts—because that is precisely the way the Christian church has always been, going back to the first disciples gathered around Jesus and ever since.

Three verses from the end of Matthew’s gospel we are told that a resurrected Jesus appeared to the group of disciples, and when they saw him “they worshiped him, but some doubted.” It’s the climax of the “greatest story ever told” and yet instead of uniform praise and belief, some doubted. The beauty of the gospels is that they don’t try to make doubts disappear; they highlight them so we’ll see our doubting selves in the story and struggle honestly with what we are to believe. In Matthew 14, Peter steps out from a boat onto the waters and instead of doing a lap above the lake, he doubts and starts to sink. In Mark 9, a man falls before Jesus and says, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” In Luke 24, the disciples saw the risen Christ in the upper room, but they thought he was a ghost and were so terrified Jesus said, “Why are you filled with doubts?” And in John 20, we get the ultimate story about how difficult it is to reconcile the Jesus of Nazareth with the Easter Christ in the stories featuring Doubting Thomas. Remember, the gospels were written 30 to 60 years after Jesus’ time on earth. The disciples’ doubts are named, not because they eventually all go away, but because they lingered—because the followers of Jesus in the next generations all had questions and doubts. So despite what you may think from TV preachers and revival tent meetings, doubt is not an obstacle to faith but a lingering and

important element of faith. If you don't have doubts and questions, you haven't taken your faith very seriously.

So let's look at Christian doubt from two perspectives this morning—one theoretical, and one musical. First, it is important to remember that Jesus' identity was never meant to be self-evident. Jesus Christ is less like  $2+2=4$  and more like  $E=mc^2$ . The whole life and ministry of Jesus was meant to contain mystery and wonder that is not fully comprehensible, because it embodied and pointed to a reality that is larger than our reality. By definition, God exceeds humanity; so it is wrong to believe humans can ever fully grasp God's divine nature and reality.

But let's do a theoretical exercise: What happens if you do not believe Jesus is the Christ? What if you are one of those doubting disciples upon the mountaintop who followed Jesus—who valued what he embodied and taught, but you can't quite accept that he has been resurrected? What if you decided that the gospel miracles and Easter story are just metaphors—powerful descriptions of love conquering adversity and justice triumphing over evil, but not Truth with a capital T? Would you do anything differently in your life? You could still read and study the bible for its wisdom and inspiration. You could still pray and meditate, seeking a peace not available through worldly pleasure. And you could still be part of a church, finding comfort in the fellowship, meaning in deeds of service and mission, and value in the rituals of worship, baptism and communion. You could act faithfully, while knowing that you do not fully possess all that is associated with that faith—living, in effect, with real doubts, yet also with integrity, purpose and grace in this troubled world.

There is a man named Duncan McMillan who wrote a story called "Every Brilliant Thing." It is based on a time in his life when he was a seven year old boy and his mother attempted suicide. Faced with her despair and depression, the boy began making a list of every brilliant thing that exists in the world. It helped him make sense of and find happiness in a world whose trustworthiness he had begun to doubt. It was his "please-don't-kick-the-bucket" list. It included roller coasters, things with stripes, cycling downhill, kind old people who are not weird and don't smell unusual, and knowing someone well enough to get them to check your teeth for broccoli. As the years passed, the boy's list grew to be pages and pages long. Despite doubts and facing the death of a loved one, that list helped him to live.

If your doubts lead you to believe in Jesus but not in Christ, how does that change your view of the world? How does that change what you do each day, or the things you'd write on your list of "every brilliant thing"? Give it some serious thought. But, while you are at it, I'd ask you to do the similar exercise and ask yourself, "If Jesus is not just Jesus, but actually is the Christ—if this resurrection talk isn't just metaphor but a reality—how does that change what I would do this day? How does that change my list of "every brilliant thing"?"

The author Madeleine L'Engle has said *"I really and truly believe in God with all kinds of doubts...[Because] there are three ways you can live life. You can live life as though it's all a cosmic accident; that we're nothing but an irritating skin disease on the face of the earth...Or you can look at the stars at night and think, yes, they were created by a prime mover, but he's aloof and indifferent to this creation...Or you can live as though you believe that the power behind the universe is a power of love, a personal power of love who really does know about the fall of every sparrow and has counted the hairs of our head—who loves us so much that every single one of our lives has meaning."* (A Circle of Quiet)

We receive from God the gift of self-awareness. But that gift does not spare us from error or from doubt. In many ways, doubts are the rooms we must pass through as we move through the house of our faith—they are the waystations we must visit and tarry awhile in as we journey toward the distant horizon. Which leads me to my musical perspective on doubt. Music ranges from the simple to the complex, from "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" to Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. Yet all music uses dissonance. Dissonance creates tension and adds interest. It makes our experience of the music richer. We hear the dissonance and feel unsettled; we wait until at last the dissonance resolves into consonance, when the strings vibrate together in harmony, and that brings us joy.

In the same way, every life contains dissonance. There are physical pains and emotional pains. There are words spoken that hurt, promises broken that disappoint, love that is unrequited, trust that is misplaced. Like musical dissonance seeking to resolve into harmony, our spiritual dissonance wants to resolve as well. We wait and hope and work for healing, for reconciliation, for wholeness—when all the strings in our life vibrate together in harmony.

At its heart, Christian faith is about resolving dissonance—the dissonance within us, between us, and between us and God. And when it happens, people still have doubts and questions about what to believe—about who exactly this Jesus is that we call Christ—about how God is active in our lives today even while there is so much suffering, evil and brokenness around us. But in the end our response today is much like what our brothers and sisters said in the gospel: *I don't know exactly how Jesus is the Christ. All I know is that I was blind and now I see; I was deaf and now I hear; I was lost and now I'm found; I was afraid and now I celebrate every brilliant thing.*

The word for "doubt" in the bible doesn't mean disbelief. It means a "hesitancy, to sit on the fence." We never have all our doubts resolve in this lifetime. That's part of our hope and the comforting promise of heaven. *"Now we know only in part; then we shall know fully."* Most importantly, Christ doesn't condemn us for our doubts nor expect us to understand everything. He only asks us to take a step forward by faith and help bring to completion the work he began. On that day on the mountaintop, Jesus said the same words to those who worshiped and to those who doubted—and he says it to us: *Go and make disciples of all nations.*

*Teach them to obey everything I've commanded you. And remember, you faith-walkers and fence-sitters, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Thanks be to God.*