

Doubt That Saves Us

**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
The Sixth Sunday of Our Global Pandemic Crisis
April 19, 2020**

**Bethany Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Foxborough, Massachusetts
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Reading: John 20:19-31

Then [Jesus] 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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." (John 20:27-29).

I.

If there was ever a movie we need to watch right now, it is *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, starring Tom Hanks.¹ In the movie, two-time Oscar winner Tom Hanks portrays the beloved Fred Rogers, whose Public Television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a staple for millions of children and their parents, providing much needed empathy and wisdom for years.

The movie is based on the real-life friendship between Mr. Rogers and a journalist named Tom Junod², who was assigned to write an *Esquire* magazine article about Fred Rogers.^{3,4} Like any good skeptic, he wondered if Mr. Rogers was too good to be true; and, like the worst of cynics, he could not believe that someone could be so kind without an ulterior motive.

Across their many conversations, Fred overcomes Tom's cynicism with empathy, kindness, and decency, even towards his family as Tom's father dies. Mr. Rogers proved to be more than just a neighborly character on a children's television program. Fred was actually just that: a good neighbor, sharing the self-giving love for one's neighbor that Jesus talked about.

We could use Mr. Rogers' empathy and wisdom these days. Our children are anxious and so are we. As we stay home to slow the pandemic's spread, and as others work to serve and even save us, we wonder when it will all end. In the meantime, we long for empathy and wisdom coming from our TV screens. We long for someone to keep us well-informed, grounded, and hopeful.

What better time than this to hear words like these from the very real Fred Rogers:

Some days, doing 'the best we can' may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but life isn't perfect on any front, and doing what we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else.⁵

Like Thomas on that first Easter evening so long ago, who still lived in Good Friday's shadows while doubting the too-good-to-be-true news of Easter, we now find ourselves standing in the

shadows of doubt leery of false promises and weary of denials and defiance, while longing for words of competent clarity and needing to return to “normal,” whatever that will mean.⁶

Like Thomas, we stand on the fault line between Good Friday’s grief and Easter’s hope. With Thomas, we wrestle deeply with needing to believe while needing also to doubt. We walk the fine line between constructive skepticism and destructive cynicism. With Thomas we want in the worst way to lean forward towards hope to avoid falling back into the abyss of despair.

How ironic that Thomas the disciple and Tom the journalist would share the same name and characteristic: a nagging, soul-aching doubt caught between constructive skepticism and destructive cynicism. Remember that cynicism killed Jesus, not skepticism. Skeptics ask honest, open-ended questions, searching for answers. Cynics ask questions to prove their point.

II.

Doubt means many things, from questioning the truthfulness of something to having a lack of confidence. It can be an expression of mistrust or hesitance. Doubt can be refusing to believe in something because it is too good to be true; even worse, too horrible to be true. Doubt can be uncertainty about the future because the outcome is...well... “still in doubt.”

Doubt can be healthy and wise. It can be an honest skepticism that questions God and religion. It can be a skepticism about ideologies and political philosophies (e.g. free-market capitalism, democratic socialism). It can be a skepticism about all sorts of truth claims, or anyone that claims to know what’s best in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Healthy skepticism is a good thing. Here’s an example.

When two out of three dentists allegedly approve of my brand of toothpaste, how many were interviewed? Only three? Maybe thirty? Maybe three hundred? Were they randomly sampled or self-selected? Did the toothpaste manufacturer offer to compensate them? Was there interview bias? That’s what healthy skepticism looks like.

When someone makes a claim, critical thinking and healthy doubt is useful until we know more. From buying toothpaste to opening our pandemic-plagued economy, we need constructive doubt. What are the metrics? Who’s doing the measuring? Who makes the decisions? What’s their expertise? What’s their bias? *It is* a life-and-death matter. For everyone’s sake, we need to know!

If healthy doubt is seen in such skepticism, then unhealthy doubt is seen in contemporary cynicism.^{7,8} Cynics believe that people are motivated solely by self-interest. Cynics call people ignorant because of who they are, where they’re from, or what they believe. Cynicism is doubt in the form of mistrust, suspicion, pessimism, or prejudice. No one can be trusted. End of story.

We hear cynicism in statements like these: “All religion is imaginary.” “All Christians are self-righteous.” “All politicians are dishonest.” “All news organizations and journalists are biased.” “All welfare recipients are lazy.” “Doctors are in it just for the money.” And now we hear cold and callous cynicism with words like these: “Old and weak people are going to die anyway, so just let the pandemic run its course and the fittest will survive.”

Such cancerous cynicism is a pernicious plague on the common good.

Jesus encountered such cynicism from one of his disciples, Nathanael, who's prejudice led him to believe that nothing good could ever come out of Nazareth, even before he met Jesus.⁹ The religious leaders that asked Jesus disingenuous questions were steeped in their own destructive cynicism, as was Pilate, who could not have cared less about Jesus. Such toxic cynicism has lethal consequences, and Jesus has the scars to prove it.

Doubt is a double-edged sword: one side skepticism and the other side cynicism. When it comes to Thomas: what kind of doubt did he have and how did Jesus respond to it?

III.

When we read the post-resurrection stories of Matthew and Luke, we discover that other disciples doubted as well. Matthew reports that:

...the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus...directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.¹⁰

Jesus was not deterred by their doubt. He went ahead by commissioning them to go to the ends of the earth to make disciples. *His work was done.* Now it was up to them to debate and delegate what was to be done. That should be a comfort to us now because even if we are all not on the same page, believing the same thing, Christ commissions us anyway! He has a mission for us!

It took Thomas the full week after Easter to move from doubt to faith, from despair to hope, and it took a direct experience with the Risen Christ, whatever that was, to convince him.¹¹ Sometimes we need to see the scars before we believe that something deadly happened, and will happen again if we fail to believe in the Way of Christ's grace and truth.

Thomas's doubt was an honest skepticism about something too good to be true. After seeing the evidence, he believed. Jesus did not condemn him for asking a stupid question, being a third-rate disciple, or challenging his authority as the Son of God. Jesus responded with patient compassion allowing Thomas to reach his own conclusion, in his own time, in his own mind and heart.

Like Fred Rogers with Tom Junod, Jesus' laser-like focus pierced through his disciples' doubt to the deeper agony of their souls. It's not the presenting question that always needs an answer. Sometimes, our deeper existential longing for trust calls for an assuring response.

*Defensive, accusatory answers make cynics out of skeptics.
Thoughtful, compassionate answers transform skeptics into believers.*

Just as Jesus blessed Thomas for believing after seeing, Jesus also blessed those who have not seen yet still believe. Though some of us may need to see the scarred faces of healthcare workers after days of wearing protective masks before we believe this pandemic is as bad as we are told, blessed are those who believe without needing to see their scars!

Dear siblings in Christ, and all people of good will, as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in this Easter season, fearing its spread and fearful of its resurgence, we must also fight against the pandemic of destructive cynicism that denies the threat, dismisses the experts, and dares to suggest that the weakest among us should risk death so the rest of us can get back to work.

Christ shows us the deadly scars of cynicism and the hope that is ours when we believe. Just as Fred Rogers' empathy, kindness, and honesty enlightened Tom Junod's mind and heart, so also did Christ's non-judgmental compassion transform Thomas from skeptic to saint.

Jesus offered kindness and calm, acknowledged difficult feelings, and affirmed the human worthiness¹² of his disciples and others, even after they denied and abandoned him in his final hours. There was more grace in him than failure in them. We would do well to live like that!

Cancerous cynicism kills at a time like this, literally. Healthy skepticism uncovers the facts and helps us to find the way forward. *This is the doubt that saves us.* Compassionate honesty will save us because, as Jesus said, the truth sets us free.¹³ This is what we need from our leaders in these doubt-filled days and what we need from each other.^{14,15,16}

May God grant wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen.

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ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

(Unless noted, Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.)

1. For more about the movie, see: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3224458/>.
2. For more about Tom Junod, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Junod.
3. Tom Junod, "My Friend Mister Rogers...He's never been more revered – or more misunderstood." *The Atlantic*, December, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/what-would-mister-rogers-do/600772/>.
4. Tom Junod, "Can You Say...Hero? Fred Rogers has been doing the same small good thing for a very long time." *Esquire*, November 1, 1998. <http://classic.esquire.com/article/1998/11/1/can-you-say-hero>.
5. Geoffrey James, "45 Quotes from Mr. Rogers That We All Need Today." *Inc.* August 5, 2019. <HTTPS://WWW.INC.COM/GEOFFREY-JAMES/45-QUOTES-FROM-MR-ROGERS-THAT-WE-ALL-NEED-TODAY.HTML>
6. Do we go back to polluting the earth, petty partisanship, inequities and injustices, global and regional tensions and enmities? Or, do we learn from our pandemic experience and make deep changes to our society and government? I'd certainly like to get back to normal: back to work, back with family and friends, back to things we enjoy; however, this pandemic calls for much more from us than back to business as usual.
7. I use the term "contemporary cynicism" to avoid confusion with an ancient Greek philosophy called Cynicism.
8. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains that "the Cynics advocate... [freeing] oneself from convention [to] promote self-sufficiency and live in accord with nature. [Cynics] live in poverty, embrace hardship and toil, and ... speak freely about the silly, and often vicious, way [that] life is lived by his or her contemporaries. ...Cynics consistently undermined the most hallowed principles of Athenian culture, but...did so for the sake of replacing them...with reason, nature, and virtue." <https://www.iep.utm.edu/cynics/>
9. John 1:45-46.
10. Matthew 28:16-20 and Luke 24:36-49.

11. John 20:19-29.
12. See Robin Berman, "When in Doubt, Model Mr. Rogers," *U.S. News and World Report*, August 27, 2018. <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2018-08-27/when-in-doubt-model-mr-rogers>.
13. See John 8:32. John chapter 8 begins with a group of men ready to stone to death a woman caught in adultery. (Seriously, where was the male adulterer?) It was then that Jesus said "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." One by one, oldest to youngest, they dropped their stones and walked away. Jesus did not condemn the woman. Instead, he sent her away with a simple challenge: "Go and sin no more." The truth about our human limitations and frailties sets every one of us free. None of us is perfect; therefore, we need to err on the side of grace and redemption. Just as the woman was redeemed for a better life, her accusers (and would-be-executioners) could well have been redeemed to show more grace and less judgment in the future. That's why mitigating factors must be considered before rushing to all kinds of judgment. We can learn a thing or two from Jesus!
14. At a time like this, I would like to believe that our faith tradition and common humanity supersedes our political persuasions and partisan biases. I would like to believe that our commitment is to a Higher Authority than we have in any office of government, from the President to our governors, mayors, legislative bodies, and local councils. I would like to believe that our attitudes and opinions, decisions and actions, are more informed by the Hebrew prophets' call for a just, equitable, and compassionate way of life, and much less by the opinions of populists, pundits, and personalities. I would like to believe that all we say and do through this crisis is informed and infused with Christ's courage and compassion, rather than the disturbing actions and attitudes we see of late in defiance of public health and safety measures. If there was ever a time apply Micah 6:8 to our lives, it is now: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with...God" and each other.
15. Regardless of our political persuasion, as Christians we *must* agree that there is one cure we need going forward. For global security and public safety, let alone for our social, economic, political, and personal well-being, we *must* insist and ensure that all candidates for high office are qualified, that they are emotionally and intellectually competent; also, financially transparent and accountable. We need political leaders that view economic and public health issues as the same, that value experts, multi-disciplinary teams, evidence-based solutions, and professional logistics. We need elected leaders committed to recruiting and appointing the most qualified, service-oriented, temperate, truth-telling people to protect us. More than anything, we need leaders with a strong moral compass (i.e. an innate sense of what's best for all concerned) who will provide genuine, empathic guidance in the worst of times, as well as the best of times. Nothing less than this is acceptable.
16. My dear friends across the theological and ideological spectrum, across every religious and regional divide, the time has come for positive change! The pandemic has exposed our weaknesses and vulnerabilities as a government and society. We need more than just a vaccine. We need to change the way we govern, prioritize our resources, build our common weal and wealth, and relate to each other. If we ignore these threats to our global, national, regional, and local well-being, we do so at our own peril. We are better than that, and we know it!