

Another Doubting Thomas Sermon – April 16, 2023
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It's the glorious season of Eastertide! The season of Alleluias! The season of daffodils and rebirth and little lambs! And you've come to church today (or are watching online) just to hear Debra talking about DOUBT... AGAIN! Talk about a Debbie Downer – literally. Well, folks, I didn't write the Revised Common Lectionary, and while we Episcopalians might break a lot of rules, according a lot of people from more conservative Christian denominations, but this is one we obey – the second Sunday after Easter is always Doubting Thomas Day. So here we go, again.

I'm going to start off with a little personal reflection time – and this time not about me – but about you. I want you to close your eyes (if it helps) and think about the time or times in your life that you have experienced the most doubt. This may include, not just doubt about the existence of God or your own faith in God but doubt about even bigger questions such as what is the purpose or meaning of your life, your actions, or even existence in general. Let's give it about a minute. Thanks for doing that. I wouldn't be surprised if you told me that these were times in your life when you were under great stress or anxiety. I don't necessarily mean that having the doubts caused the stress or anxiety, which they likely did too, but that what you were going through, was a stressful or anxiety producing time for you. For me, distressing world events like the Sandy Hook tragedy and attending to people during the worst of COVID can trigger it, but also personal losses – my parents' deaths, my recent health journey – and particularly last fall when all the medical tests began. But for most of our lives we go on ignoring the obvious truth that we will not live forever, and then sometimes, when we are least expecting it, we get hit on the head with it. On Tuesday of Holy Week, I was sitting at my desk at Norwalk Hospital doing normal things and a torrent of water came through the ceiling, and then as I tried to save my stuff, the ceiling came down on my head! Fortunately, I and my things, only sustained water damage – but the metaphor for life was a good one. When things seem to be going pretty good – you get drenched with water and hit on the head!

In our Gospel reading today, we see that even Thomas, a disciple of Jesus had doubts, and that Jesus understood that to be a normal part of who we are as humans. Thomas had not been with the other disciples when Jesus had appeared alive before them. He said he would not believe them unless he had proof -- proof being the scars Jesus had sustained from his crucifixion and death. When Jesus appeared to Thomas and the others a week later, Thomas went from Doubting Thomas to Thomas the believer. This showed Thomas that the story at the empty tomb continued and was real. At both of Jesus' appearances Jesus welcomed them with the words "peace be with you." – Jesus tells Thomas: "Do not doubt but believe." Looking forward to a time when he would no longer be on earth, Jesus says that "blessed are those who have not seen yet who come to believe." We and all the millions of others since that time are the people that Jesus is speaking about -- we don't have the proof that Thomas received -- we don't get to touch his scars – but our faith is that God exists, – that God loves us unconditionally – that this life is not all there is – and that there is meaning and truth in our existence.

If Easter is our time to affirm this as loud as we can and to recommit to our beliefs, then why is doubt so important this week? The theologian Paul Tillich explores this in his books *The Courage to Be* and in his *Systematic Theology Volume 2* where he memorably said: "The affirmation that Jesus is the Christ is an act of faith and consequently of daring courage. It is not an arbitrary leap into darkness but a decision in which elements of immediate participation and therefore certitude are mixed with elements of strangeness and therefore incertitude and doubt. But doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Therefore, there is no faith without risk."¹

¹ Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, (University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 116-117.

Paul Tillich was a German-American ordained Lutheran minister and Christian Existentialist Philosopher and Theologian who wrote his most well-known works in the mid-20th Century when he was a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He had left Germany to immigrate to America following his dismissal from his tenured position when he and other academics were declared to be enemies of the Reich after Hitler came to power in 1933. But it was in the trenches of WWI where Tillich served as a army chaplain that he said he gained many of his insights into Christian Existentialism. He had to be with and bury many soldiers including his best friend in the mud of France and was hospitalized three times for combat trauma what they then called shell shock and what we now call PTSD ² And it was at this time that his first wife had an affair, became pregnant and they divorced. His life before he came to America certainly had many opportunities for him to experience existential doubt and have dark nights of the soul.

Many people have reported that the times in their lives when they have suffered, times when they have questioned themselves and God, have also had the result of making their faith stronger, and improved their ability to handle new challenges in the future. Tillich's theology, particularly in *The Courage to Be* would affirm this as well. For Tillich, the core of our fear is the ever-present anxiety we all have regarding our death which he calls our non-being. He also discusses two other types of anxiety that plagues us as humans – anxiety over meaninglessness and anxiety where we condemn ourselves over our wrong lives or acts and the guilt we feel as a result of it. These anxieties are inescapable as you might have recalled when you remembered the times you too have had them which may have precipitated doubt. My feeble attempt to explain Tillich, who for me, is not an easy read, can be excused, perhaps, by sharing what I have found helpful from Tillich in my own times of anxiety and doubt. I love that he describes a God that is bigger than we can ever comprehend precisely because of our limited nature – our humanness that requires us to fear our non-being. This is the God that we must have the courage to believe in despite our fears. Faith and doubt cannot be separated. Tillich ends his book with: **“The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.”** This God allows and loves us for our existential questions, for our existential doubts.

The poetry in the songs of Leonard Cohen, of whom I am a lifelong fan, have always been comfortable in this existential place as well. Cohen began writing his beloved song *Hallelujah!* in late 1970's with over 150 draft verses.³ In it, Cohen talks about love being a cold and broken Hallelujah, that maybe there's a God above, but, but that at the end of it all – after it all went wrong -- there is nothing else to say but Hallelujah. And near the end of his life, Cohen wrote the powerful song *You Want it Darker* which, in a way that only Leonard Cohen can, explains the paradox of the finite human condition, our place in it, and our relationship with God. In it, Cohen writes about the “million candles burning for the help that never came.” Like its title, the song is dark, an acknowledgement that there is darkness, that Jesus was vilified and crucified, that there is suffering, blame and brokenness. Yet, the chorus, like the broken Hallelujah is “Hineni, hineni. I'm ready, My Lord.” Hineni in Hebrew means: “Here I am.” The words said by Abraham and Isaac when they answered a call by God. What both Tillich and Cohen describe is a world where doubt and faith are inseparable particularly in the face of our mortal human condition and in the face of a world that gives us many sorrows. But to thrive is to know that all of us have it in us to face that darkness because that is where God will meet us and we will courageously meet God and we will be ready to say, the only thing left to say -- Alleluia!! **Amen**

² “The Courage to Be: An Anecdote to Meaninglessness “ -- on the YouTube Channel called “Eternalized” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3ZZzudEXMU>. This is an excellent short discussion of Paul Tillich's life, theology and his book *The Courage to Be*.

³ *Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, A Journey, A Song*, 2022 Documentary by Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine. This documentary explores the history of the song tied into a biography of Cohen's life. I highly recommend it.