

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
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Faith and Doubt
John 20:19-31

The Rev. Susan Sparks is the senior pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. She tells a story of a time when she took a trip to the holy land ...the holy land of Memphis, Tennessee. She believes Memphis is holy land for a number of reasons, not the least of which is their BBQ. Now, for those of us who are not Southerners, apparently BBQ is part of what is known as the southern trinity: BBQ, Basketball and the Bible.

But BBQ is not the only reason Memphis is considered holy land. The primary reason, of course, is because it is the home of Elvis Presley.

While she was in Memphis, she visited Sun Records, where Elvis recorded his first song. In the studio, there was an "X" marked on the floor with duct tape indicating the exact spot where Elvis stood. The tour guide said that just the week before, Bob Dylan had come into the studio, said not a word to anyone, walked over to the "X," got down on all fours, kissed it and walked out. For many, Elvis has reached an almost holy status.

In fact, there have been studies on the parallels between Jesus and Elvis, most notably by the standup comedian Adam Sandler. He explains:

Jesus said: "Love thy neighbor." (Matthew 22:39); Elvis said: "Don't be cruel." (RCA, 1956)

Jesus is part of the Trinity; Elvis' first band was a trio.

Jesus is the Lord's shepherd; Elvis dated Cybil Sheppard.

Given that kind of reverence, she believes that we as Jesus fans can learn a lot from Elvis fans. Especially in terms of faith....

Like any good pilgrim, she took time on her Memphis trip to visit the shrine of Graceland. There was the great welcome sign--a twenty-five foot high Elvis saying "Welcome to the Blingdom!" And after the requisite photographs, she got in line for tickets. As she was waiting, she turned to one of the tour guides and asked, "So, how long did Elvis actually live here?" There was an audible gasp from the surrounding crowd. The guide looked at her with shock and whispered, "We don't use the past tense here." She then pointed at her t-shirt, which read: "Graceland, where Elvis LIVES."

It didn't matter that she had never actually seen Elvis or that technically Elvis stopped walking the earth over thirty-five years ago. It didn't matter. She didn't care. Elvis fans don't care. Without any proof, they believe he lives! Elvis lives, baby. The King lives.

Some Christians believe we should live our lives with that kind of blind, unquestioning faith. Now don't get me wrong. I admire a number of qualities Elvis fans have, and I think we can learn some things from them. For example, they not only believe he lives, they act like he lives. They are constantly looking for Elvis. And, sometimes, they find him. There have been Elvis sightings all over the world--from a spa in Tokyo to a Burger King in Michigan. There was even a woman who claimed that she found the image of Elvis in a taco shell.

Another thing - Elvis fans believe he lives, so they look for others who believe as well, like through Elvis fan clubs. We Christians can learn something from this. Community is what gives us strength, support and focus in times we most need it. Finding families of faith is what helps us keep our faith. If you believe he lives, you'll look for others who believe as well.

Here's a third example, and probably the most important. Because they believe he lives, Elvis fans go out into in the world and share his message. They play Elvis' music; they dress up as Elvis impersonators; they decorate their homes with Elvis memorabilia. One thing Rev. Sparks found at the Graceland gift shop was an Elvis sprinkler. It was a foot-high plastic Elvis in a sequin jumpsuit, and as he watered your yard, he would swivel his

hips. Whether through word or music, impersonators or sprinklers, Elvis fans proudly proclaim the message of the King.

But it's hard for many of us to live our lives with that kind of faith. I know that's the case with me. I tend to be more like the disciple Thomas than the tour guide at Graceland.

It's been two weeks since Easter Sunday, but the reverberations from that day are still being felt. The delicious breakfast, the children's Easter Egg hunt, the glorious service of worship in celebration of Christ's resurrection – all pointed to the great victory over evil and death that was won for us by Jesus Christ. We're still glowing a bit with the aftereffects of Easter – and in fact, on the church calendar, we stay in the Easter season until Pentecost. So we continue to sing hymns about the resurrection and focus on the risen Christ.

So then, why is the text for today on the subject of doubt? It seems incongruous, given that we're only two weeks out from Easter Sunday, but it's what happened to people in the Bible right after the resurrection. And it's what continues to happen with most people today. Many, if not most, people in church have questions about what they believe. Faith and doubt go together.

One preacher makes the amusing suggestion, not to be taken literally, of setting up a polygraph at the Easter worship service, just to get a reading on how many who declare, “I believe...the third day he arose again..., he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father...” – just to see how many would pass this lie detector test? Truth is, he suspects, there is a doubter in [most of us], just as there is a believer in [most of us]” (P.C. Enniss, *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2003, 34).

If any of you this morning harbor any hint of skepticism, the word to you is, “Welcome.” “You are in good company because most of those there on that first Easter had trouble taking it all in, also. The women who came to the tomb on Easter morning assume the body has been stolen” (Enniss). The disciples at first didn’t believe the women’s testimony after they met the angels.

And then there’s Thomas, nicknamed Doubting Thomas, who refused to believe the witness of his friends until he could see Jesus’ wounds for himself.

Doubt so often seems to go along with faith. The question is: is it o.k. to doubt? Are there any forms of doubt that are harmful or toxic?

The key Greek word for doubt is *krino*, which means literally to divide, to judge, to weigh. In the book of James, the prefix *dia* is added to

the word *krino* - *diakrino*. Dia means through, but when this prefix is used in the context of time, it means “always, continually, constantly.” So here’s what the word literally means: *krino* means to divide, to judge, and that’s a good thing to do. That’s non-toxic doubt – we’ve got to divide, we’ve got to evaluate, we’ve got to judge, so that we don’t get taken for fools. We should use the minds that God has given us. We’ve got to weigh, to judge, to be critical in the good sense.

But *diakrino* means to continually, to constantly, to endlessly divide. When you endlessly divide, then that’s doubt in the bad sense. James says that when you’re endlessly dividing, continually judging, you’re like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. That person is a double-minded person.

In other words, from the Bible’s standpoint, doubt can be good, because it means we’re looking at things critically, but to endlessly doubt means to endlessly divide, and while you’re doubting you’re not building.

Doubting is like looking for a foundation that’s strong enough to build your house. That’s good doubt – testing the foundations. But bad doubt is if you endlessly test the foundations and never get around to building your house. Some people are like that – they can never find anybody quite good

enough, can never find any job, any relationship, any church, that's quite good enough, and they endlessly doubt, and then they end up with nothing.

So essentially, doubt itself is neutral; it can even be good, when you're using good judgment. Doubt is only bad when you *diakrino*, when you doubt without ceasing. When that happens, James describes it as being double-minded: "The person who endlessly divides possibilities but never lands squarely and simply at a resting point is like a wave that has no current direction of its own, but is dominated by whatever wind is most immediate" (Palmer, *The Book That James Wrote*).

But there's also good doubt. For instance, there's intellectual doubt – this is when we doubt the facts of the evidence. The Bible is not against this kind of doubt. The cure is to keep on gathering evidence. If the resurrection really happened, if what we teach in church is really true, then we should in fact encourage people to research the facts. If you have intellectual doubts, figure out what you need to know to have faith. We'll never have all the facts, but I believe we can get enough to have faith.

The greatest intellectual doubter in the Bible is Thomas. He doubts the witness of his friends. But notice what he does with his intellectual doubts: he tells the other disciples what he needs to know, and then he stays with the people of faith. Did you all catch the line in John's Gospel? "Eight

days later, the disciples were in the room, and Thomas was with them.” He doesn’t compromise his integrity, but he stays with the others. Then he meets Jesus, and Thomas gives the greatest confession of faith in the New Testament – “My Lord, and my God.”

Doubt is part of the journey of faith – it’s not necessarily toxic. Of course, some people who doubt land on the opposite side of faith, and that’s their freedom. But I’ve been an ordained pastor for 18 years now, and that’s long enough for me to have seen that most people who approach God honestly and openly, even with all their doubts and questions, are eventually won over by God. Jesus Christ wins their respect. The secret is – stay with the people of faith, like Thomas.

Even if we have doubts, if we believe Jesus lives – we’ll act like he lives. And if we believe he lives, our lives will change. The good news is: Jesus lives, baby. The true King lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.