

Consensus

Volume 37

Issue 1 *Journeying Together toward Truth and Reconciliation*

Article 9

5-25-2016

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Recommended Citation

Lund, Kristine (2016) "Faithful Doubt," *Consensus*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol37/iss1/9>

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Faithful Doubt

Kristine Lund¹

Text: John 20:19-29

When I was 16 years old I played in the Calgary Youth Orchestra and we went on tour for a month to England, Wales, Germany and Holland. As you can imagine, it was an amazing experience for a group of young people: 35 concerts in 31 days, seeing the sights, exploring on our own, meeting other young enthusiastic musicians, billeted with families who treated us with wonderful hospitality and generosity. It was an exhilarating experience that I still remember with great fondness. Then we flew home and I began to tell my family and friends all that I had experienced with great enthusiasm and excitement. At the beginning they listened but fairly quickly lost interest in all my stories because life went on. They weren't able to really engage my youthful enthusiasm because they hadn't had the same experiences. Have you had those kinds of experiences, where you had this really amazing experience and try to share it with others and it just doesn't go very far? It's not that they don't care, they just aren't able to enter into the experience because they hadn't been there themselves.

In today's Gospel lesson we have something similar being told to us by John. Scholars tell us that the gospel of John was written at least 60 years after the death of Jesus to a community that was persecuted by the Romans. We can assume that most of the people who had personally encountered Jesus were either dead or extremely elderly now. So, the current followers of Jesus would have been those who would have been told those stories and were continuing to pass them along but they now were a number of generations away from the original disciples.

The Gospel of John was written to a community that was trying to understand the experiences of those first followers of Jesus. I'm sure the stories about Jesus seemed as unbelievable to them as they do to us at times. Chances are some of the enthusiasm about Jesus was waning or at least it was hard to pass the enthusiasm along. So, it makes sense that John would want to include a character like Thomas, so the community could see elements of themselves. No wonder John writes, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" because he knew the importance of leaving open the possibility that not everyone would be enthusiastically embracing Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I love the character of Thomas. I love him because he's my kind of guy. He doesn't take things on face value. He asks questions. He persists. With Thomas, John invites all of us into wondering about this Jesus. Thomas is the guy who just

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doesn't fall in line. John portrays some very real interpersonal dynamics. You can just imagine the other disciples trying to convince him that what they had experienced through the post-death encounter with Jesus was real. "Come on Thomas" . . . "Take our word for it" . . . "This really happened" . . . "Why won't you believe us" . . .? But Thomas was not to be swayed. He stood firm. He would not believe until he knew for himself.

And Thomas has been so badly portrayed over the centuries. He's really gotten a raw deal. He's carried the name Doubting Thomas when in fact I think we should call him Thomas the Courageous One or Thomas the Differentiated One if you want to use a term from the psychotherapy field. He stood his ground; he knew what he needed and wouldn't just fall in step with the other disciples. I'd say that took a lot of courage and self-awareness on Thomas' part to stand up to the pressure from his friends.

Tonight is our last Open Door service and the end of winter term is upon us. How many of you will be graduating this year? How many of you will be coming back next year? I invite you to take a moment and think back to either when you began your program or maybe to last fall, whichever you would like. Those of you who aren't students I would invite you to do similarly, think back to last fall. How have things changed for you since then? What questions are you asking now that you weren't even thinking about last fall?. How have you changed over the year? Or, if you are finishing your program how have you changed over the years? Perhaps your questions are arising from some of your readings in class, or conversations with peers or professors, or maybe it is something that has happened in your family or in the world that is generating these questions for you?

What difference do these questions make? Do they make you nervous because they are challenging some of your dearly held assumptions or beliefs? Do they excite you to dig further into how you are making sense of your life and the world? Do they frighten you or unnerve you? Questions are powerful because they open up possibilities. What possibilities have opened up for you because of the questions you are asking? What would you have missed if these questions hadn't appeared? How are you different now as a result of these questions?

John Ciardi writes, "A good question is never answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place but a seed to be planted and to bear more seed toward the hope of greening the landscape of an idea." Hear that again, A good question is never answered. It's not a bolt to be tightened. It's a seed to be planted to bear more seed. What if God was the question and not the answer? How would that change things? What if God is the question that never gets answered but is the seed that continues to be planted to bear more seed? What if God is the question that continues to lead to more questions and a fuller understanding but is never completely known or understood? What if God is the question that we live because of the ongoing experience of discovery which is the greening of the landscape? What if God is the question and not the answer?

Ponder that for a moment while I say a little bit about doubt and skepticism for that is a theme in our gospel lesson. Doubt often has a bad reputation because we think the

opposite of faith is doubt. But, the opposite of faith isn't doubt, its certainty. When we're certain, there's no faith involved because when I am certain, I'm in control, I know everything, it's black and white. However, it is hard to hold on to certainty in the midst of the challenges we face in life. We can't predict the future or control the outcomes of the challenges we face. We all are unsure at times, perhaps a lot of the time, and we grapple with things like Thomas. Faith is not just believing the right stuff. Faith is about keeping on even when we aren't sure about things. Martin Luther King said that "faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Faith is living our questions and seeing them as part of a life of faith. The Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, calls this faithful doubt. Isn't that a wonderful description? What a wonderful way to hold ourselves, I am a faithful doubter. You are a faithful doubter. We take the first step even though we can't see the whole picture.

What also supports our being able to be faithful doubters is Jesus' greeting to Thomas. Do you remember from the reading what Jesus said to Thomas when he saw him? He greeted him by saying, "Peace be with you." This is a greeting that one would offer a friend. Jesus was reaching out to Thomas as a friend without any criticism. He was a friend that needed to know differently than the rest of the disciples. I sometimes think of Thomas as a kinesthetic learner because he needed to touch Jesus before he knew whereas the other disciples could see Jesus and believe. Maybe they were visual learners. Anyways, what I read in John's account is that there is room for all to respond to Jesus in whatever way what fits.

As you leave today, complete this term, or finish your program, go you faithful doubters, into the world and live into your questions. May your questions propel you into knowing God more fully and spark new questions to be considered as we follow Jesus. Peace be with you.