

April 14th, 2013**"How to talk to people who have doubts about Christianity"**

Over the next three weeks we're going to be looking at how we talk with people who have difficulties believing Christianity. And we're going to talk about three areas:

1. Doubt
2. Suffering
3. Other gods

I want us to think about how we talk to people and how we have conversations with people when they question our faith. When they doubt the story of Jesus, when they question us about suffering in the world, and when they ask about other gods and other religions.

It's important for us as Christians to be able to openly talk about these things with people in the hope that they will investigate Christianity more.

Today, we're talking about doubt.

A lot of people have doubts when it comes to Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Some doubt he existed. Some doubt he died or that he rose from the dead. Some doubt his miracles. Many people doubt the Bible as a historical book. And they often wonder how we can believe in all of this.

So how do **you** respond to people when they tell you about their doubts about Christianity?

We can't dismiss people as ignorant. And we can't just stand there and mount an intellectual debate with some tricky arguments. What **can** be helpful is if we try to understand **where** their doubt is coming from.

So here are 5 things to consider as we try to help people think about their doubt. And for the purpose of this sermon, I'm going to focus specifically on Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Because that is the central truth of our faith and one part that many people have doubts about today.

So,

1. Doubt is real, but it has limits

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said that you simply can't doubt everything. He says:

- "The game of doubt presupposes certainty."
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In other words, doubts arise because we have our certainty in other places. We doubt something because we believe something else **more**.

III – For example, 200 years ago, many people doubted that a man could ever walk on the moon. It seemed impossible. Many people had a belief, a certainty, that the moon was unreachable. But then some people challenged that thinking. And now that a man HAS walked on the moon, now that people have seen it happen, that doubt is gone.

People have doubts that a dead man can rise, **because** they have a certainty, a belief, that death is final. So the more **certain** I am that dead men can't rise, the more **doubt** I will have over Jesus' resurrection.

Doubt comes from having certainty in other things.

To understand someone's doubt, we need to understand what they **are** certain about. So we can ask: WHY are you certain that death is final? Why are you certain that Jesus could not rise? We want to find out WHY people are **certain** about some things, so we can understand why they **doubt** other things.

Then we can talk about this second idea:

2. Christianity is not a philosophy or theory – it's a historical faith

We believe in the Bible as God's word. We believe what it says. We believe in miracles. We believe in angels and people rising from the dead. Christianity is not a helpful **philosophy** of life. It's a historical faith.

Many atheists will agree that Christianity is a good philosophy. It's good for society. It gives people hope. It teaches people to love one another. It's a good **philosophy**. But people say that about Buddhism or New Age religions. What's different with Christianity is that it's a **historical** faith, based on **historical** events. It's teaching is based on what has happened. What God has DONE. Not =just words that he's said.

John 20:25 – Thomas says:

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

Thomas didn't imagine that Jesus would stand in front of him again and offer for him to stick his hand in the hole in his side. Thomas' theory or philosophy on death did not allow him to even consider Jesus' resurrection. And he was a believer!

Sometimes, peoples' philosophies and theories and principles will not allow them to even **consider** the reality of Jesus' resurrection. It was only when Thomas was confronted with the risen Jesus, that he believes. And that's our third point:

3. Thomas' theories are changed when he meets Jesus

When Thomas **sees** Jesus' risen body he believes, without even touching. He is convinced and **changes** his world view. He **sees** the historical event, rather than just considering a philosophy of life.

Thomas had a certainty in a world where death is final. But Jesus changes that. Jesus shifts Thomas' world-view. He causes Thomas to rethink what he's certain about. Not with theories or philosophies, or clever arguments, but by simply appearing to him and saying: "*Stick your hand here in my side*" Thomas SEES the risen Jesus and his doubt is gone.

And this is what we can do. We can challenge people's theories and philosophies. Rather than say "Why DON'T you believe in Jesus", we can ask: "Why DO you believe what you DO believe?" We want to find out what their world view is. We want to know WHAT they believe and WHY they believe. THEN we can introduce them to the historical figure of Jesus and talk about why they might doubt HIM.

But doubt can still exist alongside faith. Thomas was a disciple. A follower. A believer. With doubts. People can have faith, but can also have doubts at the same time.

And doubts can be good, because they help us to question what we're certain of. We live in a world where the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and many of the historical accounts in the Bible, are seen as things that go against human philosophies and theories. We can't always take away all of people's doubts. But we can introduce people to Jesus and help them to **shift** their confidence. We can help them to have MORE certainty in him.

For example, you may KNOW with certainty that God loves you and is in control, but sometimes you may doubt, because he's not doing what **you** want him to do in your life, or what **you** expect him to do. Sometimes we doubt because we have human expectations on how **we think** God should work. And what we need is not to shake off that doubt, but to strengthen our confidence, our faith, in Jesus. When we struggle and doubt, we don't read the Bible and pray to get rid of doubt. We do those things to strengthen our faith. It's often more about strengthening belief, rather than "getting rid of doubts".

And to strengthen our faith, the Bible draws us into a world of testimonies. Point 4:

4. Christian belief is believing the testimony of those who saw the life of Jesus
The Bible "testifies" to the historical Jesus. We have eyewitness accounts. We have grown in our faith by **hearing** the eyewitnesses in history. Eyewitness accounts don't tell us what we WANT to hear, or what we EXPECT to hear. They tell us simply **what happened**.

And this is what John has done. John 20:30 –

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John records **historical eyewitness accounts**. He's not trying to persuade us with fancy arguments, or with theories or philosophies. He's just telling us what people saw. Testimonies. We just want to tell people the testimonies of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

And where will this get us in the end? Number 5:

5. Believing is blessed

It's good to question things, because there's so much to be skeptical about in the world today. Many intelligent people simply question everything and believe nothing. Skepticism is "smart".

But in John 20:29, Jesus says to Thomas:

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus wants people to believe **without seeing!**

In an age of skepticism, we are asking people to believe something without seeing. Because it will bring them the blessing of eternal life.

Think about that: We are asking people to put their faith in a person they have not seen. In a God who does things differently to what we'd expect. A God who breaks nature's laws. A God who challenges our world views. A God who appeals to us with human testimonies.

It is difficult for people to believe. So when you talk to people about their doubts, do you know where they're coming from? Do you know what challenges them? Do you know WHY it's so hard for them to believe?

ONE side of sharing the gospel is knowing Jesus, knowing our Bibles, and understanding our faith. But the other side is very important – we want to know **people**. We want to know their struggles, know where they put their trust. Know why they have doubts about Jesus. Some are looking for a philosophy. And Christianity won't offer them that. For others, they are looking for a God who does what they want. And Jesus doesn't offer them that. Others have been hurt by the church, abused, neglected, unloved. And no matter what we say, they are still hurting from the way God's church has treated them.

Knowing people helps us to talk to them about Jesus. Too often we are keen to **tell** people **everything** about our faith. But we also need to **listen** to their faith. To understand them. Because, as ambassadors for Christ, our job, our work, is to **appeal** to them with the gospel of Jesus. Not to ram it down their throats, not to mount a clever argument. Not to tear apart their belief system. But to appeal to them with what is the ultimate truth. More than that – the ultimate truth that offers **eternal life**.

Let's pray.