

Title: Doubt Sunday  
Scripture: John 20: 19-30  
Preacher: Rob Ross  
Date: April 22, 2007

Its doubt Sunday here, so we're going to talk about doubts. Specifically, I am going to talk about a couple of the topics that you brought up. Two topics that seemed to bubble to the surface of your responses.<sup>1</sup> First, you had questions like, "Did Jesus really rise from the grave?", "Was he really born to a virgin?" and "Did Eve really come from Adam's rib?" These questions deal with miracles, things which are out of the ordinary and inconsistent with the laws of nature. "Do miracles exist?" will be topic one. Second, you had questions about how to deal with all the painful and harmful things that people experience: things like wars and miscarriages and poverty and abuse. How do we incorporate these things into our faith? What do these things say about God? These questions deal with why bad things happen to good people, and that will be topic number two.

This is a heck of a Sunday to preach on miracles and why bad things happen to good people. Monday morning we heard of the shootings at Virginia Tech. 33 dead, including the shooter. Two days later, we heard that about 190 people had been killed in Bagdad. Maybe you, like me, have become numb to these numbers coming out of Bagdad, but 190 is a huge number. It is larger than the number of people killed in the Oklahoma City bombing 12 years ago on Friday. But this is not the only week that presents difficulties to people's faith. People wrote the cards for this sermon two weeks ago, before any of the events of this week took place, yet a full 1/3 of the cards asked about bad things happening or miracles. Blacksburg and Bagdad are not the only places of unmerited suffering. AIDS continues to ravage Africa, millions continue to be hurt by political violence in Sudan, and cancer continues to attack our friends and family. It's always a rough time to address these two topics, and that's why they are a source of doubt and that is why so many cards were written with these two topics.

A quick disclaimer before we continue. You have probably noticed that I tend to preach heady sermons. I am afraid that today will be no different, at least at first, and that is because you have serious doubts, and you have wrestled with them, and I have had those doubts, and I have wrestled with them too. The first part of this sermon is a window into what wrestling with those doubts might look like. So take a deep breath, and grab a pencil. Here we go.

First, let's try to get some definitions and background questions. We'll start with the miracles. Before we can ask if Jesus was born of a virgin, we must ask a different question: could Jesus have been born of a virgin. That is, do we believe that miracles are possible. When I say miracle, I mean something that cannot be explained by understandable, constant, and predictable laws that apply to all of nature. When someone takes Advil and his headache goes away, we do not think of the event "his headache goes away" as a miracle. We know why the headache has gone away (or more accurately, people we trust – medical doctors and research scientists – know why the headache has gone away). And we know that the event "headache goes away" occurs in

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<sup>1</sup> Two Sundays ago, at the Easter Sunday worship service, about 40 people filled out little yellow cards with their doubts, fears, and questions. I have been reading them for the last two weeks and will attempt to address in my sermon today as many of the doubts the cards raised as I can.

a way that is in conformity with the laws of nature. So, when we ask if miracles can happen, we are asking, “do events ever occur that cannot be explained the way the ‘Advil – headache’ situation is explained?” Note that the question is not, are there events that we can’t explain currently. If we took that point of view, many of our everyday activities would be miraculous to people who lived 500 years ago. In fact, taking an Advil to relieve a headache would be a miracle. No, the question is, “are there events which we can never explain according to laws of nature, because there is no explanation according to laws of nature?”

Notice that my question does not yet include God. In theory, according to my question so far, anything that is beyond nature could cause a miracle – all powerful demons, super-strong aliens from Dimension X, anything. However, we Christians do not believe in those things (at least, none of your doubt cards listed them), we believe in God. And so, we have to further refine our question: “is there ever a time when God interacts with the universe in any way other than through the laws of nature.”<sup>2</sup> Okay? So, before Christians can ask the question, did the virgin birth happen, they must ask honestly, do we believe that a virgin birth could happen, and what is more, do we believe that God could make it happen. Which is another way of asking, “Does God act in the world in ways that are unexplainable by laws of nature?” And that question is a philosophical/theological question. It is not a scientific question, and for that reason, it may not have a scientific (i.e. provable) answer.

Now, I may be stuck. And I do not yet have an answer for you about miracles...and I am already on page 4 of my sermon. But, for now, let’s leave miracles and go to the second topic – the one about painful things happening in the world. This second topic takes us into the field known by scholars as “theodicy.” Theo- is from *Theos*, which is Greek for God (like theology, theologians); -dicy is from *Dike*, which is Greek for justice. So, theodicy is thought concerning the justice or justification of God, particularly in the face of apparent evil in the world. We Christians have it hard, because we are monotheists – that is, we believe in only one God, who we believe to be both good and powerful. And the accusation against benevolent monotheists, like ourselves, goes something like this: If God were completely good, God would desire his creatures to be free from unnecessary pain. If God were completely powerful, God would be able to enact his desires. But all the creatures are not free from unnecessary pain, so God is either not completely powerful or not completely good or both. Now this problem is hundreds of years old. I didn’t come up with it. The problem is stated another way: God is all powerful. God is all good. Evil exists. Pick two out of three. If you want God to be all good, and you want to call things evil, you must admit that something other than God is influencing things – so God is not in control – God is not all-powerful. If you want God to be all powerful, and you want to call things evil, then you can have God in control, but you have to give up an all good-God. The evil in the world is accounted for by the evil in God. If you want God to be both totally good and totally powerful, that is, in control, then you can’t call things evil, because a good God controls everything and therefore, by definition there can be no evil.

Of course, we Christians do want all three – we do want an all powerful God, and we do want a loving God and we do want there to be things in this world that we can call evil and against the

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes people flip the question around to try and arrive at proof for God: “Are there any events in nature that are not explainable through laws of nature that prove the interaction of God with nature?”

will of God. I certainly do, which means we may be stuck again. So where do we go? Back to the talk on miracles, of course.

Remember, when we stopped talking about miracles, we were asking, does God intercede in ways other than the laws of nature. I said that here we could not scientifically know, because the question we asked was not scientific. So let's ignore that fact for a moment and play out both possible answers and see what we get. If God does intercede in ways other than the laws of nature, if the Exodus could be a historical event, because God could send plagues and could part seas. If the stories in Acts of the disciples healing people could be true, because God could work through human hands and human faith to heal human bodies. If Jesus could have been born of a virgin, because God's awesome power is not limited to our pre-conceived notions of a life giving act, that would be great, because it would mean that we could get miracles. But we have a problem, and it is a problem that is obvious to anyone who read the paper this week. Because, clearly, God does not part seas for every enslaved people or heal every sick person or give a child to every barren woman who asks for one. And then we ask the question, why? Why are some prayers not answered? Is it because God gives us what is best for us, not what we want? Is it because we do not deserve it or have done something wrong? Some people argue just that. In fact, there is a statement in Romans that says "in all things God works for the good of those who love him."<sup>3</sup> Some people take this statement to mean either things will work out well (so you needn't be upset) or you don't love God (so you have to get right with God and then things will work out). Others are left to question: In the Washington Post this Friday, there was a close-up picture of a coffee cup that had been placed at the unofficial memorial to the victims of the Virginia Tech shooting. On the cup had been written: "If it had not been for this coffee cup I would have been in Norris 211. I can't thank God enough for saving my life, but I will never understand why yours had to be lost."<sup>4</sup> That is the question of a survivor who believes she has experienced a miracle and can't answer the implied follow up question.

And what if no? What if we believe that God chooses not to act in the world, or cannot act in the world outside of set laws? We must do as Thomas Jefferson did – we must strike all the miracles from the Bible. Everything Jesus does in the world – maybe even Jesus' divinity, because what is left of Jesus if Jesus is not God acting in the world outside of the laws of nature? We also have to strike intercessory prayer. We are left with a God who cares for us, but does not act for us. Elizabeth Edwards talks about this when she spoke with Newsweek last week about the return of her cancer. She explained that the death of her son 11 years ago took from her the notion that God would protect her. She said, "I ha[ve] to think about a God who would not save my son. Wade was – and I have lots of evidence; it's not just his mother saying it—a gentle and good boy. He reached out to people who were misfits and outcasts all the time... You'd think that if God was going to protect somebody, he'd protect that boy. But not only did he not protect him, the wind blew him from the road. The hand of God blew him from the road. So I had to think, "What kind of God do I have that doesn't intervene—in fact, may even participate—in the death of this good boy?"... I had to accept that my God was a God who promised enlightenment and salvation. And that's all. Didn't promise us protection. I've had to come to grips with a God that fits my own experience, which is, my God could not be offering protection and not have protected my boy... I'm not praying

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<sup>3</sup> Rom 8:28

<sup>4</sup> Friday, April 20, 2007. Washington Post. Section A, Column 13. Photo by Linda Davidson – The Washington Post. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/19/AR2007041902549.html>)

for God to save me from cancer. I'm not."<sup>5</sup> So, Elizabeth Edwards' God will work to save us and enlighten us, but not protect us. But what if our lack of protection prevents our salvation or enlightenment? What if we die at age 1, before we can be enlightened or saved? What if our children die at age 30 and we are so hurt by their death that we cannot open ourselves to the healing and saving and enlightening power of God for the rest of our lives? It seems that, when pushed to the extreme, a God that can't protect us cannot assure us anything in this world. And so what then, if nothing is assured in this world? Either all of us are enlightened, saved and protected in the next life, or we all live with the consequences of this life for eternity. If we are all taken care of in the next life regardless of this life, then this life really doesn't matter, does it? If this life does impact the next, then people are not given a fair chance. And now I am stuck again – either life doesn't matter or God is not just.

And that brings us back to theodicy. I bet you are getting pretty tired of my wrestling and are about ready for an answer. You are probably beginning to think, Rob's been at this about fifteen minutes and there is no solution yet – he is running out of time. I am sure that this has felt like a long time. And I promise that if you and I sat down for a cup of coffee, we could keep going like this for a lot longer. I know that because I have been going on like this for a long time –at least three years of seminary were spent wrestling with issues like these (which may explain my social life). I have thought and thought and thought about these things and I have come up empty. And I have to be honest with you – I spent three years thinking about these things without being involved in a Christian community, and it destroyed my faith.

I am sure that some of you know that I came to this church on accident. By the time I graduated seminary, I had lost my faith. So what is an MDiv to do with a degree and no faith? Focus on ethics – so I came to DC to try and get into politics, where I could work to further my ethical views. I started at this church to put food on the table, so I could do something else, without much of a faith. And let me tell you what happened while I was here. I became involved in the community of believers. I started interacting with you – doing service with you, studying with you, discerning your call with you, worshipping with you, sharing hard times and joyful times with you. I began living in community with you. And I did it imperfectly, and I am sure you did too. But insofar as I did it, I began to find my faith. I found strength from the community.

And now, here I am, planning on being ordained in a few months, and I can honestly attribute a great deal of that to this community. If I had stayed in the intellectual exercise that is seminary, I would not be considering ordination. If I had waited until I had it all figured out in my head, and then gone to join a Christian community, I would have never gotten it figured out. Being a part of this community helped me with my doubts.

In the past few months, Jan preached on the story of the rich, young, ruler. In that story, the rich, young ruler is searching for answers. He has the money and the power to grant himself a life of leisure...a life where he is not committed to anyone else. And in his freedom from commitment, he can pursue the truth – in isolation. He can get answers to his questions. And he hears about this new teacher, who can answer everyone's questions – even the religious leaders. And so he goes to him, with his fears and doubts. He says that he has kept the commandments since he was

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<sup>5</sup> April 9, 2007. Newsweek. Interview with Jonathan Alter. P 38-39.

young – but he doubts that it is enough. In his heart, he does not feel peace and spends his sleepless nights staring at the ceiling of his private bedchamber. And so he comes to Jesus, breathless at the possibility of an answer to his questions – a solution to his problem of doubt. And what does Jesus say to him – first, get rid of all your stuff – all those things which separate you from intense relationship with others. All those things which protect you from living in community. Then, come and join us. No, I am not going to give you an intellectual proof of your salvation. No, I am not going to tell you something you have not thought of before. No, I am not going to show you the way out of your mental crisis. Or maybe I am. Come on, and find out.

And as the man turns to go, Jesus is saddened and says, how hard it is for the rich to experience the community of God – the word he uses is kingdom, *basilea*, empire, the place where God is felt and interacted with. He could have said, 'how hard it is for the rich to find home.' Not because they are rich, but because they are isolated.

I want to close with three things:

First, I know you have questions and doubts and fears. I have questions and doubts and fears. I am sure that you have thought about the things I talked about in the first 15 minutes of this sermon. I certainly have, and I am sure that you have come to the same dead ends, the same trite platitudes, the same empty, unfulfilling, insecure proofs. You know those paths well and know where they lead. And they may lead to answers, but they don't lead to life.

Second, you are not alone, and that is extraordinarily important. Your neighbors sitting next to you are struggling with painful questions about whether Jesus came for them, whether God answers prayer, whether God saves Muslims, whether there is a heaven, what Jesus' death on the cross did for them, whether there is a God, whether their life matters. There are a lot of questioners here, and there have been questioners from the beginning.

Finally, I want to tell you – as someone who has spent an amazing amount of his time doing it – that sitting in your room and thinking will not solve your problem. You cannot sit in isolation and think yourself into faith. There is a place and time for thinking and for pondering – I'm a Christian Educator with two degrees in religion – I promise you I value thinking and pondering. But that by itself will not lead to faith and it will not lead to life. What may lead to faith and life is joining with your brothers and sisters and becoming a part of the body of Christ. The body that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 12 – the body that laughs together and cries together and worships God together and cares for the poor together and strengthens the weak together. Like Jesus said to the rich young ruler, are you looking for answers, then come join us – join in the work we are doing, share in the food we eat.

In the next two months, you will have many opportunities to join the work that we are doing here at FPC. This weekend, we are cleaning up the outside of the building – planting new plants and spreading mulch. Next weekend, we are building on a habitat house, the following two weeks we are preparing for the Spring Yard Sale, a month after that, we are going on a 5 day mission trip to rebuild Katrina houses. Interspersed in there, we have Bible studies, food donations, and other classes. You can sign up for any of these things. If you don't see the way you want to connect to others, talk with a staff member about starting it – you may even be called to lead it.

Jan will be talking more about mission in the next few weeks. But today, let me tell you, that involvement, working together, playing together, worshipping together, praying for one another – has a mysterious way of healing doubts. I know you have them. I have them too. But when I meet with others and we try to follow Christ, something happens to me. I can't explain it to you. I can only show you. So, come join us. Find out for yourself.