

GROWLS OF THE SOUL

On Friday morning Ian got up early, made his breakfast and sat down in the living room to eat. He put on the television. This may seem typical to you but lately, because he works in the evening, I haven't seen Ian in the morning. It has also been the trend lately to get food and retreat to the basement rather than staying among the *parental units* upstairs. So I joined Ian for breakfast – got my bowl of fruit and sat down to watch the show with him.

It was *Mythbusters* – a show the whole family enjoys from time to time. In this program commonly held beliefs and urban legends are put to the test. The more explosives the hosts of the show get to use the better! Does the color red really make bulls go ballistic? How easy is it to shoot fish in a barrel? Will drinking coffee sober you up? Will yodelling trigger an avalanche? The episode on Friday looked at two questions: Does leaving windows open during a hurricane lessen the damage to your home? And can you use liquid nitrogen to freeze a head within 5 seconds and then smash it into pieces as shown in a particularly grisly sounding horror movie?

These are not questions that interest me particularly, but our need to prove – confirm – or to disprove – bust – these sometimes bold claims is intriguing. The program has a solid following that spans a broad demographic and they address a wide variety of issues that touch all parts of human life. They do however, perhaps wisely, leave questions of faith out of the mix.

We are a culture of armchair scientists. We tend to question and doubt all sorts of things. Even in the face of compelling evidence we can remain sceptical. Lots of people are sure that vitamin supplements and protein shakes improve their health and plenty of evidence can be found to support that, yet some of us are still unconvinced. Many of us use a microwave in our homes without giving it a second thought but what about claims that it could be harmful? How much proof do you demand before trying a new product, investing in the latest technology, or participating in a trial for an experimental medication or surgery? In most aspects of our life we question. When someone sends me an email story that seems just a little too good to be true – I question. When the bulk mailing includes some envelope suggesting that I am already a big winner – I seriously doubt it!

Doubt is not an enemy, but a friend. Doubt keeps us from being a sucker for every get-rich, get-beautiful, get-saved scheme that comes along. The danger is that, surrounded by pop-up ads and bogus invitations to wealth and intimacy, we will become cynical and cease to believe anything. Yet I wonder if we are really so wise when we leave questions of faith out of the mix. Our inquisitive, investigative minds are part of how we have been created. Just as our stomach growls to remind us of our physical hunger and so we eat – our doubts and questions are the

growls of the soul for spiritual food – for nourishment. These rumbles deep within can stimulate us to seek food – conversation, prayer and perhaps answers. As we feed our physical bodies we grow – in fact, in western society we are generally overfed. Unfortunately, our corpulence does not extend to our spiritual selves. We tend to ignore the growls of the soul or, even worse, we demonize them as unfaithfulness and seek to starve them into submission. Eventually we may not feel or hear our spiritual yearnings and so we become stunted – unwilling and unable to grow.

Don't you wonder about what you believe and why? Have you ever questioned how the Bible got organized the way that it did or considered what Jesus meant when he said he was not of this world? Have you ever pondered how the ten commandments help us live together in a broken world or doubted that Jonah really lived for a time in the belly of a whale? Have you ever said with Thomas, *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*?

I think Thomas is one of the original *Mythbusters* – someone who is not so much a doubter as he is an honest engager of reality. Thomas stands in a long line of skeptics stretching back to the beginning of the faith. Abraham was doubtful that God could deliver on the promise of a son while Sarah laughed in God's face. Moses questioned whether he could accomplish what God called him to do. Gideon demanded proof. Elijah ran away. Jeremiah and Job – even Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion – struggled with doubt. One theologian notes that the only people in scripture who are certain of God's will stone the prophets and crucify Jesus.

Thomas wants to be sure – to confirm what he has been told by others. We tend to malign Thomas – to mock his quest for answers. His desire to explore for himself is considered weakness and folly yet in John's gospel we read that Jesus is not unhappy or discouraged by Thomas' demands. I believe he understands the spiritual hunger in Thomas – the spiritual hunger in us – and responds with love.

When I began a study series a while back entitled, *Living the Questions*, I had someone tell me that they had no questions because coming to Christ had given them all the answers. I am disturbed by that attitude because it assumes that faithfulness in the Christian life is never to be examined – that we are to look at a list of doctrine and put checkmarks beside all those things we believe and that we are Christian only if we can check off most items. Sounds rigid and unfaithful to me – sounds like weak and shallow adherence to "the law" instead of the fulfillment Jesus calls us to. Sounds like blind certainty. Sounds like starving the growls of the soul to death.

Doubt and faith are companions and not opposites. We cannot know everything by seeing – some things must be known by trusting. We trust in the areas of our lives where we are not certain – *blessed because we have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

Exploring questions of our faith and our life is not a quest for certainty but a yearning to be blessed. The pursuit of certainty is a danger and a serious challenge to mainstream Christianity today. Fundamentalism is all about certainty – about rejecting questions as unfaithful – about an unexamined way of life. The rampantly growing fundamentalist wings of all the world’s religions – not just Christian, but Islamic and Jewish and Sikh and Hindu – all fundamentalism is thriving because we live in a world filled with uncertainty.

Part of the problem, as Karen Armstrong points out in *The Case for God*, is that faith has come to mean belief – as in belief in doctrine and dogma – where in fact the word used in scripture for faith – *pistis* – means trust in a person or a truth. Trust is relational rather than intellectual. Trust is about being blessed because we have not seen – about faith that is alive in the uncertainties of life and can endure all the questions we might pose.

Questions can push us forward in life and faith. It is a way of life for high school and college students – questioning your major, your current romance, your career plans, your faith. Doubt is faith seeking to grow – faith seeking understanding. Questions do not signify a lack of faith. On the contrary, they are evidence of how seriously you take your faith – so seriously that you are willing to doubt – to wonder – to acknowledge and respond to the growls of your soul! Faith uses our questions to nourish and strengthen itself. Questions are not the end but the beginning. Most of us – when plagued by doubt or engaged in the significant questions of life – try hard to figure things out, to think through, to discern truth. Easter isn’t about endings either. Easter is about a God who stands with us – suffers with us – even dies with us.

God’s promise in Easter is that Jesus can and will break through the locked and shut doors of our lives. Jesus comes through the wall, breaks in, and speaks: *Peace be with you*. God’s peace isn’t a promise that there will be no doubt, pain, struggle, indecision, or any of the other things which are part of being human – part of being in relationship with one another and the world. God’s peace is a promise to walk with us – to strengthen and sustain us – to forgive and to challenge us.

So today I encourage you to become more attentive to your inner rumblings – your questions and your doubts. Allow them to be considered and addressed so that they may lead you, like Thomas, to greater faith. **Amen**