

FCCS April 15, 2018
Rev. Curran Reichert

The Gift of Doubt

Luke 24:36-48 Jesus Appears to His Disciples

Doubt is useful!

Our church marked the beginning of Lent with a small Ash Wednesday service. We gathered here in this room in a circle to thoughtfully examine our own mortality.

What made the service remarkable, aside from what this space is like at night, was how the evening began. A few of us were gathered before the service began and I asked them what Ash Wednesday meant to them.

The answer that set the tone for the whole season for me, was the person who shared that they at this moment in their life they were calling everything into question and not sure what, if anything, they believed- they were trying to figure out the essence of faith.

That, my friends, is **doubt at its best**. This person is not wrestling their doubts alone, they are facing their questions in community and showing up while they work it out. Doubt in action and can be very productive.

I love these early appearances of Jesus to the disciples after Easter, because they bring the gift of doubt front and center.

Jesus, the one who is thought to have been crucified, dead and buried now stands among the disciples. Is it little wonder that their first reaction is doubt?

And Jesus isn't put off by it. He invites the disciples to engage their doubts, they do, then he asks them to make him breakfast. How does that work- who knows, the resurrection is a mystery, just as the presence of God among and within us is a mystery and doubt is a fair reaction.

Jesus does not dismiss the doubt, but he also will not let the disciples get stuck there. Because as many of us know well, doubt has the potential to become its own imprisonment and free people must be both intentional and vigilant about the wolves we feed.

If we spend all our energy nurturing our doubts, it is easy for skepticism to replace the ability to be satisfied.

Spiritual maturity is about holding multiple realities side by side. Healthy skepticism combined with a commitment to forward momentum is what allows us to live out our faith, whereas focusing on doubt alone can lead us down a path of isolation and despair.

Doubt ceases to be a useful spiritual tool when by it we become persuaded to stop interfacing with others, preferring instead preserve our suspicions or particular set of beliefs, conjecturing that others couldn't possibly understand.

We get into trouble when we succumb to the temptation to view our pain, our questions, our doubt as unique and insist on steering clear of those who might dare to help us see otherwise.

It is no mistake that Jesus returns to the disciples in a group, that he blesses them as a group. They are, of course, individuals who had particular attachments to him, but their pain, their questions, their doubt was not unique, and their healing would come in the form of communal action, forward momentum. Jesus knew that the key to their survival and the survival of his message was for the disciples to stick together.

That is true of any people's who have suffered atrocity, devastation or destruction. We need compassion from one another in order to heal just as we need motivation and encouragement from one another to move forward.

I have been reading series of historical novels by author Ken Follet.¹ The second book in the series focuses mainly on WWII. In it there is a dramatic and detailed account of efforts made by German citizens to shut down an operation known as Aktion **T4**, or **T4 Euthanasia Program**.

In October 1939, Adolf Hitler empowered his personal physician and the chief of the Chancellery of the Führer to kill people considered unsuited to live; it was framed as a euthanasia program—to kill incurably ill, physically or mentally disabled, emotionally distraught, and elderly people.²

¹ **Kenneth Martin "Ken" Follett** (born 5 June 1949) is a Welsh author of [thrillers](#) and historical novels *Fall of Giants*, *Winter of the World*.

² <https://www.britannica.com/event/T4-Program>

The parallels between the atrocities of WWII and the present treatment of refugees and immigrants in Syria, South Sudan, and Myanmar is stupefying. It is hard not to feel overcome with doubt as if nothing any of us might do could make a difference.

Rabbi Steve invited me to help lead a Holocaust Remembrance service for his congregation this past week. The service was designed to acknowledge the heroes who stood up to the injustice of the Nazism during the war and the hero's who stand up to similar injustices now.

I felt that night, as people told mind-numbing stories of their family's survival, as if the voices of the past were reaching into the present imploring us to live with more courage and unity.

One woman spoke about her grandparent's, saying they were both remarkable people, her grandmother never wasted a second of being alive she relished every day, that was the best way to avenge the horrors of her past. But her grandfather, she said, could not move beyond his experience of imprisonment and brutality. He spent each day reliving the horror and inflicting the stories again and again on himself and those around him. He survived the holocaust, but was never free from it.

Remembering our history critical to not repeating it. Indeed, moral, virtuous and faithful living requires that we hold one another accountable for right action. A healthy amount of doubt enables us to stand up for ourselves. Insisting all the time that we are doing our own work to live up the bar we set for others.

Obsessive doubt, however, robs us of our ability to hold a necessary tension between the magnificence and the tragedy of this world.

The Romans sought to destroy anyone who refused to comply with their authority, the Nazi's did the same, the current level of governmental corruption and blatant ignorance is both depressing and immensely discouraging and yet the voices of our past continue to reach forward and implore our persistence.

You will survive this the voices say, do not let despair prevent you from seeing the work that must be done in partnership both with people who see things the way you do and those who do not.

We cannot allow our doubts cheat us of the everyday blessings that greet us each day with the rising and setting of the sun.

There was a poem found written on the Wall in Mother Theresa's home for children in Calcutta, originally by *Kent Keith*, it is called, "The Paradoxical Commandments." Adapted

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

Amen

The Original Version:

The Paradoxical Commandments

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

1. **People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.**
2. **If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.**
3. **If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.**
4. **The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.**
5. **Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.**
6. **The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by
the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.
Think big anyway.**
7. **People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.
Fight for a few underdogs anyway.**
8. **What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.**
9. **People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.
Help people anyway.**
10. **Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.
Give the world the best you have anyway.**

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"The Paradoxical Commandments" were written by Kent M. Keith in 1968 as part of a booklet for student leaders.