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I remember playing the children's card game "I Doubt it." One player would place a card face down on the table, announce the number on the card, and then other players were to place the same number face down on top of it. The tricky part of the game is that you could try and get away with putting down a card that did not match. You were safe unless someone challenged you by saying, "I doubt it." I recall not liking this game very well, maybe because I couldn't tell when to doubt someone's card, or maybe because I couldn't keep a straight face when I played the wrong card. Either way, the idea of doubting seemed troubling to me.

The struggle with doubting is often reinforced in the church, isn't it? We're often told that doubting is a sign of a weak faith. So when we face those difficult questions in life that prompt us to doubt some things we've heard, we face a dilemma. Some choose to "just believe," and they ignore that little voice of doubt that tugs at our minds; others may rebel and leave their church and faith behind.

But either way, the questions remain unresolved, pushed away to the dusty shelves in the recesses of our minds.

Then we come to the story in John's Gospel, and we hear of Thomas' doubts. Not much had been said about Thomas up to this point in the Bible, but he's front and center stage in this story. After the events of Easter and the exciting news of resurrection and new life, Jesus had appeared to the disciples; Thomas, however, had been absent. When the others explained to Thomas what they experienced, he said he wouldn't believe it until he had more substantial proof.

At this point in the story, I think most of us can identify with Thomas' doubts. Many of us probably agree with him that it would be nice to see something tangible—to have something to touch and hold onto. From this story it seems as though doubt has a place in Bible after all, and many of us might wish the story ended right here—with

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Thomas and his struggle to understand what had happened and a recognition that doubt really exists.

But the story continues...Jesus appeared again a week later, and this time Thomas was there. He could see and touch the risen Christ. Jesus offered a blessing, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Well...that's a nice ending, for it includes all those who have not seen but believe, but what about those who still have questions? Wouldn't it have been nice if Jesus had said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and still ask questions and struggle with faith"? That openness might encourage some young adults today to remain in the church with their questions, feeling as if they have permission to doubt and remain a part of the community of faith rather than walk away in discouragement. People have been asking questions about faith for a very long time, and I suggest that it's a normal and healthy part of faith.

Many of us may recognize the name Leo Tolstoy for his famous books written in the mid-1800s, such as *War and Peace*, but did you realize he also struggled with questions of faith and doubt? He grew up in the church, but he admits in his book *A Confession* that he began to notice inconsistencies. He wondered about the meaning of life and why life is filled with suffering.

After leaving the church for a while during his search for meaning, Tolstoy came back to the church to see if it might help answer the difficult questions of life. He visited many different kinds of churches, wondering why they argued over the unessential parts of faith rather than agreeing on the essentials. He wondered why churches couldn't unite over the basic beliefs we have in common rather than argue over minor differences.

Tolstoy wrote, "I turned my attention to what is done in the name of religion and was horrified," and he gave the example of the church's approval of war and executions.¹

He realized that the church did have some truth in what it proclaimed, yet he doubted some of what he had been taught. He explained his task as “I must find what is true and what is false, and must disentangle the one from the other.”²

In a sense, Tolstoy was going about the same process as Thomas, trying to sort out the truth in what he had been told in relation to his own experience and questions. And for many of us, it’s the same process we go through in our journey through life. When we face those difficult questions of life, they may seem titanic to us, too huge to sort through. When faced with those titanic issues, we may often feel like ignoring them.

History teaches us, though, that those titanic questions must be faced. 100 years ago today on April 15, 1912, the *Titanic*, thought to be the unsinkable ship, hit an iceberg and sank to the bottom of the sea.

What if someone on the *Titanic* had listened to the telegraph transmission about the nearby

icebergs and had doubted the wisdom of their speed? Someone could have suggested, “I doubt that we should be going this fast.”

What if someone during the construction of the ship someone had said, “I doubt this small size of rudder is enough for this size boat”? If the ship had been equipped with a bigger rudder, they might have been able to steer the ship away from the iceberg.

What if someone had asked, “I know we’re trying to cut costs, but I doubt we have enough lifeboats on the ship”? In order to save money, they installed only 20 lifeboats, which was enough for only 52% of the people on board.

And what if the captain of the nearby ship called *Californian* had doubted the unsinkability of the *Titanic*? When the *Titanic* launched distress flairs and sailors on the deck of the *Californian* reported these to the captain, he couldn’t imagine why the *Titanic* would need any help. Though his ship was only 10-15 miles away, he didn’t even wake his

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telegraph operator to find the distress calls that the *Titanic* had sent.

In all these cases, a little doubt would have been beneficial. To ask questions would have saved the lives of many people. In a similar way, when we hear something about God, the church, or faith that just doesn't make sense, it's ok to ask questions, to wonder about the truth of certain ideas.

For example, during last week's book study on heaven, someone questioned the idea of a loving God omitting some people from heaven due to the mistakes that they make in life—or whether a place called Hell exists as punishment. That led to a whole discussion about the nature of God—a rich discussion that occurred because someone in the

group doubted a traditional idea that has been floating around for centuries. Did we solve the issue? No. Did we all agree? No. But our conversation opened the door for a deeper understanding of who God is and how God embraces us in life and death.

It's ok to think...to ask questions...and even to doubt. Rather than doubt indicating a lack of faith, I believe that our faith can grow and expand during our doubts. So when those titanic doubts begin to rumble around in your head, who knows, they just might be trying to tell you to prevent something from sinking.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, p. 74

² Tolstoy, p. 76.