

### “The Beauty of Doubt”

I was watching a British TV show the other day and one of the panelists told a story about a special ceremony that happens behind closed doors prior to the coronation of a king or queen of England. As the story goes, after the formal rehearsal at Westminster Abbey is completed, all but the highest ranking clergy are ushered out of the abbey and the doors are locked. Then he said a most strange and ancient ritual takes place. The monarch-to-be lies down on a blanket made of fine velvet trimmed in ermine. The archbishops and bishops lift the sumptuous blanket and proceeded to toss the heir to the monarchy into the air while chanting unique prayers. The point is to ward off the influences of Satan. The panelist told the story with such conviction that the others were awestruck. It was one of those stories that, given the other rituals that surround the coronation of a monarch, just might be true. If you knew that the panelists on this show are comedians, you would have even more reason to be skeptical.

While the report of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples is not silly like this story about tossing monarchs, Thomas is right to be incredulous. People do not rise from the dead and appear in locked rooms to display the wounds of death.

The Gospel does not tell us what happens during the following week. Instead it is like a movie that fades to black and on the screen we see the words “A week later.” Over the coming week the experience of seeing Jesus alive that Easter Day would certainly have come up in discussion. The group would have continued to try to convince Thomas of what happened. But there were also other things to take care of. For example, food and water had to be fetched and cooked. Perhaps there were family members to check on and reassure. Plus, they still had to worry if the Romans, who might have been patrolling just outside their door, were looking for them. They seemed to have the need to stay hidden because there were still in the same room a week later. That is when Jesus appears again.

He enters the room without coming through a door or window. He is simply there among them. Now Thomas gets to see the risen Lord first hand. Before he had said, “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.” Yet when he sees Jesus he does not do those things. Rather he falls on his knees and exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” That was surely the appropriate response when the risen Christ appeared. But his response of doubt a week earlier was also appropriate.

It is unfortunate that many preachers over the centuries have castigated people who have doubts by reciting this story. Doubt is a normal human response to things that are incredible. Doubt is also normal when we hit hard times and wonder where God is in the predicaments we face. I think certain periods of wondering and doubting are a normal part of faith. Faith means to trust in God and God’s promises. Faith allows for doubt as we wonder how God can love everyone. Faith allows for doubt when the world seems upside down. Faith allows us to sing Hallelujahs in concentration camps, during war, during pandemics, and during disasters because faith allows room for doubt.

Only certainty requires that we give up doubt. Certainty cannot allow doubt to creep in. Doubt causes certainty to fall apart. Certainty puts up walls because it

knows it is weak. Indeed, certainty's greatest flaw is that it is not actually sure. Otherwise blocking out anything contrary would not be necessary.

We have faith in God, not because we have experienced the resurrected Jesus, or been to Mt. Sinai with Moses to meet God, or been with Abram when God called him to become a wandering Aramean. We have faith in God—Father Son and Holy Spirit—because we have encountered God in the bread of communion, the spiritual touch we feel in prayer, in the way our lives are changed through the routine of weekly worship, in the way our service to others lights a fire in us for more service, and in the myriad ways we are affected each day by the holiness of creation.

Faith allows doubt because faith is stronger than certainty. Faith is not dead. Faith is not threatened. Faith is the unmistakable gift from God that allows us to believe without being coerced, brainwashed, propagandized, or bludgeoned into submission. Faith allows us to be who God made us to be and to use our brains and our hearts to find the truth for ourselves.

Give me a “doubting Thomas” any day. They are more interesting and compelling to be with than those who have it all figured out. Jesus might well have wanted the same thing. After all he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”<sup>1</sup> The Gospels show us Jesus caring for sinners, the ill and outcasts. Usually it is with the righteous, those who are very certain about everything, that he has confrontations.

Jesus allows us to have doubts. Jesus allows us to be human. Jesus performed a healing miracle for the father of a boy who was plagued by demons that caused him to have seizures. The man asks Jesus, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”<sup>2</sup>

That statement in its simplicity is one of the most profound statements in scripture. I do not think there is a more human cry to the Almighty. “I believe; help my unbelief!” I do not feel pity for this man. I feel immense gratitude that he had the courage to state the truth. It is meaningful that we could pray it each day, and have said everything that needs to be said. Belief and doubt are not opposites they are part of the same side of the coin. Let your faith inform your doubts and your doubts inform your faith. That is how we live to be the authentic human beings that God made us to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 9: 12-13, ESV

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9: 22b-24 NRSV