

“Doubting Gene”

Poor Thomas, for nearly two thousand years he has been stuck with the nickname, Doubting Thomas. Given that he was also called “The Twin,” I have to wonder if he was one of those people whom others love to hang a moniker on. Growing up I was one of those guys. The number of nicknames I received seemed to be endless—Lil’ Gene, Genie, Gene ol’ Bean, Eugene the Jeep, LaCrutch, Cootie, Cootiehead...and those are the nice ones. But none of my nicknames stuck like Thomas’.

I think it is even more remarkable that this name has stuck when Thomas never says that he doubts the resurrection. He just wants confirmation of what the other disciples told him. I think most of us would see that as a reasonable response to such a fantastic story. After all, they said that Jesus who had been crucified, dead, and buried has now appeared to the disciples in a locked room, showed them his wounds, and then disappeared. Thomas just wants to see if for himself.

We live in this most skeptical of times. We are steeped in scientific reasoning, the journalistic view of history, and the skepticism of the post-modern world. What’s more we are told from an early age that “Seeing is believing” and “Believe half of what you see and nothing that you hear.”¹

What’s more the religious response to the modern world has often been to deny it rather than engage with it. That has led to the rise of vocal brand of atheism, which mocks, with its scientific certainty the biblical certainty of literalists. What is a fellow to do? If I doubt any part of the Bible I am a heathen. If I doubt any scientific explanation I am a religious fundamentalist. There seems to be no room for doubt of any kind.

Yet doubt seems to me to be fundamental to science and religion. In science it is doubt that leads scientists to test out other’s theories and work. In religion it is how we work through to what is essential to our personal faith.

When Thomas sees the risen Jesus he immediately believes. Jesus’ response to Thomas is very important, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The six words “and yet have come to believe” are crucial. At least they have been for me.

I, like many of you I expect, was not born reciting the Nicene Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, or the thirty-nine articles of faith. I was raised in a Christian household and was baptized, but like many people I became skeptical of my church and left. I was full of doubts, but I had nowhere to explore them because I seemed to be surrounded by certainty.

I needed people who would listen to my doubts, explore them with me, and not condemn me for them so that I could, as Jesus said, “Come to believe.” It seems to me that faith must encounter doubt. It must be tried and tested.

¹ Attributed to Edgar Allen Poe.

What's more for me this is an ongoing struggle. Faith and belief have not meant that the dark nights of the soul are gone, just different.

As I ponder "Doubting Thomas," and my own doubts I remember another Bible story from the Gospel of Mark. In this instance the disciples have been unable to perform a healing, and Jesus is vexed by their ineptness. When Jesus challenges the boy's father, the father blurts out, "I believe. Help my unbelief."² That has become an important prayer for me especially in the dark times.

The other prayer that helps me is the invitation to Communion which I have used here once.

"Come, you who have much faith and you who have little,
you who have been here often and you who have not been here long,
you who have tried to follow and you who have failed.
Come, because it is the Lord that invites you:
it is God's will that you should meet him here."

There are stories about Thomas that are not in the Bible. These stories tell us that Thomas went on to be a great teacher and preacher. He traveled all the way to India from Israel to tell people about Jesus and God. Today there are still people in India who believe Thomas was a great disciple because of his teaching and preaching to their ancestors two thousand years ago.

You and I are wracked with doubts. But God's will for us is different. It is as Wendell Berry wrote and I paraphrase, God's will is that "All our stirring becomes quiet around us like circles on water. Our tasks lie in their places where we left them... and, regardless of our doubts and consternations, we sing our song at last."³

² Mark 9:24

³ Wendell Berry (1998). *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997*, Counterpoint LLC