

### “The Beauty of Doubt”

A favorite television show of mine, one I have watched repeatedly, is “Rev.” It is a BBC show that started in 2010 and ran for three seasons. The show follows a vicar, Adam Smallbone, who is given a parish in London. The church is a Victorian monstrosity that is in ill repair. The congregation is small and quirky. They undergo many trials, some of which are funny and some of which are not. Toward the end of the third season, Adam’s life is falling apart. His church is being sold, his marriage is in trouble, and he is having doubts about his calling. In one particularly poignant episode, he remembers he was supposed to lend their large cross to another parish for an Easter service at a hilltop park. Instead of putting the cross in a truck to move it across the city, he decides to carry it.

As he makes his way through the crowded streets of London, he experiences people jeering at him and spitting on him. Some have the faces of his parishioners and his persecutors. The journey takes him all night. When he reaches the park at sunrise, he climbs the hill and leans the cross against a sign. He stands there weary and dispirited. Then he starts to sing the hymn “The Lord of the Dance.”<sup>1</sup> As he sings, another face creeps into the edge of the frame and begins singing. Adam is surprised by this homeless man, but keeps on singing and dancing.

Afterward, they sit on a bench, and the man comments that Adam must be in a good mood. Adam replies, “No.” When the other man asks why, Adam says, “I’m trying to keep something alive, and I don’t think I can do it.” (We are meant to realize the double meaning of his church and his faith.) The other man says, “I have learned some things over the years.” He starts repeating one cliché after another, such as “you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs,” and “the open hand has the strongest grip,” and “you are what you eat.” There are several more of these sayings, and Adam clearly feels even worse. The man’s last cliché is “Never parachute into an area you’ve just bombed.”

At this point, the man turns to Adam, puts his hand on his shoulder, and says, “Adam, Adam.” Adam looks at him, wondering how he knows his name. The man continues, “We all have our crosses to bear.” Adam says, “Yes, we do.” The man finishes saying, “I understand, Adam. I’ll always be here.” The man stands up and disappears. Adam is left amazed. Amidst all his doubts, he is reassured by God in the form of a homeless man.

In contrast, the disciple Thomas demands a meeting with the resurrected Jesus before his doubts will be quelled. He has good reason not to believe the other disciples’ report. People do not rise from the dead and appear in locked rooms to display the wounds of their execution. It is a week before Thomas will get to see Jesus for himself.

When Jesus appears to them again, he enters the room without coming through a door or window. He just appears among them. Now Thomas gets to see the risen Lord firsthand. Before he had demanded to see and touch the marks of the crucifixion. However, when Jesus appears, Thomas falls to his knees and exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” His doubts are overcome by simply seeing Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> “Lord of the Dance” words by Sydney Carter to the Shaker tune “Simple Gifts.”

Thomas and his doubts have been used by preachers for centuries to label people as unfaithful because of their doubts. That is wrong. Doubt is a normal human response to something incredible. I think certain periods of wondering and doubting are a normal part of faith. 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 wars, during pandemics, and during disasters.

Only certainty cannot allow doubt. 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 certain.

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 the unmistakable gift from God that allows us to believe without being coerced, brainwashed, propagandized, or bludgeoned into submission. Faith allows us 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 think they have it all figured out. Jesus might well have wanted the same thing. After all, he said, “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”<sup>2</sup> The Gospels show us Jesus caring for sinners, the ill, and outcasts. 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>3</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. Belief and doubt are not opposites; they are part of the same faith. 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>2</sup> Matthew 9: 12-13, ESV

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9: 22b-24 NRSV