

WHEN DOUBT IS FEAR

The Second Sunday of Easter

April 23, 2017

Every Easter is followed by what we often call Thomas Sunday, after the famous doubting disciple. First comes the resurrection, then on its heels comes the doubt: did it really happen? Show me the wounds! Doubting Thomas, as we have come to call him, speaks for a great many people, some in churches and many more whose doubt made them leave or never come in the first place.

It's also true that we are an enthusiastically doubting society. We doubt habitually and instinctively. We do it because we are seekers, we do it entertain ourselves because we love an argument, either with others or with ourselves. Doubt is everywhere; we are marinated in it so thoroughly that it gives our culture its distinctive flavor, for better or worse.

Doubt is necessary and in proper amounts is healthy. It can defend us against all kinds of bushwa, whether secular or religious. But too much doubt, doubt as a habit of mind and way of life, doubt that insidiously seeps everywhere, is not good for our spiritual selves; it is not good for the soul. And this is especially true now when so much of our doubt is ideological or tribal. One bunch of us doubts banks and big corporations, another that great and powerful liar and bully called The System, still another bunch the government. Some of us who have been through hell on earth come to doubt God himself

or herself, and we have our reasons. A sizeable group of feisty Americans doubts the whole shebang—they are doubters, through and through.

In all the formulations I just rattled off, you could revise by adding “doubts *and fears*” and you would be on your way to a larger reality. Doubting and fearing the government, corporations, the church, God, life generally—this is a big part of the human condition of living in constant uncertainty. It always has been our lot to be afraid, to one degree or another, depending on our station in life and maybe how good our luck has been—and it always will be.

Doubt and fear, in fact, is the real subject of this morning’s gospel. We meet the disciples hiding out on the night of the Sunday of the resurrection, because of fear of the Jewish authorities who had ordered the execution of Jesus. Here and in other post-resurrection appearances in the gospels, Jesus appears to reassure and to rally the disciples to do what they are called to do. “Peace be with you,” he says to them, twice. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Thomas’s doubt surely comes from his fear and uncertainty: he missed Jesus visit, he feels isolated and vulnerable, and his posture is nervous and defensive, and more than a little understandable in the situation. Is he to believe the nervous and terrified disciples, who may be grasping at straws to make themselves feel better? Show me the wounds, Thomas says, and Jesus does when he comes next to a still locked house—the disciples are no less

nervous than they were before. And Jesus makes the point that it would be better to believe by faith, without proof, but he shows Thomas the wounds anyway. He lets Thomas know his shortcoming, but he has compassion and understanding as well.

The disciples may be all tied in knots with fear about what's going to happen next, but Jesus does come, twice, despite the locked doors. So it is with us: as contemporary tough guys and gals like to say, you can run but you can't hide. A spiritual call will find us, often when we least expect it. We might find ourselves seeing the spirit of Christ revealed to us in the face of another person, or in some other occasion that melts our resistance unexpectedly, like those lucky people who see someone and say "That's my future wife or husband" and they turn out to be right. (We won't pause over those forgotten times when that blinding insight turns out to be blind, and nothing happens, or sad and wrong things happen.)

These revelations burst right through the locked doors of our daily lives, where we are afraid that Christ might show up without an invitation, ready to shake us to our foundations.

Was Thomas the only doubter on that first Easter? Not at all. The other disciples had refused to believe Mary Magdalene when she told them that she had seen the risen Christ and in their fear locked themselves into their

room. Mary Magdalene herself didn't believe her eyes when she saw the empty tomb; she was convinced only when Jesus himself appeared.

Where does that leave us, all of us latecomers over the past two thousand years who have not seen the evidence? We are like Thomas. Or at the very least, an important part of us is like Thomas. Doubt and skepticism are part of our natures. Some of us are more skeptical than others.

Often we pair doubt and faith, hoping that one balances and strengthens the other. But just as you can doubt so thoroughly that nothing seems to get through to you, so you can be so faithful that you appear credulous or naïve.

I said so *faithful*, which is a kind and affirmative church word. But what if I said so *certain*. For me one of the most powerful forces in religion are the legions of the absolutely certain believers. They know they are right. When this certainty is private and includes as part of its nature a tolerance for those who disagree with them, it can be a powerful force for good—it can move mountains. But when certainty that we are right is so strong that it requires the denunciation or worse of those who disagree, it becomes a toxic religion or ideology that endangers cultures and changes history for the worse. We saw them at work in the American churches of the 18th- and 19th-centuries, where believers found powerful justifications in the Bible for the horrors of slavery. We see them today in churches that still refuse women as pastors, or bar gays as pastors or even members. They are *certain* that their faiths make them right.

Our annual visit to the story of Thomas is central to the church because finding that rich balance between doubt and faith is a lifetime task for all of us. The great German poet and thinker Goethe wrote that “the deepest, the only theme of human history, compared to which all others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of skepticism with faith.”

Of course most of us see how crude these labels are on all sides. There are infinite degrees of doubt and skepticism that people express, just as there are infinite kinds and degrees of faith. For each of us to find our difficult balance of using and thriving on doubt and skepticism that’s healthy and appropriate, shall we say, from doubt that becomes immobilizing fear.

A cousin of faith is trust. We all know, if we take two seconds to acknowledge it, that we live twenty-four hours a day on faith and trust. We drive on expressways at seventy miles an hour surrounded by other cars in front, behind, and next to us, all going seventy, or sixty, or eighty miles an hour, trusting that none of us will make a fatal mistake. We receive our income and pay our bills trusting in computers, or pieces of paper handled by strangers. Some of us trust electronic transfers, while other skeptics pay only cash. We make so many decisions all day about whether to trust or not that if we consciously thought about and weighed each one we would be utterly exhausted and never get through the day.

We need trust to be able to live together—whether in church, or in marriage, or a commute on the expressway. But what about our deepest trust as spiritual people—trust that there is a meaning in life, and that meaning has to do with love and the giving of ourselves for the sake of others, as Jesus of Nazareth gave himself?

It takes faith and trust to give yourself in love—but our human nature tells us that it is valuable to be careful before you take that leap of faith. Kierkegaard and other great thinkers remind us over and over again that we cannot think and reason ourselves to a fact-only science of faith and love. At some point you take the leap of faith. Look at the greatest loves of your life—love of God, love of the people most important to you, love of country—and ask where that love came from. I wager that your answer will be that it comes from somewhere different and deeper than cool reason and logic.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says to Thomas. We don’t know whether Thomas actually took Jesus’ invitation to touch his wounds. But his passionate conclusion, “My Lord and my God” is his cry of faith. His experience—first doubt, then faith—is the experience of all of us, each in his or her own way. It is through doubting and believing that we come to love and have new life in his name.

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