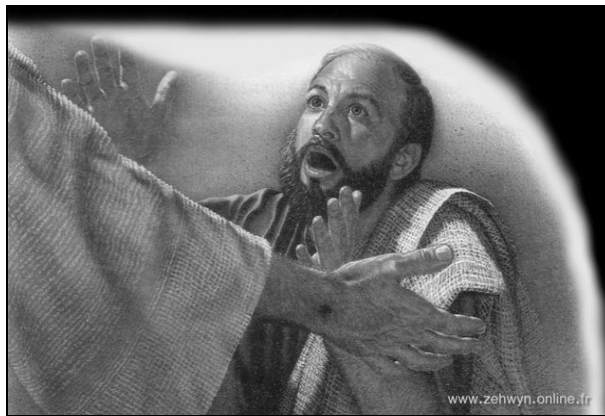


FAITHFUL DOUBT



Scripture:

Acts 4:32-35

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



FAITHFUL DOUBT

In a blog called Bold Café, Pastor Meghan Aelabouni writes about a collection of Mother Teresa's private letters published in 2007 that revealed that she suffered from intense spiritual doubts for much of her life.

Some Christians were shocked to think that Mother Teresa's work wasn't grounded in unwavering belief. But others argued that Mother Teresa's dedication, in the face of doubting God's presence, was actually a sign of strong faith. Maybe God is deep within and beyond our doubts?

Knowing Mother Teresa went through periods of doubt may help us be empathic towards Thomas in today's scripture. And likewise, it may help us to have more understanding of ourselves when we go through periods of doubt in our faith in God.

FAITH/DOUBT

Pastor Meghan shared a faith/doubt story that is very similar to my own. She had no "lightning bolt" experience of coming to faith. Meghan was baptized as an infant and raised in the church, went to Sunday school, sang in the church choir, and washed hundreds of tiny glass communion cups in a soapy sink with her mother who was an elder. At church camps, she sang heartfelt songs of praise, and prayed daily.

Yet, her prayers were almost always for more faith, and to be free from doubt that had also been with her for as long as she could remember. She was the kid who asked why the dinosaurs were missing from the Bible and questioned the miracles of Jesus. At Christmas, as she sang "Silent Night," she still couldn't wrap her mind around the virgin birth. And so, she prayed for the spiritual strength to get it together to accept, to believe, and to stop questioning.

In her younger years, Pastor Meghan was convinced that faith was an "all or nothing" proposition, and that doubt was a faith defect that must be corrected in order to achieve a flawless, wholehearted belief in God.

Writer Anne Lamott has pointed out that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. What we know for certain requires no faith on our part. Faith, the "assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen," requires not knowing.

Most human beings, using our reason and imagination, explore the parameters of what is unknown, question what is assumed, and challenge what is taken for granted.

Doubt is not a deficit, or a lack of faith; doubt is an active process of questioning and searching for truth. That is, if you apply your doubt to seek more understanding about God and ponder the influence of Jesus on your life.

THOMAS

Faithful doubt is doubt that you deal with and don't ignore or take for granted. Faithful doubt is like the doubt Thomas had. He admitted it and actively did something about it. He said he would only believe if he saw and touched the wounds on Christ's body. And when Christ came to him, he did not hesitate to get close and touch his wounds.

Thomas is not so much a doubter as he is a realist, and a few days earlier he'd encountered reality like never before when he saw his friend and Lord nailed to the cross and die. So when his friends tell him that they've seen the Lord, he reacts with a realist's skepticism.

Remember, when Jesus appeared to the other disciples he showed them his hands and his side, and only then the disciples rejoiced "because they saw the Lord." (John 20:20) One conclusion we might draw is that (despite his bad rap) Thomas is no worse than the other disciples.

Professor Thomas Lose, in his working preacher blog, asks this question: "Is it

possible that we have misunderstood the nature of faith altogether, assuming that the "more" faith we have the fewer questions we'll ask?" He said, "If we look closely at the Bible, we find many places where faith and doubt are woven together." When Jesus says those who believe without seeing are blessed, it isn't necessarily a direct insult to Thomas. John wrote his gospel with the Christian community of then and now in mind, which includes all of us. John knew people would not automatically believe Jesus had risen. They wanted proof then as many of us need now. So John includes the doubting Thomas story to show how Jesus understands our human needs and inquiring minds.

Dr. Lose goes on to say that Jesus isn't so much rebuking Thomas as he is blessing us! Rather than being remembered as the inferior doubter that Jesus rebuked, we should remember Thomas as a model disciple in John's gospel. He becomes the model of how to become a disciple and goes on to be a fearless missionary spreading the Good News throughout Judea and into parts of India. (Syriac Christians and St. Thomas Christians claim the disciple Thomas founded their churches as John Knox founded the Presbyterian churches.)

Thomas was no fool. But once he encountered Jesus, his faith was as realistic as his past skepticism. Thomas doesn't merely believe but also makes the chief confession in John's gospel, that Jesus is "my Lord," the title reserved for Caesar in the first century, and also "my God," the highest praise of Jesus made in the New Testament

Thomas proved that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an essential ingredient and an asset to vibrant faith.

HEAD DOUBT AND HEART DOUBT

Frederick Buechner explains that: "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith." He writes of two kinds of doubt: "head" doubt and "heart" doubt. Head doubt is a primary tool of theology that questions and seeks an

understanding of God, such as how could Jesus be human and divine?

How do we interpret the ancient texts of the Bible in a twenty-first century context? What about other religions?

Before we answer any of these questions, we must admit the limits of what we know and understand. Doubt is a sign of humility, the awareness that not all the answers are easy or even possible.

Heart doubt, according to Buechner, is like Jesus' cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Heart doubt can be brutal, but it can also be essential to faith. Some things should be doubted. When tragedy and injustice break our hearts and lead us to cry out with Jesus, "My God, why have you forsaken us?" God may be stirring up doubt in us to motivate us to be part of the solution, to make things better, to bring healing where there are wounds and justice where there is injustice.

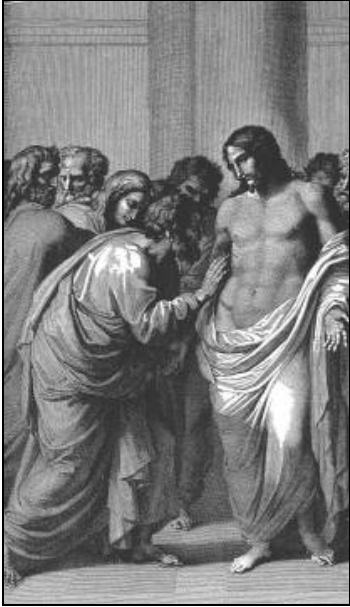
Doubt arising from the brokenness of the world may be the first step of a holy calling. Martin Luther once said in the small catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him." Luther relied on the Holy Spirit to bring him to faith and to give him the courage to lead the reformation.

God's love doesn't depend on our ability to fake faith. God doesn't measure our faith first and then decide to grant us grace. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But faith is not as much about belief as it is about trust, living with hope and trust that God's promises are true, without knowing for sure.

I love being able to proclaim the good news that there is such a thing as faithful doubt, trusting that God won't zap me for saying that doubt is okay!

May you find in your doubt a window to a deeper, richer, truer faith in the Risen Jesus who understands us and loves us, doubts and all.

Closing Prayer: God of our heads and our hearts, remind us that you can work through our doubt to bring us new insight, understanding, and compassion for others. Guide us in faith, in doubt, and in trust, in the name of Jesus. Amen.



Benediction: When you doubt, I encourage you to be like Thomas. Get closer to Jesus, touch his wounds and use your faith to heal our broken world with love.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen



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