

Faith and Doubt

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You might be tempted to sympathize with Thomas.

I am.

After all, who could believe such a thing? That Jesus, who had been crucified, was alive. And what's more? He was walking around, talking to disciples, visiting them in locked rooms, still bearing the very wounds that ended his life.

Nail marks in his hands and feet. A spear mark in his side.

When the risen Christ visited them, Thomas had been away. When he returned the others all had quite a story to tell.

"I won't believe it" Thomas said.

"Not unless I see the marks, myself. No, not unless I press my own hand into his wounds."

"I won't believe it"

You might be tempted to sympathize with Thomas.

I am.

After all, who could believe such a thing?

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Then again, perhaps you might sympathize with the rest of the disciples.

I do.

After all, who among us has not been in a position where we are telling the truth and someone does not believe us. Is there anything more frustrating? To know that what you are saying is true, and to be met with disbelief?

There is a minor character in Homer's *Iliad* named Cassandra, in her life she lives with both a gift and a curse. She has the ability to foretell the future, and yet she is cursed that no one who hears her will ever believe what she says.

She warns the citizens of Troy that the giant wooden horse being rolled through their gates is a trap. She told anyone who would listen. But no one would believe her.

Her frustration is palpable. It is hard to imagine a worse curse than to know that such destruction is imminent, and yet nobody will listen at all.

And of course that literary archetype is just as common now as it was then. How many movies have a scene where the hero hopelessly runs person, to person, saying “You have to believe me.”

And my guess is most of us have had something like this experience. Telling the truth, only to be met with disbelief.

And while there is certainly the frustration that someone just won’t believe you.

There is also a pain, a sadness, that comes in those moments.

The pain and sadness of realizing that —for whatever reason— your word is not good enough.

If that has ever happened to you, then maybe you could sympathize with the disciples who have told Thomas an incredible story, about the most amazing thing they have ever encountered:

Jesus, who had been crucified, was alive. And what’s more? He was walking around, talking to disciples, visiting them in locked rooms, still bearing the very wounds that ended is life.

“I won’t believe it”

Thomas said.

They must have been crushed. All of them speaking with one voice about this amazing thing that had taken place, and Thomas had to see it for himself.

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And so, a week later, Jesus does indeed appear again, and this time Thomas is there. He get’s what he wanted, a chance to feel Christ’s wounds for himself.

And then Christ offers this gentle, but clear rebuke:

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

So is Jesus saying that the true mark of faith is to simple accept everything even if it cannot be proven or shown?

I don't think that is exactly it.

I think Jesus is making a case that we ought to trust the testimony of others in our community.

Jesus is not pushing Thomas to have a blind faith in the unbelievable. He is pushing him to have enough confidence in his community to take them at their word when they testify with one voice that something unbelievable has happened.

Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for failing to accept the truth of the resurrection, he rebukes him for failing to believe the testimony of his sisters and brothers in faith.

In short, Jesus rebukes him not for doubt, but for trying to chart his own course to faith without leaning on the stories of his companions.

Jesus says: "blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe."

Given the generation that I am a part of it might not surprise you to know that the vast majority of my friends do not attend church.

I hang out with people just about every weekend whose spiritual life has nothing to do with any kind of organization or institution.

"Organized Religion" is often the term they use for what they reject.

These folks meditate and pray, they experience a sense of mystery and awe, many of them even believe in God.

But they prefer to go it alone, to seek and find what they can cobble together from their own experiences in the world.

I bear them no ill will. But I do tell them that I think they are missing out.

And sometimes I even worry about them a bit.

I worry that they are trying to go it alone through the hardest parts of life's journey.

I worry that life's twists will leave the lost, and life's pains will pick them off.

Let me tell you what I love about organized religion.

I am certain that in my one short life, my fingers will never trace the counters of God's body. My eyes will never see all that can be seen of God's beauty. My mind will never know all there is to know about life. My heart will never grasp the fullness of the mystery of creation.

But that is ok, because I have a great cloud of witnesses. Whose stories I have heard and wondered at. Whose wisdom I have soaked up. Whose teachings I have wrestled with.

I have old songs that train my heart to believe.

I have treasured traditions that help me taste and see God's goodness.

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But there is of course one more thing to learn from this story.

Even though Jesus has a clear preference that Thomas could come to faith through the testimony of his community. Jesus does show up. Thomas does get to touch his wounds, and come to believe.

That may happen for us too. We may have experiences or moments in our lives where we feel like we are standing face-to-face with the power and beauty of God. Moments where we come to know deeply some important truth.

Something broken, healed.

Something split, restored.

Something beautiful, beheld.

So the other side of Thomas's story is this. When things like that happen to you. Don't keep it to yourself. Tell us.

I have always believed that religion is a team sport. Not an individual event. None of us come to have confidence in these amazing things without the testimony and example of others.

Just a few weeks ago, I was sitting with Janet Christensen, our church-member whose funeral we had here yesterday. She told me then something she told me every time I spoke with her.

"I'm not afraid to die."

It always amazed me to hear. And I believed her.

And it was a good thing, because you know what? I am afraid.

And the way I see it, I have two choices between now and my dying day.

I can either spend my whole life trying to gather up enough experiences, and knowledge, and wisdom, and confidence, and inner-peace, that someday I to find that death is not such a fearful thing.

Or I can believe Janet.

My sister in faith.

Who told me as much.

That's what I am going to try to do. To try to believe Janet, and the many other saints of our faith who have walked this way before.

Because if I do, I think I will be blessed.