

## Doubt and Faith

Do you ever doubt? Or have lingering questions--things that you'd like for God to clear up for you? I do. And I always have. That's what led me deeper into the Bible and into The Episcopal Church to begin with; then into EFM, into all the adult Christian education I could get at church, and then into seminary. That's what led me out into places and situations and relationships that put my faith to the test, and helped it grow.

I heard a priest<sup>i</sup> say something when I was first exploring The Episcopal Church, and it has stuck with me and encouraged me since: "The opposite of faith is not doubt," he said. "It's certainty."

Yet, I've heard many a Christian treat doubt and belief as if they were mutually exclusive. Or try to squash doubt altogether—which, I'm afraid, drives many people away.

So why does doubt get such a bad rap?

Maybe because of the legacy of the Enlightenment and modernism, which contend that all that's worth knowing can be proved with certainty and objectivity; and which recognize few limits to human understanding.

Maybe because of the influence of fundamentalism, itself a reaction to the questions raised by modernism and the sciences, including biblical criticism. Maybe we're still wrestling with fundamentalist principles, like the inerrancy of scripture, or the assumption that faith equals certainty--or that truth must be this or that, but not both.

Maybe it's because we tend to confuse doubt with despair, or cynicism, or atheism—other forms of certainty that have ruled God out.

It could be because of all the violence and corruption and suffering we've seen in our lives, which leaves us at a loss for answers.

Or maybe, it really has more to do with us. A very wise 8<sup>th</sup> grader<sup>ii</sup> from this church got me thinking about this a couple of weeks ago. Maybe, she suggested, believers are uncomfortable with doubt because we're afraid of what we don't know, afraid of uncertainty, afraid of being judged—by parents, peers, priests, even God.

So we may discourage or dismiss the questions posed by “doubting Thomases”: by youth who are outgrowing their childhood faith; or friends who are struggling to make theological sense of evil; or skeptics, who are curious how we reconcile miracles with a modern worldview.

But we need their questions. They invite us to admit what we don’t know, and to **claim** what we do know. And if we don’t want to turn people away from church (which we don’t!), we need to take their questions seriously. We need to let them know that there’s room in faith for uncertainty, and that we’re willing to learn and grow with them.

In today’s Gospel, we meet the original “doubting Thomas.” He comes onto the scene **after** the Marys have discovered the empty tomb and run to tell the other disciples and bumped into the risen Christ on the way. And **after** Jesus has appeared to the other disciples, and offered them his peace and showed them his wounds, and commissioned them to continue his work, and breathed the Holy Spirit on them.

But Thomas wasn’t with them. So when he hears about all of this, he wants what they have. He wants to see Jesus for himself. He wants to believe, but he isn’t quite there yet. And he says so.

A week later, Jesus comes again, and he invites Thomas personally to touch his wounds and see his hands—and to believe.

Now, before we move on, we need to deal with the word “doubt” that sneaks into many translations of this passage. “Do not doubt but believe,” the NRSV translation has Jesus say. But the word “doubt” is not used at all. The closest word that Greek has to “doubt” is *diakrino*, which is translated “to judge, distinguish, hesitate, or doubt.” But even that word isn’t in this passage.

The word used is *a-pistos*, which means “faith-less; non-believing.” Its opposite is *pistos*, or “faithful.” What Jesus says might be better translated, “Do not be faithless, but be faithful. Do not be un-believing, but believe.”

And Thomas does come to believe—and to believe wholeheartedly: “My Lord and my God,” he answers. We aren’t told whether he actually reaches out and touches Jesus, because that’s not the point. The point is that Thomas asks, and Jesus answers. The point is that Thomas seeks, and Jesus finds him. The point is that Thomas doubts, and Jesus meets him in his doubt.

Then Jesus turns to those of us who come later, who are not eyewitnesses to the resurrection, and who have to depend on what others have reported; and he blesses us: “Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe!”

Just to be sure we don’t miss the point, the evangelist John adds: “These stories are for you, so that you may believe, and have life in Jesus.”

“Believing” in this case is not the same thing as intellectual agreement with a fact, like the sum of one plus one, or the name of the 37<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S. Believing is trusting. Committing the heart. Living and loving out of hope and life-changing truths, like “God is with us,” and “God has defeated death and sin for us.” Believing is something we grow into for the rest of our lives.

And doubt, my friends, is very much a part of believing—of faith, whether we like it or not. It’s about wondering and longing and seeking and asking.

So I’m grateful for saints like Thomas, and the young woman I mentioned earlier—for the mentors and spiritual companions who have been honest and brave enough to voice their doubt: to talk about the questions that won’t go away and the dry seasons in their prayer lives and the long winters of their faith.

One of those people is writer and biblical scholar Renita Weems, who dedicated a whole book<sup>iii</sup> to confessing her faith struggles. A well-known preacher, she reached a point in her ministry when she stopped believing in her religion, her ministry and her own words, and, at times, even God. All she could muster was a faint “belief in believing.”<sup>iv</sup>

Rituals were her saving grace: they were routines that forced her to live faithfully, to show up for duty, even when she didn’t feel like being faithful.<sup>v</sup> And so she continued to show up, though God was silent, though church seemed dull, though she felt like a fraud.

And she began to confess her “unbelief to believers” and her “belief to unbelievers.” Confessing unbelief to believers and belief to unbelievers. That sounds good, and I think we should try it.

Over time, Weems began to see faith and prayer differently. “The issue in prayer,” she realized, “is not to pray because we’re certain, but to pray because we’re uncertain. It’s a risk where **the risk itself is the outcome.**”<sup>vi</sup> The risk of praying, of showing up, is the outcome, the act of faith.

Doubt keeps us moving, seeking, hoping; it keeps us humble; it keeps us in conversation with God and one another; it makes room in us for new ways of encountering God. And it draws us into the hard work of faith, real faith, faithfulness: showing up when the fun and warm-fuzzies and brilliant epiphanies peter out.

“Faith,” Weems concludes, “is learning how to live between the last time we heard from God and the next time we hear from God. And if during that time we have an insistent sense inside that we’re being asked to forgive someone we never meant to forgive, to trust a stranger, to open our heart to someone or something we normally shut ourselves off from, to give up our right to punish those who have wounded us, then **that** is quite likely the beginning of our long-awaited encounter with God.”<sup>vii</sup>

So, blessed are you, who showed up today, and keep showing up; who do the regular work of faith in the in-between time; who have faith enough to live in faith.

Blessed are you, 1 Peter says, for “Although you may not have seen Jesus, or may not see him now, you love him and rejoice in him.”<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> John Westerhoff.

<sup>ii</sup> Laura Schlecht.

<sup>iii</sup> *Listening for God*.

<sup>iv</sup> Weems, 38.

<sup>v</sup> Weems, 36.

<sup>vi</sup> Weems, 41.

<sup>vii</sup> Weems, 174.

<sup>viii</sup> 1 Peter, paraphrased.