

Easter 2

Year A

[RCL] Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Doubt Strengthens Faith

One of the greatest blessings we encounter as Christians is the freedom to admit when we have doubts. As faithful Christians, we should have the audacity to ask tough questions concerning our faith and traditions.

For some, doubt is synonymous with having a lack of faith, but doubt and faith are two sides of the same coin. They are the Ying and Yang, if you would, of the Christian life.

According to Paul Tillich, doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Rather than suppress our doubts, we should explore them and allow them to set us on a journey of discovery and a deepening of our beliefs and convictions. In our Gospel reading today, Thomas asked for proof, and we also want proof as well that our faith is not in vain.

Thomas often gets a bad rap for doubting the resurrection of Jesus; however, he was no more doubtful than the other disciples and apostles.

The other disciples didn't believe that Jesus had risen until he appeared to them, so why should we expect Thomas to be any different?

In fact, we applaud Thomas for his insistence on wanting tangible proof. After all, Thomas was well aware that Jesus wasn't the first messianic figure on the scene to be crucified by the Roman occupiers. Thomas showed great religious restraint and demonstrated the proper amount of rational doubt. But when Jesus appeared to him, Thomas proclaimed without reservation, "My Lord, and my God."

Doubt can be a wonderful tool that propels us into deeper learning, earnest soul searching, and spiritual revelation. Faith based on absolute certainty leads to fanaticism, but faith tempered with doubt is mature and stable.

Many believers struggle with their own doubts brought about by life's unpredictability and tempestuous nature. We have very real struggles in our lives that generate an uncertainty about where God is to be found in all the turmoil.

Sometimes we look to spiritual giants, the superstars of Christianity, and feel inferior in our own personal walk in comparison. However, the greatest in the Kingdom sometimes deal with the greatest doubt.

Mother Teresa's diary reveals a saintly person who struggled with a type of doubt that would crush the faint of heart. She wrote to her spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael Van Der Peet, in 1979, "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."

For the last nearly half-century of her life Mother Teresa felt no presence of God whatsoever — neither in her heart or in the Eucharist. That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta and— except for a five-week break in 1959 — never abated.

Although perpetually cheery in public, Mother Teresa lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. She bemoans the "dryness," "darkness," "loneliness" and "torture" she was undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. Nevertheless, she continued to love the least in God's creation and dedicate her life to Christ to the very end.

Mother Teresa isn't alone in her struggle with doubt. The Polish-born Jewish-American author Isaac Bashevis Singer states that doubt is part of all religion, that all the religious thinkers were doubters. The art critic Robert Hughes said, "The greater the artist, the greater the doubt. Perfect confidence is granted to the less talented as a consolation prize."

Catholic priest Henri Nouwen wrote, "So I am praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting."

Despite Fr. Nouwen's own struggle with doubt, he was able to mentor and encourage countless thousands through his writings, lectures, and sermons. One particular quote from a book of his has been a lifeboat for many who find themselves overcome with the waves of life's stormy doubts: "Have the courage to trust that you will not fall into an abyss of nothingness, but into the embrace of a God whose love can heal all your wounds."

Faith is a daily, ongoing exercise. It is a risk. Doubts arise. We struggle with God. And hopefully, faith grounded in the goodness of God triumphs — even when we do not have all the answers and life doesn't make sense.

Will we believe in a God of love who wants to be near us and has our best interest at heart? Or will we believe in a God who plays games with us, and is ultimately cruel and uncaring? Will we believe in a God who stands beside us in our troubles, or one who is distant and difficult?

The author of Hebrews writes, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is not void of doubt, but requires a daily commitment to developing our spiritual walk despite life's uncertainties and sometimes cruelties.

Faith doesn't take away our doubts, but is strengthened by them. And faith doesn't deliver us from our problems and heartaches, but gives us the strength to persevere through them and lead others as well as they navigate around the abyss of nothingness.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. This you can be sure of.

May his resurrection power be at work in our lives as we learn to allow our doubts to strengthen our faith.

Amen.

Written by The Rev. Timothy G. Warren, a 26-year retired Air Force veteran with more than 15 years' experience as an educator in the private and public sector. Fr. Warren is pastor of St. Francis (Independent Old Catholic Church), an emergent outreach ministry that serves at-risk teens and young adults in the High Desert Region of Southern California, and President/Executive Director LifeSkills Development, a nonprofit dedicated to providing assistance to at-risk young adults. Fr. Warren is also a member of the High Desert Interfaith Council.

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