

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

“An Hasidic tale is told of an old rabbi of great wisdom whose fame had spread far beyond his own congregation to the villages and rabbis on the other side of the mountain.¹ One day, suddenly, he died, and the young rabbis were bereft. Now they said, ‘What are we going to do when our people look to us for guidance? Without the old master where are we going to get the answers to the great questions of life?’

“They decided among themselves to pray and fast until the old man’s holiness and wisdom would be infused into one of them. And sure enough, one night in a dream, the old man appeared to one of the younger rabbis. ‘Master,’ the young teacher said, ‘it’s so good that you’ve returned to us. You see, with you gone, the people are now looking to us for answers to the great questions of life, and we’re still unsure. For instance, Master, they’re demanding to know—on the other side, of what account are the sins of youth?’

“And the old man said, ‘The sins of youth? Why on the other side, the sins of youth are of no account whatsoever.’ And the young rabbi said, ‘On the other side, the sins of youth are of no account whatsoever? Then what has it all been about? On the other side, what sin is punished if not the sins of youth?’

“And the old man answered very slowly but very clearly, ‘On the other side, that sin which is punished with constant and unending severity is the sin of false piety.’”

Every year on the second Sunday of Easter we hear John’s Gospel story about the disciples, locked inside the Upper Room, fearing that the authorities will come after them next. Then suddenly Jesus is standing among them, actually speaking to them. Surely they were caught off guard by this surprise appearance of their Lord, whom they had believed was gone from them forever despite all that he had told them about his resurrection. John says that they rejoiced when they saw him and they received the Holy Spirit from him...all except poor Thomas. No false piety in this man! He will forever be remembered because he doubted.

Doubt is defined very simply as uncertainty about something. We experience it as a state of questioning, and we have come to believe that it’s not good, particularly as it pertains to our faith. We may experience it in our relationships with others, and we surely doubt ourselves from time to time. When we consider human emotions and states of mind that motivate us and that move us to action, doubt will probably not be among them. That’s because doubt can hold us back, make us indecisive. When we doubt something strongly, we may find ourselves paralyzed to the point that we can’t take action at all, one way or the other.

Our doubt of others can make us distrustful, suspicious of their motives. It can make us skeptical and cynical. It can separate us from others because we don’t believe we can trust them or trust ourselves *with* them. Self-doubt can make us think we’re unworthy and undeserving; instead of persuading us that we can accomplish something, it convinces us of our inability. Doubt strives for completeness in logic and worthiness in perfection, often threatening our goals and achievements. Usually doubt is accompanied by our fear of what will happen if we do something—or if we don’t do it. We fear being wrong. We fear being vulnerable. We fear losing control. And we believe that doubt and the fear that accompanies it is bad!

¹ Synthesis: a Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship following the Revised Common Lectionary. Easter 2—Year C, April 3, 2016, Postscript.

Let's think about doubt in a different, more positive way: doubt can be our mind's way of saying slow down—you need to work through this. Maybe we *need* to be suspicious and distrustful to keep ourselves from being hurt; maybe we *need* to become more self-confident and self-assured in order to do our best. Here's the big one: maybe we need to learn that being wrong isn't the end of the world. Sometimes we must let down our defenses in order to open our lives to someone or something new. From time to time, perhaps we *need* to relinquish control and discover that risk can broaden our possibilities. Despite what we've been told and taught, doubt *can* be a healthy contributor to our well-being.

Let's take another look at Thomas and bless him, because he gives us permission to doubt and question the beliefs on which we base our faith. Some of us have unfortunately been taught that we are not to question, only that we are to believe. But as Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins wrote in *The Feminine Face of God*, "Selling out to someone else's story is a waste of who we are and prevents us from completing the sacred tasks for which we were created." In other words, if we believe only what someone else has told us, our faith may not be personal because we have adopted theirs. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells them they must work out their own salvation. In the same way, we must work out our own faith. Jesus does not condemn Thomas for doubting but implores him to believe. Doubt is not disbelief, but a tool to strengthen belief. If we pay attention to our questions and work to resolve them, they will lead us to stronger belief and deeper faith.

Does it *really* matter whether we work out our beliefs so that we possess the beliefs we profess? Yes! Absolutely! Remember that the young rabbis were troubled after the master died because now others would be asking them about the meaning of life. In the young rabbi's dream, the Master told him that "On the other side, that sin which is punished with constant and unending severity is the sin of false piety." If we do not truly believe what we say, how can others see Christ in us and know Christ through us?

Anthony de Mello tells of a young man who crossed the desert and finally came to a monastery.² He asked to hear one of the abbot's lectures and that afternoon, listened as the abbot spoke about the importance of work in the field. After the lecture, the young man said to one of the monks: "That was amazing. I thought I would hear a fine sermon about virtues and sins, and the abbot spoke only of tomatoes, irrigation, and so forth. Where I come from, all believe that God is merciful and all one must do is pray." The monk smiled and replied: "Here we believe that God has already done God's part; now it is up to us to continue the process."

How do we see Thomas on this second Sunday of Easter? I pray that it's through the lens of love and thanksgiving for his honesty. Someone said that "sitting next to every true believer in the Easter pews is a doubter, whose presence is dedicated to unanswered questions; that churches are not communities of believers, but communities of people who have questions, who doubt, who hope, who come to find something out." Let us welcome them, hear their questions, share what we know, and then together open our arms to others who are questioning, seeking the answers of faith.

Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." *Amen, and amen.*

² Ibid.