

EASTER 2 B

John 20:19-31

Thomas

The world was surprised when Mother Teresa's diary was made public, and people read about her painful doubts. Was her work right?

Did God care? Was there a God after all? It turns out this holy woman, on her way to official sainthood, was plagued with many religious doubts.

But this Sunday, when we read about Thomas, the quintessential gospel doubter, we should remember that everyone walks through life with doubt on one arm and faith on the other.

Sometimes one pulls harder than the other.

Most human beings follow the tug of faith.

To illustrate, imagine that you're in a shopping mall, and a group of college students asks you to participate in an experiment for their psychology class. You agree and allow them to blindfold you and place a cardboard box at your feet pressing against your toes.

They ask you to ascertain, without removing the blindfold, if the box is empty or contains a live Easter rabbit.

How might you go about it?

There are basically three ways to approach it.

You could bend down and stick your hand into the box

and feel around to determine if there is a rabbit inside.

This would be gaining knowledge by direct experience,
through the use of your senses.

Second, you could pick up the box and judge from its weight
or shake it to detect motion.

This would be gaining knowledge through reasoning or deduction.

Third, you could simply call out to someone passing by
and ask if there is a rabbit in the box.

This would be learning by believing or placing faith in
the testimony of somebody else.

Of the three ways of gaining knowledge, which one do you think
is most important and the one most often used?

If you answered "**faith**," accepting the word of another,
you would be correct.

Scientists say we gain more than 75% of all our knowledge
by accepting the word of others.

Think about it:

I always look at the nutritional value on the food packages I buy,
yet I have no way of checking if the fat content
and cholesterol percentages listed are accurate.

I just accept the testimony of the label. I take it on faith.

I've never been to the North Pole or to Iraq,

but I believe they exist on the word people who say they have been there.

The last time you flew, did you check to see if the pilot had his license?

You just took it on faith that he did.

Am I a really ordained priest?

Not one of you has ever asked to see my credentials.

So, it goes. The scientists are right.

We do accept most of our knowledge on faith.

But doubt always lurks, as it must,

whenever we do not have direct knowledge ourselves.

And doubts about religion, our faith, are commonplace,

as they too must be. It's part of being human.

We have questions about the credibility of our witnesses.

Furthermore, cramped by a modern mindset, we have intellectual doubts

as we wonder if miracles occur, if the gospels are true, Jesus is divine,

God exists, or if the Church, with its present scandals,

can claim any right to be called the Church of Jesus Christ.

Our emotional doubts increase in proportion when we are sorely afflicted:

where was God when my daughter was killed or my husband died

or my son was in an accident that left him paralyzed –

especially when I have been so faithful?

Could not God have treated his own better?

It's something, I guess, like Thomas. It was all right up to a point,

but when his best friend and mentor, this innocent man

who went around doing good, was cruelly arrested, beaten, disfigured,

and horribly crucified, how could he believe in God anymore?

When people have intellectual or emotional doubts about faith –
and most do – there are few answers.

But there are three practical approaches we can take.

Let's examine them.

First, stay with community.

You notice that when Thomas was off by himself,
his doubts got the better of him. Only when he rejoined the community
was he able to say, ***“My Lord and my God.”***

The fact is no one believes all the time;

no one can feel God's presence all the time. But the community does!

The community believes

when you and I are unwilling or unable to do so.

Peter believed for doubting Thomas until he could believe again.

Thomas believed for denying Peter until he could embrace again.

Monica believed for her son Augustine

when he was in his period of sinfulness and down
until he could repent again.

Claire believed for Francis when he was sad until he was glad again.

We are a gathering of Christians.

We support each other, and as a faith community,

we become more than the sum total of our individual selves.

You exhibit the gifts I don't have, and I exhibit those you don't have.

You cry the tears I cannot cry, and I laugh the laughter you cannot laugh.

You believe when I struggle with doubts;
I believe when you struggle with doubts.

Our individual pieces are partial.

Our faith, our hope, and our love are quite incomplete.
We belong to a vast community of time and space,
and the mighty truth is this: together we believe more
than we believe alone.

That is why, even with our doubts, we should stick with community.

Second, when doubt becomes strong,
and the temptation to drop out is severe, resist it.

The path of the “**painful pilgrim**” is the way to go.

Come to church. This stance is sometimes confused with hypocrisy,
but it is different.

The hypocrite is one who consciously is pretending to be better than
he or she is, saying one thing and doing another.

The **painful pilgrim** knows he or she is in a period of doubt and unbelief
but sticks with going to church, not in order to deceive,

but to continue the search

in order to be there the next time Christ reappears in his or her life.

The **painful pilgrim**, unlike the hypocrite
but like Mother Teresa, is a noble person.

Third, experience faith people.

If your diet is **People** magazine, MTV, and pop culture –

in short, if your intellectual and emotional diet is
 a steady intake of secular sources that are fundamentally sneering,
 skeptical, and unbelieving – then sooner or later,
 the old adages comes true: **“Birds of a feather flock together,”**
 and **“Tell me who your friends are,**
and I will tell you who you are.”

If you're steady **“friends”** are freewheeling hedonist, scoffers,
 lovely and engaging agnostics, bright secularists,
 then your doubts will sink deeper and deeper
 without the counterbalance of faith-filled people.

Belief does not survive well in a faithless community
 anymore then resistance to drugs
 survives well among drug-taking friends.
 It's as common sensibly simple as that.

Remember, Thomas is not called **“the twin”** for nothing.
 He has a million siblings, all of whom are perplexed, honorable people.
 When we feel his doubts, we must do what he did:
 first, go back to community;
 second, except the very human role of
 a painful pilgrim in search of truth; and, finally,
 hobnob with people of faith, the folks who,
 after all their own troubles and doubts, have found the center.

No doubt about it, Thomas is our hero. Amen.