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Doubts Unlimited and Faith Unending

Texts: **Mark 9:20-24**; **John 20:19-31**; John Ortberg *Faith and Doubt*

Doubting Thomas. I don't know that I've ever heard him referred to in any other way. It seems like it's always Doubting Thomas. As if that were his full name. "Nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, and nice to meet your son, Doubting, too. What a cute little skeptic he is!"

Of course, there's more to Thomas than that. Before that fateful day, he might have been called Daring Thomas. In John, chapter 11, just after Jesus has resurrected Lazarus, and the authorities have decided to kill both Jesus and Lazarus because of it, Jesus declares his intention to travel on to dangerous Jerusalem anyway. It's Thomas who boldly declares, "Let us go to Jerusalem with Jesus, that we may die with him there." But this courageous declaration didn't matter for his reputation in the long run, because since that first Sunday of Easter, he has forever been Doubting Thomas.

It also doesn't matter that, just a week later, he was the first one, perhaps ever, to realize that Jesus was not just the Messiah, but God in human flesh, when he knelt before the resurrected Jesus and confessed, "My Lord and my God." He might have been known as Thomas the Bold for saying that. He was the first to have eyes to see. But no.

Nor does it seem to have mattered that Thomas went all the way to South India with the message about the risen Jesus, probably the only apostle to leave the Roman Empire to share the good news. He founded what is today known as the Mar Thoma church, a church that to this day is proud to trace its ancestry all the way back to Thomas. He died a martyr's death in southern India, and he might have been known as Thomas the Brave for that. But no.

None of that matters, because he will always be Doubting Thomas because of this one incident.

Now, let's look at Thomas's reaction again. Thomas doesn't react as someone who just refuses to believe a story that the others are faithfully telling. Thomas reacts as if he thinks he is the butt of some incredibly cruel joke. His response seems to be that of someone who's really been hurt.

"Oh, yeah," he says, "I'll only believe that when I can put my fingers in the holes in his hands and put my hand in his side." That's not so much the answer of someone who is full of doubt as it is the answer of someone who thinks he's being made fun of. It's a pretty forceful answer and I think we have to remember the situation he's in. Of course he doubts, but who wouldn't? I love that he didn't just go along to get along, that he told them what he thought of their tale. He's the skeptic in all of us who wants to shout, "I'll believe it when I see it. I need something more."

And so I say, God bless Thomas, Doubting Thomas. He speaks for all of us who would really like a little more help with faith. He speaks for all of us who would happily give up a bit of that extra blessing that comes from believing without seeing if we could just get a little bit of seeing to go along with our believing. I love that when he first hears the good news about Jesus being alive after being dead, he just rears back and says, "No, I don't believe it!" To me, that is fantastic. I know who that guy is. I've met that guy on the street a thousand times. I am that guy! "Show it to me! Prove it to me! I want more than just your say so!"

The very fact that Thomas is there saying what he's saying makes me believe the whole story a whole lot more. They could easily have covered up the doubts and just told us that everyone believed. That would have been the smart thing to do, to never acknowledge that there's any room for doubt at all. But they didn't do that. They put the doubts front and center. Here's Thomas, one of the Twelve, and he didn't believe at first. That is great news for anyone who ever struggles with faith. Hey, I'm not alone! Thomas struggled, too, and he knew Jesus, and he knew the other disciples and what kind of upfront guys they were, and he still had doubts. Like all of us, Thomas is a mixture of faith and doubt.

In fact, faith in Jesus doesn't often come all at once. It starts in doubt. It starts with conditions. I'm not going to believe until or unless.... It starts with Thomas. And it might never get past that place.

But if it does, it probably doesn't go up to 100% very often, even though for Thomas it does because, well, boom, bang, there's Jesus standing in front of him the next week holding out his nail-holed hands and saying, "Hey, Thomas, here they are, stick'em in." Normal faith grows, maybe into hope that it might be true, maybe later to a feeling that it could possibly be true, and perhaps with a little more experience of knowing Jesus in prayer and in life it might grow into a decided sense that it probably is true. At moments, it may even seem certainly true, or almost certainly true, and then back off again for a while to just probably true. Maybe it goes right back down to "I'm not sure any of it's true at all." That's just the nature of faith. It's not the same thing as certainty. It moves on a continuum, up and down.

Faith moves up and down. That's to be expected. Today I'm at 89% faith, next week I might be at 25%, then a week after that, I might be at 73%. Faith changes with our experiences, with the way the world is, with what happens around us. Jesus knows this. When Jesus comes to the disciples again the next week, he doesn't tell Thomas what a jerk he is for not believing. He offers Thomas what he was asking for, his hands and his side, nail holes and spear wound included. He gives Thomas what he needs. Though I don't think Jesus is likely to appear to us this morning with that kind of proof – he is risen to Heaven, after all – I do think that when we come before the Lord with a heart that is genuinely aching to believe and we ask him to give us something to hold onto, he does.

It's okay to be that person who says to Jesus, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!" Jesus treasures that struggle, that engagement with him. I remember in university, one of my friends told me that she had been really struggling with God and was just not sure of her faith anymore. She had been on the subway and had said a silent prayer to God, "God, if you're there, let me know somehow, give me a sign." And as she was leaving the subway, going up the long escalator from underground to the surface, a man going down suddenly turned to her and said, "God loves you, you know." She got to the top, turned around and raced down after the man. When she caught him, she said, "Why did you say that to me?" And he said, "Believe me, I don't normally do things like that, but I just felt a sudden urge to say that to you. I'm sorry if I offended you." And she explained everything to him. It was just what she needed.

I want to tell you a story of something that I believe the risen Jesus did for me. It was 2012, summer, and I was on vacation at our family cottage on a lake about 130 miles north-east of Toronto. I was in the car and driving back from doing grocery shopping in Haliburton, the nearest town, when news of yet another mass shooting came over the radio. It was the Colorado movie theater shooting.

I don't know what it was about that news, that shooting, but it got to me. It was just one more shooting in a long string of shootings, but I remember thinking, "O God, what are you doing? Why do you allow these horrible things to keep on happening. Don't you care? Are you even there? Am I just talking to the air? Have I wasted my life?" Like I said, it really got to me. I was utterly downcast, in real despair. It was just at that moment that I was driving past a part of the forest where a tornado had come through twenty years before, and you could still see the swathe of trees that had been blown over, just lying there. And for some reason, I just blurted out, "Lord, if you exist, then send me a tornado so I know." I realized immediately that that was a horrible idea, so I said, "No, not a tornado, a whirlwind, but small, really small, just for me and my family, and not so much as to hurt us." And then I said, "God, I'm being ridiculous. I know you don't do that. But I need help. I'm just hanging on here. If there's anything you could give me, any sign at all, that'd really help. Yes, I know asking for a sign is bad. It's ok, I'll make it." That was my thought process: doubt, despair, asking for help, reflecting on it a bit, faith seeping back in, drop by drop. I pulled into the cottage driveway, the kids were there, the groceries needed to be put away, and I forgot all about it.

About two weeks later we were down at the beach. I was standing in 18 inch deep water, maybe a little less. Six feet behind me were my mom, and Kate with Adam in her lap, and 3 year old Emily. They were on the dock under a sun umbrella getting ready to swim. Towels, hats, buckets, and toys were strewn on the dock. I was holding Noah in my arms facing away from them. I was about 10 feet out from shore. Suddenly I noticed a disturbance in the water. It was like a little swirling. Before I could say anything, that swirling increased in size enormously, and a water spout about ten feet tall rose in front of me, headed straight towards me and Noah, about as wide as my arms would be extended, and soaked me. It continued onto the dock, where it soaked everyone there, blew off the towels and buckets, and had enough force to bend the metal stand of the huge sun umbrella until it failed and the umbrella bent and sagged into the water. I turned in time to see the water spout dissipate just before it got to our neighbor's dock, 75 feet away, dropping a beach hat in front of our astonished neighbors. And then it was gone. My mom, Kate, Emily, Noah and I were all soaked by the water, and you could see a wet path crossing the dock where it had blown.

We were all like, "what was that?"

It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. It grew from a tiny stirring to a full blown whirlwind ten feet high in seconds, soaked us, travelled 75 feet, and dissipated, all in like 15 seconds. We've been going to the cottage since 1969, and had never seen anything like it. I called the local Environment Canada bureau, the government weather folks, and asked what they could make of it. The meteorologist said he'd never heard of such a thing, but since there was a hill leading down from the cottage to the lake, it might have caused a wind current that could conceivably do what I said. It wasn't until a few days later that I even remembered my conversation with God as I was driving past the same spot and realized, I got my whirlwind. It was just for me and my family, it was small, it didn't hurt us. It literally washed over us, and only us, soaked us, and disappeared. It was exactly what I'd asked for. Now, of course, I already told you that there could be a perfectly reasonable natural explanation for it. But the coincidences involved would be pretty incredible.

It's the closest I've ever come to experiencing a miracle. Like Thomas, Doubting Allan made a ridiculous demand of God. And in this case, God soaked me for it. A friend of mine calls me "the pastor of wind and water." I am convinced that God does still offer signs that will spur our faith on. Not always spectacular ones, but sometimes, and when we least expect it.

But still, the greatest sign is the one that Jesus offered: his nail-scarred hands and his spear-split side. When Jesus stretched out those hands to Thomas, Doubting Thomas, he was stretching out his hands to everyone who has ever doubted, to all of us. "I died on the cross for you," he seems to be saying, "and I am alive again for you. Trust in me, because these hands are the proof of my unending love for you." His wounded hands open our ears so we can hear what he does say: "Stop doubting, and believe."

Not, "Be certain!" but still and always just "Believe." And we can all do no better than to echo once more the words of Thomas, Faithful Thomas in response: "My Lord and my God."

Thanks be to God for every bit of faith that God gives, from the first Easter until right now.

Amen