

## **Is There Any Room for Doubt?**

a sermon by J. R. Luck  
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Last week Peter entered the tomb first; this week he's hiding in fear. Last week the beloved disciple believed; this week he's hiding out with Peter. But we don't call them clueless Peter or fearful John. But we will always know Thomas as Doubting Thomas. Why? Let's start by cutting the dude a little slack for asking for some evidence. If friends had told me that my brother was alive, I would have wondered about psychosis. I know what death looks like in the flesh; I would have needed to see life in the flesh to believe otherwise. Also, please note that there is NO evidence that Thomas touched Jesus' scars and wounds. Yes, he tells the disciples that he will have to touch them, and yes, Jesus offers Thomas the opportunity to do so, but the text never tells us that he took Jesus up on the offer. We are told that Thomas says "My Lord and My God." This affirmation comes from the only disciple willing to go to Bethany with Jesus after Lazarus' death despite the risks. So why is he "Doubting" Thomas, and why do we say it as if it were a contagious disease? Besides, when it comes to REAL doubters, Thomas doesn't even make the cut.

Trivia question: Who compared his/her life to Hell and expressed doubt in both the existence of heaven and God? Atheist Christopher Hitchens? Evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin? Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud or social theorist Karl Marx? No. It's Mother Teresa; the saint of Calcutta; the saint of the gutter; the woman dressed in white and blue with knarled hands and an omnipresent smile. But Teresa wrote that her smile was a "mask." And precisely because her outward appearance was so incongruent with her inner struggles, she struggled deeply with what she called her "hypocrisy." In a letter Teresa wrote to a spiritual director saying, *People say they are drawn closer to God- seeing my strong faith. – is this not deceiving people? Every time I have wanted to tell the truth – "that I have no faith"... And yet I still keep on smiling at God & all.*

Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light shares with the world 40 pieces of correspondence between Teresa and her spiritual directors over a period of 66 years. These letters reveal that for almost all of the last 50 years of her life she never felt the presence of God. She wrote: *I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake....?* I don't know about you, but I'm not too surprised she doubted; she worked in the gutter with the most pitiful of the pitiful. In such a place ANY sane person would ask "Where are you God because I don't see you?"

After the tornadoes of this past week blew past, survivor after survivor came out of their basements, closets and bathtubs. Many gave credit to God for their safety. And maybe God did intervene. How would I know whether God did or did not save them; I don't even know where my keys are half the time. But just once I'd like to hear someone standing amidst the rubble say, "My God, my God why have You abandoned us?" Part of what good theology does is to help us make sense of our experiences with God. In large part that is what the Bible is; it is a record of a people's experience with the living God. But that's not all it is. Good theology helps us to wrestle not only with God's presence but with God's absence. And thankfully our Bible is filled with this kind of good theology. This is the theology we see on the cross when Jesus says, "My God, my God why have you

forsaken me?" This is the theology we see in the psalmist from whom Jesus quotes. Job and Lamentations and Ecclesiastes show a willingness to wrestle with doubt and with the absence of God. The Hebrews ask, yell, cry, and question why God would lead them out of slavery to die in the wilderness. And don't forget, they didn't know the end of the story as do we.

From 2002 to October of last year, the Real Live Preacher posted an on-line blog. I'd like to share with you a little of one of his first blogs.

*I came to understand that it was the teachings of that same Jesus that led my parents to fight poverty and want in that [Texas/Mexico] border town.*

*There was a leetle problem though. Early on it became apparent that something was different about me. I couldn't make myself believe some parts of the Bible. I was a natural born skeptic.*

*When told the Noah and the Ark story in Sunday School, I quickly figured out that two of every kind of animal would not fit on the boat. No one else seemed to be doing the math. I could no more believe the ark story than I could believe the sky was green. I wanted to believe. Believing seemed nice, but I couldn't. I COULD NOT.*

*I felt strange and out of place because everyone else at church seemed to believe everything. I kept my "believing problem" to myself because I thought something was wrong with me.*

*Thus was born the strange dichotomy that has become the Preacher. A passionate love for Christ and his teachings mingled with fierce skepticism that would only grow stronger as I grew older.*

By the way, this blogger is not a Unitarian. He's a Baptist preacher in Texas. But they could have easily been the words of a UCC preacher in North Carolina.

Next month I will have been ordained for 20 years and for 20 years I've struggled with my calling to the ministry. Why? Why am I 44 years old and I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up? Some of the reasons are psychodynamic and have to do with being a preacher's kid. Long story. We don't need to go there. But I will say that I sat in a lot of congregational meetings growing up and I didn't like what I saw. Additionally, I've struggled with my calling because my heart's passion has always been to teach. But a lot of my struggle - most of it? - has to do with my doubt, my skepticism, my lack of belief. I don't feel worthy of being in this pulpit - in any pulpit.

When Mother Teresa writes that she feels like a hypocrite - I GET THAT. The idea that you would turn to me for spiritual insight is, at times, horrifying.

But people like C. S. Lewis help me keep going. Lewis once said we should be unafraid to doubt as doubt leads us to discard that which needs to be discarded and therefore allows us to grow deeper in the faith. Cool. And when I first heard about Mother Teresa's letters I said "Thanks be to God." And I meant it. I hold on to saints like Teresa and the Real Live Preacher and even to College Park pastor Michael Usey precisely because they would be the first to freak out if you called them saint. And while I still feel like I'm in the minority, I feel a little less alone and a little less freakish in their company. Having people as gracious as you also helps. A lot. I once confessed having some doubts to a lay woman named Angela. Her response? "That is precisely why I come to you for spiritual guidance." What do you say to that except, "Thank-you."

So where do I go from here? Will I still be preaching come the 40th anniversary of my ordination? Will I still be struggling with my calling? Most likely the answer is yes; yes I'll be preaching and yes I'll be struggling and doubting. I don't know how not to.

Over the last few weeks, some of you have asked, requested, and wished that I would become your regular pastor. You are kind; deluded, but kind. But I'm not sure you know what you ask or who you ask it of. But I will say this. In this 21st century, indeed in this search process for a new minister, you need to think about what kind of church you want to be.

There are A LOT of churches out there that, seemingly, don't have a doubt in the world. Such churches not only have the answers, but the answers are black and white, clear, & unambiguous. At least some, if not many or most of those churches, thrive, at least they do numerically. I won't kid you. You might be better off going in that direction. If you go there, I will freely and willingly give you my blessings and I'll mean it.

But I won't go there. I can't go there. If all there is to Christianity is Hallmark drivel, easy answers, inane prayers and denial about the presence of real suffering, I'll pass. Now if those become the only churches, I have no idea how I will make a living - "Would you like fries with that order?" - but at least I would get to hang out with some really cool heathen friends at night.

The thing is, there are a lot of cool heathens out there. Some of them aren't that different from me. But they aren't in church because they don't know if there's room in church for doubt. What do I tell them? Is there room in church for them? Is there room in the church for their doubts and questions?

Rev. James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit magazine *America*, writes that Mother Teresa not only had a ministry to the poor, but now she has a ministry to people who experience doubt and sometimes even the absence of God. And then he writes, "And you know who that is? Everybody. Atheists, doubters, seekers, believers, everyone."

Going back to where I started, Saint Thomas wants some evidence that he's dealing with reality. Likewise people out there want some evidence that the church is dealing with and in reality. And while we may not have an in-the-flesh, breathing messiah to show them, WE CAN BE REAL. We can, or at least we could show them OUR scars from wrestling with God's presence AND absence. Instead of hiding our doubts and skepticism, they could be our offering to the world. Now I won't lie. Some will call that heresy. But others will call it a healing breath of fresh air that is nothing short of miraculous. You as a church will have to decide what kind of church you want to be.

All I ask of you while you're deciding is to remember that doubt is not the opposite of faith. If there was no doubt, there would be no need for faith. And besides, faith is not something you feel or even think. The Christian faith is something you DO. Mother Teresa knew this to be true which is why, despite what she felt and thought, she DID the work of Christ. And the Real Live Preacher knows this too. He once prayed: *God, I don't have great faith, but I can be faithful. My belief in you may be seasonal, but my faithfulness will not. I will follow in the way of Christ. I will act as though my life and the lives of others matter. I will love. I have no greater gift to offer than my life. Take it. All I can say is Amen. Well, that and "Lord I believe; help my unbelief."* Amen.