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## *In Defense of Doubt*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Easter 2 – Year B**

### **Doubt and Faith**

Easter *is* glorious, and we celebrated it gloriously here last Sunday – with beautiful flowers and exquisite music and a people filled with joy and hope. God’s glory was revealed to us in no uncertain terms, as we celebrated the resurrection and light of Christ.

But then Monday came, and Tuesday, and Wednesday. As life seems to return to normal, and our pre-Easter problems linger, that Easter confidence may start to waver. And doubt may creep in. “Did that really happen?” we may wonder. “Dare I place my hope in this receding memory of Easter glory—and in the extraordinary, impossible event behind it, which I never even saw for myself?”

When I was new to the Episcopal Church, I heard a priest say something that stuck with me: “The opposite of faith is not doubt. It’s certainty.” This came as a relief to me, because I had far more questions about the mystery of God than I had sure and certain answers. And ironically, it was these questions that drove me deeper into the Bible and into church to begin with; then into EFM, and adult Christian education, and seminary. Ironically, it was my nagging doubt that led me out into places and situations and relationships that put my faith to the test, and helped it grow.

So why does doubt get such a bad rap?

Maybe because of the legacy of the Enlightenment and modernism, which contend that all that’s worth knowing can be proven with certainty and objectivity; and which recognize few limits to human understanding.

Maybe because of the influence of fundamentalism, which reacts to the contradictions and questions of our time with a claim of biblical inerrancy, and discomfort with ambiguity.

Maybe it’s because we tend to confuse doubt with despair, or cynicism, or atheism—other forms of certainty that have ruled God out.

It could very well be because of all the corruption and pain we’ve seen in our lives, which leaves us at a loss for answers. Or discontent with answers that are too easy, too neat, too triumphant.

Or maybe, it really has more to do with us, and our fear: maybe it’s because we’re afraid of what we don’t know, afraid of uncertainty, afraid of being wrong. Afraid of being judged—by parents, peers, priests, even God.

So, out of fear, we may discourage or dismiss the questions posed by “doubting Thomases:” by youth who are outgrowing their childhood faith; or friends who are struggling to make theological sense of evil; or skeptics or outsiders, who are curious how we reconcile miracles with a modern worldview.

In today’s Gospel, we meet the original “doubting Thomas.” He comes onto the scene after the Marys have discovered the empty tomb and run to tell the other disciples and bumped into the risen Christ on the way. And after Jesus has appeared to the other disciples, and offered them his peace and showed them his wounds, and commissioned them to continue his

work, and breathed the Holy Spirit on them.

But Thomas wasn't with them. So when he hears about all of this, he simply wants to see Jesus for himself, like they did. He wants to believe like they do, but he isn't quite there yet. And he says so.

A week later, Jesus comes again, and invites Thomas personally to touch his wounds and see his hands—and to believe. “*Do not be faithless,*” Jesus says, “*but believe.*” Note that Jesus doesn't say “do not doubt.” The word used is *apistos*, which means “without faith” or “faithless.”

And Thomas does come to believe—and to believe wholeheartedly: “*My Lord and my God,*” he answers—with the most complete affirmation of faith we've heard yet! By *not* settling so easily, and by being honest about his questions, all the while staying in community, Thomas comes to an even deeper understanding.

We aren't told whether he actually reaches out and touches Jesus, because that's not the point. The point is that Thomas asks, and Jesus answers. The point is that Thomas seeks, and Jesus finds him. The point is that Thomas doubts—or questions—and Jesus meets him in his doubt.

Then Jesus turns to those of us who come later, who haven't seen his resurrected body, and who have to depend on what others have reported. And he blesses us: “*Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe!*” Just to be sure we don't miss the point, the evangelist adds: “*These stories are for you, so that you may believe, and have life in Jesus.*”

“Believing” in this case is not the same thing as intellectual agreement with a fact, like the sum of one plus one, or the name of the 37<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S. Believing is trusting. Committing the heart. Living and loving out of hope and the life-changing truth that “God is with us,” and “God has redeemed even death and sin for us.” And believing is something we grow into for the rest of our lives, and it involves wondering and longing and seeking and asking.

So I'm grateful for saints like Thomas, and for the many mentors and spiritual companions who have been honest and brave enough to voice their doubt: to talk about the questions that won't go away and the dry seasons in their prayer lives and the long winters of their faith.

One of those people is writer Renita Weems, who dedicated a whole book [\[i\]](#) to confessing her faith struggles. A well-known preacher, she reached a point in her ministry when she doubted her religion, her vocation and her own words, and, at times, even God. All she could muster was a faint “belief in believing.” [\[ii\]](#)

Christian rituals were her saving grace: they were the habits that helped her live faithfully, and show up for duty, even when she didn't feel like being faithful. [\[iii\]](#) And so she continued to show up, though God was silent, though church seemed dull, though she felt like a fraud.

With the support of a community whose faith carried her, she began to confess her “unbelief to believers” and her “belief to unbelievers.” And over time, she started to see prayer and faith differently. “The issue in prayer,” Weems says, “is not to pray because we're certain, but to pray because we're uncertain. It's a risk where the risk itself is the outcome.” [\[iv\]](#)

That, I believe, is faith: the risk of praying, showing up, trusting, even when we are uncertain. *Especially* when we are uncertain.

Doubt—faithful doubt keeps us moving, seeking, hoping; it keeps us humble; it keeps us in conversation with God and one another; it keeps us open to new ways of encountering God. And it draws us into the hard work of faith, faithfulness: showing up when the fun and warm-fuzzies and brilliant epiphanies peter out.

“Faith,” Weems concludes, “is learning how to live between the last time we heard from God and the next time we hear from God. And if during that time we have an insistent sense inside that we're being asked to forgive someone we never meant to forgive, to trust a stranger, to open our heart to someone or something we normally shut ourselves off from, to give up our right to punish those who have wounded us, then that is quite likely the beginning of our long-awaited encounter with God.” [\[v\]](#)

So, blessed are *you*, who showed up today, and keep showing up; who do the regular work of faith in the in-between time; who have faith enough to live in faith.

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[i] Renita Weems, *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey through Silence and Doubt* (Touchstone, 2000).

[ii] Weems, 38.

[iii] Weems, 36.

[iv] Weems, 41.

[v] Weems, 174.