



Doubting Faithfully

John 20:19-31

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In 1959, Mother Teresa's spiritual director told her to write a letter to Jesus, and this is what she wrote: "My Own Jesus, in my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing."¹ This was after nearly a decade of work among the poor in Calcutta. She was plagued by spiritual dryness and a feeling that she had lost her intimacy with God. There was a brief reprieve in 1958, but she relapsed quickly into this doubt and pain that would be with her for most of her life. St John of the Cross famously called this the dark night of the soul--it might come as apathy, it might come as fear, it might come as loss of belief. However it comes, it makes its way to most Christians at some time or another. For Teresa, and maybe for some of you, it was a way of life.

When we engage truly with the Holy Spirit, we eventually encounter doubt, and there are different kinds. Intellectual doubt might question historical or supernatural claims that Scripture makes. God became human. Christ rose from the dead. God exists. This can be scary, especially the first time it happens. We might wonder whether we even believe in Jesus, whether we can believe in Jesus. When I was a teenager, I was plagued by the idea that if I had met Jesus while he was on earth, I would not believe. Because how could I? So did I count as a Christian? Sometimes I still wonder—what do I not believe that I need to believe? How are my

beliefs and my opinions not measuring up?

I think spiritual doubt is something different. There's sadness, fear, hopelessness. Teresa says there's this "pain of longing, the pain of not being wanted—I want God," she writes, "with all the powers of my soul, and yet there between us, there is this terrible separation. I don't pray any longer." This kind of doubt is agonizing, not least because it is often accompanied by an almost inexplicable feeling of love for Jesus. Teresa says to Jesus, "I am afraid to write all those terrible things that pass in my soul—they must hurt you." We ask whether God really loves us, whether he pays any attention to us, whether he really wants the best for us. We're hurt, and we wonder how we are in the wrong. How are my emotions not measuring up? How is my love for Jesus not measuring up?

There's a personality thing here. I'm a system-maker. And so intellectual doubt is invigorating for me. It can be unsettling, but I like figuring it out. How can I adjust to account for new information? So in seminary, when historical criticism in freshman Old Testament caused a lot of spiritual trouble for some of my classmates, it didn't bother me. But spiritual doubt is my dark night of the soul. I want proof that I love Jesus, I want response for the depth of love that I feel. I want to know that my love is real and not manufactured by guilt. I want to be

¹ Teresa of Calcutta, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 192.

sure I'm doing enough. And it feels like doubt. These are things that of course have profound impact on my spiritual life and the kind of problems I run into, and for you there are these things or other things.

Maybe sometimes doubt for you is not being sure of something you want to believe. Sometimes, it's just a painful change in your relationship with God. It's hard to know why it happens, or to articulate what it is you're not sure about. Most times, it is Jesus calling you to deeper trust, deeper love, deeper knowledge.

This kind of doubt, the kind that makes you long for something, it's rooted in the search for truth. The last time we saw Thomas, in John 11, the disciples were trying to convince Jesus not to go to Jerusalem. When Jesus refuses to turn back, lately I'm more and more imagining exasperation in Thomas' voice—"let's go with him and die with him."² If Jesus insists on being unreasonable, they might as well die together. John 11's Thomas tells us that John 20's Thomas is not motivated by ambivalence toward Jesus. This Thomas was willing, no matter how ornery and skeptical he might have been, to follow Jesus to death. And today, after this week of misery, Thomas does not want fake Jesus. This is the kind of doubt that stems from love—the search for truth for the sake of love. Truth for the sake of love for a person you know. This is doubt that seeks the gospel. This is doubt that seeks Jesus Christ. Fake Jesus is not good news. The Jesus Thomas touched is the Jesus he loved, that's the Jesus he wanted back.

Maybe you are struggling to believe in any of the Easter we're celebrating. Maybe you wonder how God could allow what God has allowed. Maybe you are at the end of your rope with the church. Maybe you can't handle one

more encounter with fake Jesus. Remember, with me, the Jesus you want. The Jesus, maybe, who you want back. Remember the one who cares for your weak faith. Jesus did not demand that Thomas believe without seeing. Jesus gave Thomas what he needed to believe, he took Thomas' hand and put it in his wounds. When Mary didn't recognize him at the tomb, he didn't scold her, but spoke her own name, a name he knew, a name that was as familiar to him as his was to her. The question in these stories and yours is the one he asks Peter after he denies him: "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?"

Thomas wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared to the assembled disciples. We don't know why. Maybe he was too upset or too lost and confused to get together with them and talk about Jesus? We tend to think of Thomas as the rebuked unbeliever. And he is that. But he's not unfaithful. I don't think it's too strong a statement to say that none of us will escape doubt. Thomas was absent at that first meeting for us.³ Like Thomas we might find Easter too incredible, we might be too tender from disillusioned love for our Lord, we might be like Peter and Teresa, ashamed for the hurt we have caused Jesus. We might be too afraid to look him in the face and, like Mary at the tomb, be recognized.

Last night I was out with friends at a Princeton bar. We were winding down from a long day of writing, we're in the thick of finals. Because seminarians will be seminarians, we started talking about how we know we're Christians, what beliefs we need to affirm. And I have to admit, I just finished finals, and I was not in the mood to talk about this question, you know, I'm having a glass of wine, I'm hoping to be in bed soon, but this is the life I've chosen for

² John 11:16

³ Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 11-21: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT Volume IVb* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 367.

myself. But my Lutheran friend brought up a classic Lutheran question, here it is. Isn't belief a work? If we're justified, made right with God, by faith, isn't believing in God technically a work, an obligation we have to fulfill to make God happy? Maybe that question is too meta for you, and that's fine. But as I thought about that this morning it seemed really important that I bring it to you.

Whomever you are, if you need to hear this: your inability to check off every box of intellectual assent does not change God's love for you, Christ's death and Resurrection for you, and the Holy Spirit's constant prayer for you. Belief is not a gift we give to God, it's a gift God gives to us. And we won't always have a full experience of it. But here's a central Presbyterian teaching: God doesn't drop people. Holding on is not your job. Faithfulness is just trying. If you're thinking you might just not believe anymore, I want you to at least try to keep that. The one who called you is faithful, and Jesus was faithful on your behalf, and the Spirit will draw out what you will be.

The Jesuit ethicist John Kavanaugh spent time working in Calcutta while he was discerning his vocation. He met Mother Teresa there, and she asked him, "what do you want me to pray for?" He said, "Clarity."⁴ This is what most of us want. Certainty about the facts of the case. A clear-cut vision of the right thing to do. A voice from heaven to tell us that God is not angry. Someone to inform us whether Mark or John captures Jesus' personality best. An answer to the problem of evil. Teresa said, "No." She said, "I will pray that you have trust." Trust is not

always clear on the details. Trust is clear on the One you love. Trust is when the One you love is the truth. The One you love is the way, the truth, and the life.

Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote to a friend, "if someone could convince me that truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ, and not with truth."⁵ The mystics among us will find that easier to swallow than others. But the point is this: the One you believe is greater than the things you believe. Thomas followed this beloved Christ through life and to his death, and he did not want to be taken in by hysteria or lulled by ghostly spiritualism. I suspect that that is true of most of us today. Thomas wanted to find the real Christ. Christ was his truth. Christ was the alpha of his questions and the omega of his answers. Only Christ. "I believe, help my unbelief."⁶

It is God who gives and preserves your faith. Even when we wander, God keeps something alive in us and calls us back to it. From long ago, maybe, you know this Jesus. From deep within you, maybe, you want this Jesus back. Maybe you long for this Jesus you haven't met yet, someone you know must be because you are homesick for him. Don't let doubt hold you back from loving this tender and gentle Lord, the crucified and resurrected one who wants each one of us to know him. The impulse to turn, even the inkling to want this Jesus is from God. "No one can come to me," Jesus says, "unless the Father who sent me draws them,"⁷ and God does not begin something only to drop it. Don't worry that you won't be able to believe enough. Don't agonize

⁴ Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 5.

⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Letter to Mme. N. D. Fonvisin," in *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to His Family and Friends*, trans. Ethel Colburn Mayne (New York: MacMillan, 1914), 71.

⁶ Mark 9:24.

⁷ John 6:44

over your doubt. Trust in Jesus. When you can't trust in Jesus, follow even the smallest desire to trust him. Cling to it. Pray for it. And then wait. No one ever prayed for faith in vain. Be confident that the one "who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus."⁸

⁸ Philippians 1:6