

Wrestling with Doubt

*So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord."
But he said to them,
"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands
and put my finger into the nail marks
and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." – John 20:25*

One of the most well-known stories of the Easter season is that of "Doubting Thomas." For whatever reason, Thomas was not present with the others to whom Jesus had appeared on the night of that first Easter, and he now refuses to believe their tale of what occurred. The notion that Jesus has risen from the dead is beyond what reason will allow him to wrap his mind around. And as many have pointed out over time, naturally so. Would *you* believe if someone told *you* that a friend whose funeral you had attended was now walking through walls?

Doubt is something that the earliest Christians had to wrestle with over and over again. Repeatedly, the Easter stories suggest that having a personal experience of the Risen Christ was a very powerful and persuasive thing, but hearing about the Risen Christ from others was not. Not only Thomas, but Peter, and surely other disciples as well, longed to see things with their own eyes.

We can understand that desire well. We've all been tricked into thinking something that later turned out not to be true. In school, we're taught to make sure we don't believe everything we hear and to do our research. We know that doubt serves a purpose, and we can't function in this world without it.

At the same time, we also have to concede that doubt has its limits in terms of usefulness. During the pandemic, those of us serving in Catholic health care have seen time and again how doubt has become a way of life for many who refuse to believe even the most knowledgeable medical voices in the nation. In words hauntingly similar to Thomas, they insist that unless they've "done their own research" personally, they won't believe. What this stance ignores is that unless you are a medical scientist working directly in a lab, even "your own research" will be based on an act of trust that what you are reading of others' research is correct. None of us is an island unto ourselves. We all make decisions daily based largely on what we've heard from others rather than knowledge we have gleaned directly. And we cannot do otherwise. No one is an expert in everything. A healthy sense of doubt is good, but only in concert with a healthy dose of humility about the limits of our "research capacities" and the ability to discern wisely what voices we should trust.

In the story of Thomas, Jesus intervenes and offers the direct experience for which Thomas is so hungry. But at the end, Jesus names as “blessed” those who are able to discern what is true and believe not only because of what they have seen with their eyes, but what they have heard through their ears. Figuring out when to trust and act rather than wait and demand more information is one of the biggest dilemmas we face as human beings, but getting it wrong, as the pandemic has shown us, can have tremendous consequences for our own well-being as well as the well-being of others.

In our Easter journey this week, let us walk alongside Thomas, praying that we will gain the clarity we seek and the capacity to trust that we need to live our moment in history well.