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Thomas: A Villain of Faith or Hero of Doubt?

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25)

In the church (and also in theological institutions), we have been taught about the men and women in the Bible and throughout the history of the church who “never wavered” in their faith and who therefore accomplished great things.

The problem is that in teaching or preaching that version of history, the reality has often been minimized or kept hidden: From Abraham to Jesus, from Saint Augustine of Hippo to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the “great heroes and heroines of the faith” embraced and accepted doubt as part of the process of developing their faith.

Like Nicodemus, a respected Pharisee and Jewish leader, I am sure that many church leaders and members today would—if they could—“come by the night” to Jesus to present their doubts and questions (John 3:1-2). But most of the time we do not dare to do so with colleagues in ministry, much less with members of our faith communities. We avoid it so that others will not think we are losing our faith, or out of shame, or fear of rejection or expulsion from our religious group.

The Gospels present two accounts from the final days of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus that remind us that doubting is not only an essential part of having faith but that doubt is necessary in order to deepen it. These are the story of Jesus in Gethsemane and the story of Thomas, who refuses to believe until he sees the risen Jesus with his own eyes and, even more, until he can put his finger into his wounds.

In the case of Jesus, we must be clear that he did not simply die; Jesus was killed. And not only was he killed, he was tortured until he died on a cross. How could he not pray, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me”? How could he not sweat that night in anguish “like great drops of blood”? I know that for some people this simply points to “the human side of Jesus,” as if his “divine side” invalidated the seriousness of the tension between his faith and his doubts and questions. But it was in the midst of that tension that he remained firm in doing the will of his Father and not his own, and it was within the mystery of his Father’s abandonment that he exclaimed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Perhaps for that reason, in the case of Jesus, we often minimize or even overlook that tension.

In the case of Thomas, it is different. In the minds of most people who profess the Christian faith, Thomas has been presented as the “doubting disciple,” as if that were synonymous with someone who has little faith or no faith at all. However, it is important to understand that the word “doubting” or “incredulous” refers to someone “who does not believe something easily or lightly,” in contrast to a “credulous” person who believes everything easily and naively.

Thomas was one of the few disciples who dared to express his questions directly to Jesus. He did so during the Passover meal (John 14:5), although he was not the only one who dared to do it. Philip and the other disciple also called Judas did as well (John 14:8, 22). What makes Thomas, for many people, the “villain of faith” is that he did not accept as true the testimony of



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the other apostles that Jesus had risen. However, of course, the other apostles could affirm this because Jesus had already appeared to them and shown them “his hands and his side” (John 20:19-20).

But we must not forget that the other disciples also had their doubts. Was it not Peter who did not believe the testimony of the women—almost treating them as if they were crazy—though they were the first to have concrete evidence that the tomb was empty? And was it not Peter who became convinced of what the women said only after he himself ran to see the empty tomb with his own eyes? (Luke 24: 11-12). And what about the disciples on the road to Emmaus? Even more, were there not among the disciples “some who still doubted,” despite seeing Jesus and worshipping him before he gave them the mandate we like to call the “Great Commission”? (Matthew 28:17). And what about his mother Mary and other members of the family who at the beginning of his ministry thought that Jesus “is out of his mind”? (Mark 3:21, NIV). And yet, we see Mary and her sister standing at the foot of the cross watching the son and nephew die! (John 19:25).

According to the testimony of the four Gospels, there was not a single disciple, nor any member of his family, who at certain moments did not have doubts about the actions and message of Jesus, whether before or after his death. Clearly, doubts and questions were part of their process of believing in him and following him. Yet Jesus never rejected his disciples (or anyone) because of their questions. Rather, he responded to them and exhorted them, through words and visible signs, challenging them to have a faith that transcends doctrinal systems imposed by religious leaders and to express their faith through acts of love as he himself did.

Understanding and accepting that doubt is intrinsic to faith, even with the risks that this implies, is necessary if we are to move beyond a “credulous” faith—one that blindly accepts what leaders of every kind say, and treats as true everything that is heard or read in social media. At times it is necessary to have an “incredulous” faith—one that allows us to dare to question what we hear and see when it does not fit with the message of Jesus and that pushes us to ask new questions in light of new knowledge and emerging human realities. The maxim of Saint Augustine advising us to “believe in order to understand” is as valid as the maxim of Anselm of Canterbury encouraging us to “seek understanding in order to believe.”

Perhaps during this season of Lent, in the midst of a deeply troubled world and a church in crisis, we might see Thomas with different eyes: no longer as the villain of faith, but as a hero of doubt. Thomas, the “doubting disciple,” reminds us that doubt is not the enemy of faith but, when expressed humbly and honestly, can lead us to the deepest and most practical expressions of our faith: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). Perhaps this will also allow church leaders, in the midst of their own doubts, to humble and graciously receive those who, by night or by day, seek to understand in order to believe and to be more faithful to the message of the risen Jesus.

And this is extremely important for the moment the church is going through. On the one hand, many promote and profess a credulous, naïve, superficial faith. On the other hand, a growing number of believers struggle, silently and in hiding, with a faith that, for many good reasons, has become increasingly “incredulous.”

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