

“A Belated Easter” / John 20:19-31 / 7 April 2013

Funny how the resurrected Jesus pops in and out of locked rooms, scaring folks half to death, and his first words are always, “Peace be with you.” Every year, without fail, the Sunday after Easter—or the second Sunday of Eastertide—brings us this story about Doubting Thomas. Why do you think that is? Is it because Thomas isn't just some long-ago disciple; he's you and he's me, and he's everyone who has ever had the courage to admit to having doubts.

In the 2008 movie, *Doubt*, Philip Seymour Hoffman plays a liberal priest named Father Flynn, who is newly assigned to a church in the Bronx. The film is set in the mid-60s, as seismic changes are afoot in the Roman Catholic Church—and all the churches, really. Some critics called the movie a parable, and it's true that it acts like one in places. The wind is constantly blowing in the movie, knocking over garbage cans, slamming doors, representing the winds of change that are buffeting the world of faith.

Father Flynn's first sermon at his new parish is about doubt. He says that doubt's not always a bad thing. Like faith, doubt can be a unifying force in the world. Well, Sister Aloysius doesn't like it. She's the director of the congregation's parochial school, who is played by Meryl Streep. Sister Aloysius is old school. She's suspicious of the new priest's unorthodox tendencies. She asks the other nuns, “What could be amiss in father's life to make him preach a sermon like that?” And she encourages the other nuns to watch him closely to see if he isn't engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

Before long, one of the nuns observes Father Flynn calling a certain schoolboy into the rectory, where he remains for a long time. When the boy comes back to class, he looks distraught and smells like alcohol. When Sister Aloysius confronts the priest, he says that the student is troubled; his father is physically abusive, and he caught the boy drinking communion wine. Little things keep happening to arouse the nun's suspicions, and in the end, she just can't let it go. She's convinced that Father Flynn—the doubter—must be a pedophile. She learns that he's been moved between three different parishes in just five years. She tells him that she contacted a nun at one of his previous churches and learned that he left under a cloud of suspicions. She tells him that he doesn't deserve to wear the collar, and she demands his resignation immediately; otherwise she'll destroy his reputation. Unable to stand up to such a hard and driven woman, Father Flynn resigns. He's assigned to a larger, wealthier parish—essentially a promotion.

At the end of the movie, Sister Aloysius is sitting with another nun in the convent garden. Sister Aloysius admits to the other that she lied about speaking with a nun from his previous parish. She never spoke with anyone. She just wanted to see how he would react; if he was troubled by it, then she thought it would be proof that he was guilty. The film ends with Sister Aloysius weeping quietly, not really knowing if she did the right thing. And then that stern, unswerving character says, “It's just that I have such doubts. I have such doubts.” The audience is left with doubts as to whether Father Flynn is guilty, and Sister Aloysius—the unremitting champion of orthodox belief—is left with all the doubts that she hated Father Flynn for naming in that first sermon. Everything she did was driven by those doubts and her fear of them.

Any person whose faith is deeper than a tablespoon knows that doubts can be the teacher of faith, the sculptor, the engineer. Some people learn to live with their doubts; some have the candidness to own them, while others desperately attempt to remedy them with double doses of the hardest, most uncompromising religiosity.

You have to wonder about the wide-eyed fanatics of every living faith: the Muslim extremists, the Westboro Baptists, the Sister Aloysiuses. What doubts might they be trying to deny in themselves with all their hardline rhetoric and religious posturing? I wonder if some of the most outrageously ugly religious behavior isn't sometimes more motivated by secret doubts than by sincere belief, doubts that the doubter doesn't want to own and tries to undo with extreme faith.

And then, there's good old Doubting Thomas! That long-ago patron saint of all those hapless faithful who find one day that—no matter how hard they try—they just can't manufacture enough belief to keep up! As disciples go, I like Thomas. He's one of the few whose distinct personality comes across in those ancient texts, down the centuries, from the several scant speaking parts that he actually gets in the gospels. Thomas's several recorded comments show us that he was sort of a loyal pessimist. Thomas won't turn his back on a friend, but he doesn't have time for any nonsense. You want a guy like Thomas on your team. He's probably the kind of man you'd want to be driving your kids' school bus on a snowy day: serious, not willing to take chances. The Nominating Committee would be after Thomas to get him to serve on the session of the church. He's perfect elder material: deeply invested but slow to put his trust in new ideas. Steady, truehearted, without an ounce of gullibility. Thomas indulged in one—one!—incidence of understandable disbelief, and he's been known ever since as one of the flunkies of the gospels. But I like Thomas because I—like Thomas—was not there when the risen Lord appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room. I—like Thomas—have seen the Lord of Life crucified on the many crosses of our world. I—like Thomas—like you—I have sometimes known the seeming absence of God in the place of great need. None of us was there to see the risen Christ, and all of us have looked into the place where we thought God should be, only to find a deadening absence. And so it is to Thomas, to me, and yes, to you, that the risen Christ declares, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

Doubting Thomas is better than all the cocksure bigots and pundits crowding the airwaves today. I mean, have you ever met a person who has never known a doubt? I'm related to a man—related by marriage—who has surely never experienced a moment's skepticism or any kind of existential crisis in all his sixty years of life. He's a stranger to all forms of doubt, but especially self-doubt. He once believed that his dog had run away, and so he drove the back roads looking for the animal. When he came upon a dog, he threw it in the trunk of his car and took it home and beat it with a wiffle ball bat while walking it all along the perimeter of his property—in order to teach the dog its boundaries. The man's son came out of the house and said, “Dad, whose dog is that, and what are you doing to it?” It wasn't even the right dog! But he's never paused to second guess himself. Better a person who asks questions than one who has all the answers. Better a person who sometimes doubts than a person who is always very sure. Doubt can eat away at our spirits like a wasting disease, yes. But doubt is very often the skillful hand that sculpts our faith into something beautiful and mature.

I think one of the most famous Doubting Thomases of recent times has been Mother Theresa. In 1979, she wrote in a letter to her spiritual adviser, “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness are so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.” To think that even Mother Theresa, the very symbol of faithful living, even she lived with persistent doubts. In another place, she wrote, “My

smile is a mask, a cloak that covers everything.” And yet, look how faithfully she lived! And I ask you, in the end, when it's all been said and done, which is more important: the things we believed or the way we lived? Do you think the Dalits, the untouchable caste of India, would have refused medical care from Mother Theresa if they had known that she struggled with things like the virgin birth? Most of the people in your life are only marginally interested in what you believe. Mostly, they care about how you treat them, whether you respect them, whether you listen when they speak, whether you see them or look past them. Jesus never said, “Believe all the right things about me.” No, he only said, “Follow me. Behave as I behave. Love as I love. Take up your cross and follow.”

Most of the people I know are prone to doubts and second guesses. We're probably a little more like Mother Theresa than we are like my relative upstate who unknowingly kidnaps the neighbor's dog and beats it. Like Doubting Thomas, all of us find some of this stuff hard to believe, from time to time, and yet it's okay to live with some uncertainties in our faith. Indeed, it's far better than the alternative.

You've heard of the man who fell off a cliff, and as he plummeted toward the earth far below, he managed to grab a small tree, growing off the side of the precipice. He yelled back up to the top of the cliff. “Is there anyone up there. Please help me.” In time a voice said, “This is God. I can help you, but you must do exactly as I say. Let go of the little tree.” And the man yelled, “Is there anybody else up there?” Doubts.

If you—like Sister Aloysius—absolutely must beat yourself up for your doubts; if you're hardwired in such a way that doubts are not acceptable, then consider this: Faith is a communal gift. Take comfort in the fact that the church is always still here believing even at those times and in those places where you cannot. You don't have to manufacture belief. Please don't try to. When your faith is strong, share it. When your faith is weak, then rely on ours.

On the other hand, if you—like Thomas—are able to own your doubts, if you can make room for them, then they will, in time, turn around and bless you, and deepen the very faith that you feared they would destroy. It was a belated Easter for the Disciple Thomas. Maybe it's been a belated Easter for you, too. But if you still don't have the Christian faith all figured out, if you still struggle with questions and doubts, take heart. Better a kind doubter than an unkind believer. Better a sincere question than a whole book of unexamined beliefs. It's not always a bad thing to be a Doubting Thomas. Amen.