

RESURREXIT SICUT DIXIT! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN AS HE SAID! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!

OK, your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. A young woman named Sally was driving home from a business trip in Northern Arizona. She saw an elderly Navajo woman walking on the side of the road. As the trip was a long and quiet one, she stopped the car and asked the Navajo woman if she would like a ride. With a silent nod of thanks, the woman got into the car.

Resuming the journey, Sally tried in vain to make a bit of small talk with the Navajo woman. The old woman just sat silently, looking intently at everything she saw, studying every little detail. Then the old woman noticed a brown bag on the seat next to Sally.

"What's in the bag?" asked the old woman. Sally looked down at the brown bag and said, "It's a leather coat. I got it for my husband." The Navajo woman was silent for another moment or two. Then speaking with the quiet wisdom of an elder, she said: "Good trade."

First, we've heard the story of Easter so often that we can forget how wild, astonishing, and shocking it really is. It's surprising that someone doesn't stand up every year when we hear this and shout "Are you kidding? This is the strangest thing I have ever heard. We're supposed to believe this?" And today's gospel reminds us that we are in good company. Doubting Thomas – SAINT Thomas – is forever enshrined as the voice that speaks for all of us in our struggles to believe. I have to admit. There are times when I stand at the altar during mass and think 'you know, if this story ISN'T true, then I have the weirdest job in the entire world.' But eventually my little attack of atheism seems to pass and then I think again 'I can't believe that God loves us this much – that He went through all that pain and suffering – just to show us His amazing, forever, forgiving love.'

Growing up, I thought that faith was a matter of correct beliefs. My religious teachers taught me so: that if I didn't hold the right beliefs, or at least say that I held them, I would be excommunicated from my community, and perhaps, after death, from God's presence. They taught me this not to be cruel but because they themselves had been taught the same thing, and they were working hard, sometimes desperately, to be faithful to the rules as they understood them. I tried to do the same, and I would still be doing so today if not for doubt.

Doubt chipped away at those beliefs, one agonizing blow at a time, revealing that what actually mattered wasn't the point of beliefs but the clear window of faith, faith as a life orientation, faith as a framework of values and spirituality, faith as a commitment to live into a deep vision of what life can be, faith as a way of life, faith expressing itself in love and service to our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters all.

For all those years, when I said, "I believe," I thought I understood what I was doing. But more was going on, so much more. Looking back, I now see that underneath arguments about what I believed to be true FACTUALLY, something deeper and truer was happening ACTUALLY.

What mattered most was not that I BELIEVED the stories in a factual sense (think Adam and Eve and a talking snake!), but that I BELIEVED in the meaning they carried (sin came through a human act, not through the hand of God) – and I needed to embody the truth of the stories in my life, to let their meaning breathe in me, animate me, fill me with compassion and love. Whether I considered the stories factually accurate was never the real point; what actually mattered all along was whether I live a life pregnant with the meaning

those stories contained. To my surprise, when I was given permission to doubt the factuality of my beliefs, I discovered their actual life-giving purpose.

Doubt need not be the death of faith. It can be, instead, the birth of a new kind of faith, a faith expressed in love and service, a deepening and expanding faith that can literally save the world. (adapted from Richard Rohr, posting of 2 June 2021)

Second, I know many families – including my own – are struggling with our love and concern for members of our families – and dear friends – who no longer practice any faith; belong to no church. I have both family members – and children of dear friends – that I have baptized, been raised in the faith, went off to college, and never went back to church again.

In one particular case, the kid went off to college – and took a class in world religions. On the first day the religion professor announced that he wouldn't be talking about his own faith until the last day. He didn't want his opinion to affect theirs as he presented Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism. Apparently this professor is wonderfully engaging and my friends' son looked forward to what he called his most interesting class. As he grew in admiration of this teacher he assumed that he must be a committed Christian, but on the last day the professor announced with great drama that he is an agnostic. He used to be a Christian, but now he's not sure. The young man was not sure what to think.

So that particular Christmas Eve, parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins all show up at church as was their custom. Christmas Eve is always beautiful – and so at communion time, all the family came up for communion except the college senior. As far as the family knew, it was the first time since he was baptized that he remained in the pew. Well, he managed to upset 3 generations at one time. Later he tried to explain to his father why he didn't take communion, "I'm not sure what I think and I don't want to be a hypocrite."

If you were his father, what would you say? How about, "Let me get this straight son. You're not sure what you think so for Christmas you decided to give your mother a broken heart. Maybe when we get home you can kick over the tree and smash the presents. Did you notice your grandmother was having a stroke? In the spirit of not being a hypocrite, why don't you tell grandma that you've been lying to her all these years? You never liked her banana pudding, never wore the socks she knitted for you, and you make fun of her when she's not wearing her hearing aids. Did you even entertain the possibility that this particular occasion might be one on which to keep your fuzzy opinions to yourself? Would it have killed you to take communion rather than stab in the back the people who gave you life – on Christmas Eve for goodness sake?"

What would you say to YOUR son who doesn't know what he thinks? You could go the other way. You could say that you're glad he's honest and that he takes worship seriously. You might suggest that he talk to his mother about what he's feeling. You might say, "Son, maybe St. Thomas should be your saint. Thomas didn't know what to think and he didn't want to be a hypocrite."

Thomas probably wasn't easy on his parents either. They probably worried whenever he started talking to his grandparents. When anything came up that Thomas didn't believe or couldn't understand, he probably had direct questions to ask. Today's gospel tells us that he refused to go along with the crowd.

The gospels record that the last time the disciples and Jesus had supper together, and Jesus talked about leaving them. He told them He'd get things ready for them as soon as He got where He was going, and that they knew how to get where He was going. Nobody else breathed a word, but Thomas didn't hold back. He blurted out: "You're wrong, Lord. We don't have the foggiest idea where you are going – so why do you

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think we should know how to get there?" There's more faith in insisting on an explanation than in glibly repeating things that haven't reached our head or heart.

Thomas was the voice of reason in a group that seemed to be missing a few buttons on the remote. When Jesus insisted on going back to Judea to be with the family of His friend Lazarus, who had just died, Thomas tried to talk Him out of it. The last time Jesus had been there, the Jewish leaders tried to stone Him. When it became clear that Jesus was determined to go, Thomas agreed to go, too, but he was smart enough to know what was coming. The temptation for the unthinking follower is to cheerily believe that nothing bad will happen if they stick with Jesus. Thomas said, "Let's all go, so that we can die with Him."

Today's gospel places us a week past Easter. A week prior Jesus had done the same, and they had told Thomas, but he refused to believe. So here they are again, Thomas included, still huddled in fear, and Jesus suddenly appears, literally scaring the hell out of them and says "Shalom – peace," and the disciples said "STOP SCARING US LIKE THIS – CAN'T YOU JUST KNOCK?" (Well, it's not recorded that they said that – but I'll bet that's what they were thinking!) Sorry, I digress. Jesus could have said, "Thomas, if you would just have more faith, be more like the other disciples, you wouldn't have so many problems." He says rather, "OK, Thomas, take your finger and examine my hands. You can believe now."

Third, Thomas had the humility TO CHANGE HIS MIND. When he meets the risen Christ, he unloads one of the great confessions of all time, "My Lord and my God." Thomas' doubt led him to greater faith. He came to belief PRECISELY BECAUSE HE WAS HONEST ABOUT HIS DOUBTS AND QUESTIONS. We call him doubting Thomas, and we often use that as an insult. But it shouldn't be. Memorizing someone else's answers isn't believing. It may seem easier to coast through life without being honest about our questions, but people who pretend never grow.

There is more belief in honest doubt than in easy answers. If we're going to grow in our faith, we need to ask hard questions: What exactly happened in the resurrection? Where's the line between physical and spiritual and do these categories even make sense? What does Easter mean in our lives? What difference does it make if we even believe in God? Why is there so much suffering? What about the war in Ukraine and the suffering of all those people? Why are there pandemics and so many innocent people die? How can we know what's true? What about eternity?

Honest doubt can lead to a genuine hope. We don't have to wait to understand every detail before we live with faith. The gospel isn't abstract or academic. It's not theoretical and dogmatic. The gospel is practical. It is the place where we engage life with a whole different set of values than those which are pitched to us non-stop all day: "It's all about me." "Get all you can." "Pleasure above all else." "In pain, take this to make it go away." "Money, power, sex – these are the things to pursue." "There's nothing after this life – so do as you please."

No. The gospel tells us that we were put here to serve, to love, to forgive, to live our lives for others – and for God. To be those who try to leave the world a bit better because we have been here. Who care for others above self. Who find a genuine happiness in life because it has been lived with purpose, intention, and passion for love-of-God-discovered-through-and-in-others. The gospel is the place where we engage life. It's the place where what we believe becomes what we can see.

In his song, "Walk On," Bono suggests that faith precedes sight and that trust comes before assurance. "Walk on, walk on/ You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us have been/ A place that has to be believed to be seen."

We are such rational people. We try to make sense of everything. When someone tells us something that doesn't fit with what we consider reasonable, we refuse to believe. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal, however, insisted that "the supreme function of reason is to show us that some things are beyond reason." All the truly great things in life are beyond reason – love, forgiveness, courage, compassion. Why would Ukrainian soldiers stay behind and die – when they could flee? Why would a mother deny herself food in order to feed her children? Why would a soldier fall on a grenade for the sake of his companions?

As Christians we don't ignore reason, but we recognize that reason ultimately leads us to understand that certain things lie beyond the bounds of reason, things that can only be comprehended through a larger lens – a faith lens.

So what would you say to a college senior or a friend who isn't sure what they believe?

You might say, Go ahead and doubt. Don't stop wondering, pondering, searching, thinking and struggling. You'll be deciding what to believe and what to let go of all of your life. Be humble enough to follow to where it might lead you. Keep asking questions because that's how you'll find your way, but while you're asking, make sure that you're also listening, trying, and allowing God to have His voice. Give faith a chance, because cynicism leads to such bitterness.

Be open to the possibility that God will come to you, but probably not in as dramatic fashion as He did to Thomas. When he have locked ourselves away, hiding because we're afraid, God still comes to us with the same words He did to Thomas: "SHALOM, PEACE." Doubt and all. Amen. (Adapted from Brett Younger, in LECTONARY HOMILETICS, April-May 2009, p. 25-26)