

Dealing with Doubt

Grandpa George loved reading travel journals and looking at photos of far-away places. He was especially intrigued by images of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, somewhere he wanted to visit personally. Imagine his excitement when his family announced they would be taking a trip there during summer vacation and that he was invited to join them! It would be a most wonderful 75th birthday gift.

George's son Rob and daughter-in-law Nancy had booked a campground in a RV park on the South Rim of the canyon where views would be the best. Despite the anticipation of what he might feel, George was unprepared for the seeing the vast gorge for the first time. It was overwhelming, the sense of awe at the mile-deep and two-mile wide chasm in the earth's surface carved by the Colorado River into the soft sandstone. For a long time, he just stood there on the viewing platform gazing out onto this natural wonder. He couldn't wait to see the changing colors of the rock as evening came.

Shades of deep purple and blue dimmed the lower levels as the sun set behind the North Rim. Then in a fiery display of yellow, orange and gold, the light was gone and night began. George thought about his day and realized that, had he not personally seen the grandeur of the canyon, he would have never believed the greatness of what it can do to the soul – a window into God's creative genius at making such a thing of beauty.

In a way that's strange, because as believers in God's power of creation, we shouldn't be limiting his ability to make whatever he wants. Yet, that's exactly what a statement like that means – we'll only believe if we see with our eyes. In today's gospel reading, we find an example of that very thing, someone who refused to take the disciples at their word that they had

seen the risen Christ. More importantly, let's explore what doubt is and how we can deal with it as it arises in our lives.

Source of doubt: lack of belief and trust

1) inability to understand. "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies. He will be killed, but three days later he will rise from the dead." [The disciples] didn't understand what he was saying, however, and they were afraid to ask him what he meant." (Mark 9:31-32) Despite preparing his disciples with this news well in advance, Jesus' message went 'over their heads', as they couldn't imagine anything like this happening to their teacher. They couldn't expand their thinking to include something outside their experience.

2) looking at things from a human perspective. "As [Jesus] talked about [his death] openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. 'Get away from me, Satan!' he said. 'You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's.'" (Mark 8:32-33) It's easy to look at every situation with the logic that our minds come up with, rather than what we can understand from scripture is God's perspective. Often, they're very different.

3) steeped in one's own culture and worldview. "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world.'" (John 18:36) The Jews viewed messiah as a warrior king sent by God to drive out the occupying Roman forces and restore Israel's fortunes. Jesus' kingship was from a much different source and idea - to save people spiritually, not physically. He came to fight our spiritual battles, something of far more eternal importance than simply giving us a more comfortable life now. But we have to get beyond our preconceived ideas about Jesus' mission and presence first.

Let's see how this comes out in our gospel passage where Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection.

First appearance on resurrection day

“That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders.” (John 20:19a) Recall that they had received the report of eyewitnesses, “Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, ‘I have seen the Lord!’ Then she gave them his message.” (v.18) Still, they didn’t believe this woman’s report (cultural bias against women witnesses) and the human impossibility of rising from the dead (naturalism – the view of many people today who deny anything supernatural). As well, they didn’t trust God’s protection as the locked room indicated and the fear in their hearts.

“Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! ‘Peace be with you,’ he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord!” (v.19b-20) The first thing Jesus did was to put their minds at ease. Then he addressed their unbelief by showing proof that it really was him come back from the dead. Finally, he commissioned them with a task, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (v.21b,23) It’s significant what he did before that, “Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (v.22) Without God’s presence within them, the mission they were given would be impossible. Not much different from ourselves, as the Holy Spirit’s indwelling is what allows us to do the works of God in our day and time.

Second appearance a week later

“Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. ‘Peace be with you,’

he said.” (v.26) As previously, he first calmed their fears by strengthening their faith in the reality of his presence. Then he got to the issue of Thomas who had said, “I won’t believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.” (v.25) If Thomas needed physical proof, Jesus offered it, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!” (v.27) The text doesn’t say if Thomas actually did what Jesus told him, except that the result was a change in attitude, “My Lord and my God!” (v.28)

Notice Jesus’ advice directed to us, “Then Jesus told [Thomas], ‘You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.’” (v.29) For the millions of followers of Jesus who have come after that he ascended into heaven, this applies because none of us have witnessed the actual risen body of our Lord. We believe without having seen. How, then, can we deal with doubt when it arises in our lives?

Dealing with doubt

- 1) recognize that it’s part of life. Anytime we’re confronted with new situations or unusual events that we haven’t experienced before, there’s natural fear and uncertainty. It’s how we deal with it that counts: believing in chance, coincidence and random meaninglessness, our doubts will probably continue; believing in God’s hand of guidance and purpose, our doubts can be replaced by trust and faith. As our gospel passages concludes, “But these [accounts of miraculous signs that Jesus did] are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.” (John 20:31)
- 2) identify signs that God is present and working in and through us. Be open to ways God shows his presence in our midst: a kind deed done by a neighbor at just the right time when help was needed; the opportunity to serve on a volunteer team to visit shut-ins and the joy that brought

them; good advice given by a friend who seemed to understand exactly what to say; thoughts that came to mind as we prayed and asked God for wisdom. Many people have discovered God's nearness that brought them to another level of belief, trust and faith, effectively dealing with doubt and fear that may have been present before.

Lynne Turner's 80-year-old mom Muriel is a light in the shadows of the nursing home that she worked in as a paid professional caregiver, and now as a volunteer every Wednesday afternoon. After having raised a family of five as a farmer's wife, helping with the farm work, planting and tending a huge garden and preserving its yield, she knew the value of service to others. That made it easy for her to want to continue assisting the residents in a better life.

"A lot of them would just sit in their rooms being lonely," she says. "I don't give them a choice. I just tell them that there's a church service to take part in, or musical entertainment that they'd enjoy in the common room. Before they can say no, there we are!" She's proud that the largest attendance of any of the special events held at the home is when she's there to encourage people to attend. She's also there to help over lunch hour, assisting with meals. If there's a few who enjoy knitting or a game of cards, the same energy and enthusiasm goes out to break the monotony of life. The result has been wonderful for the residents, as one said, "I can't get enough of being around Muriel. She's been the answer to my prayers. I can feel young again even though she's really older than me. What a blessing!"

We can take the same approach as Muriel. Determine to be a blessing to others, showing them God's presence in the light and love of our service. Bring them out of their shadows with the passion, wisdom and energy of God. Our Psalm says, "How wonderful and pleasant it is when [people] live together in harmony!" Let this be the way to deal with doubt – just like Jesus modeled in the Upper Room. Amen.