

“Hey Dad, what if I jumped out of the car while it was moving? What would happen?” “Hey Mom, what if I stuck my tongue in a power socket?” “What if I only drank root beer floats for breakfast?” Kids sometimes ask inane questions.

And yet, “what- if” speculation is also the driving force of pop-culture curiosity. What if Jesus actually fathered a child? A question considered in the book the *Da Vinci Code*. What if aliens were to invade Earth like in the movies Independence Day, War of the Worlds, the Fifth Wave? What if a modern day virus outbreak occurred and turned people into zombies like in the television show the Walking Dead?

And consider the “what ifs” that make up our escapist adult thought patterns. What if I married the wrong person? What if I never went back to that horrible job? What if I never became a parent? What if I hit the lottery?

In fact, one of the only places that “what ifs” aren’t typically a normal part of our conversation and engagement is at church. When leading Bible study or teaching Sunday school I don’t ever recall anyone ever asking, “What if God didn’t exist?” or “What if Jesus was not really the promised Messiah. This doesn’t mean, however, that we never have doubts or that we never have questions pertaining to our faith. Practically every time we read scripture

together in a group setting we almost always encounter things we don't quite understand, or we seek to find answers to some of the puzzling things we discover while exploring God's Word.

This morning let's put ourselves in the shoes of our kids and pop culture and ask, "So what if Jesus stayed in the ground after Easter?" After all, that wasn't just a "what if" for the disciples. That was their soul-shattered reality. Jesus was indeed God in the flesh raised from the dead, but for the first three days after the tomb they had no way of knowing. Their lives had been turned completely upside down when their teacher and friend had been crucified and now the disciples were devastated, scared, and uncertain about what to do next.

Let's stop for a moment and let's try to put ourselves into their experience. Don't forget they were confused faith-misfits who appeared to be totally wrong about the King of the New kingdom. Their rabbi was dead, and now they feared what could happen to them. Imagine all the haunting "what-if" questions they thought of, based on what they had seen and heard for the last three years. To summarize their world in one word, it would be "doubt."

So how does God engage his skeptics? Jesus meets with them behind closed doors. But in that room, what did the ten disciples experience? Their world-ending fear was turned back into the joy they had hoped in. Their

secluded gathering is turned into a powerful commissioning. Their despair is turned into the tangible presence of the eternal Lord and the empowering Holy Spirit. In short, they had a religious experience. But only ten of them had that experience. One of the twelve, who may have never believed in Jesus, had killed himself. Another of the twelve, Thomas, was still an outsider to the Risen Christ that his fellow disciples had just encountered. He was still locked in a tomb of his own doubt.

So, what was the experience of Thomas like? Was he so distraught that he just needed to be alone? Was he bitter and hardened because all he had learned of Jesus seemed a lie? Was he confused because he had to redefine all the supernatural things he had witnessed as merely a psychological phenomena? Our narrative for today doesn't tell us, but this is what our modern day doubting Thomases tell us.

Their prayers seem to bounce off of the ceiling. They don't know how to relate to an invisible God. Life is hard, so therefore God hardly seems loving. They are beset with disbelief as they watch hypocritical church leaders ensconced in scandal. Pain is a problem, dinosaurs have evolved, and the supernatural is unnatural. So, when the ten in our Gospel story report on what they had just experienced, Thomas felt skepticism and doubt — the Doubter had

not had the same religious experiences that the ten did. Their experience seemed foreign, well-intentioned, but not well evidenced.

Thomas is tactile and needed tangible proof, and he's merely expressing sentiments that countless pilgrims after him will echo. Jesus appeared to Paul, why doesn't he appear to me? God spoke audibly to Moses, so why don't I get a burning bush? God gave Gideon a wet fleece, so why won't he tell me his will for my life?

We read in our narrative this morning that when Jesus did return to visit the disciples it was a week later. Ok...so what was that week like for Thomas? Again, we can only speculate, but perhaps he was feeling some of the same things many of us have perhaps felt at some point in our lives — alienation from friends, not just alienation from what we have believed. Those in doubt need community, but tend to avoid it. It's like people who get laid off and no longer easily pal around at happy hour with those still gainfully employed by the company. It's like alcoholics who, rightly, create a distance for themselves from the old party crowd. After all, their community holds dearly to things they are questioning and wrestling with.

As Jesus returns to engage his last doubting disciple, he appears as dramatically as he did when he met with the ten. He offers the same ironic

words “Peace be with you” to Thomas who is miles away from peace at that particular moment in time. And then Jesus offers him the understanding he craves, what Thomas needs, he provides him with tactile evidence of himself as living and risen.

As we encounter those who doubt, we need to try and remember that God knows their needs more than we do. Perhaps he is testing and strengthening them through their exploration. Perhaps they need to lay down their idol god, or their ideal god, in favor of the Real God. In any case, God knows best what they need, and God is working in their doubt, like all things, for their good.

Therefore, there is no better way to partner with people in their doubt, than to pray that in His kindness God would address their deepest needs and make known the ways he is shaping them through their questioning.

But go back and notice what Jesus *doesn't* do in the face of one doubting him. Punish. Ignore. Judge. Shame. Patronize. Marginalize. Unfortunately, we Christians often eat our own when it comes to doubts. When people question God, we act more like Job's friends than Jesus' friends. We tend to toss our apologetics or trite “let go and let God” pietism at people. We celebrate those who are “put together” and *don't* question God, instead of those who are

honestly engaging him. We accidentally create sterile operating rooms of faith where questions are a disease that must be avoided like contamination.

But God reaches out to those of little faith. Remember the storm story in Matthew's gospel? A squall comes up quickly on the lake, and the little boat in which the disciples and Jesus are sailing suddenly is swamped by a mini-tsunami. Jesus is sleeping; the disciples are not. So they awaken Jesus, and Jesus says, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

Maybe we kind of secretly wish Jesus hadn't said that. Or we might think he was being a tad harsh with his comments. That he could've been more gracious, that he didn't have to be so tough, as well as tender. Of course, we all know that no one likes to get roused out of a nice nap. Maybe he got up on the wrong side of the boat or something. But he said it. But notice what Jesus didn't say.

He didn't say, "Hey, you people of little faith, come back to me sometime when your faith is strong, when you really believe, and then I might try to help you out." Then, Jesus grabs his pillow and pounds it into a good sleeping shape, and goes back to his nap. He didn't say that! Instead, after reminding them that they had room to grow in their faith journey, he immediately came to their rescue. He "rebuked the winds."

Jesus rebukes the winds, we don't. We can't make having faith a good work! Thomas doesn't "achieve" a coming to faith. Faith is something the risen Christ brings to Thomas. Jesus gave Thomas the help he needed even when he was in a "what-if?" mode. Even though Thomas was wondering "What if Jesus is still in the tomb?" Jesus still was willing to meet him in the vortex where faith and doubt intersect.

Today countless people stand in the legacy of Thomas, who in the words of fellow doubter Philip Yancey, are reaching for the Invisible God: "How do you sustain a relationship with God, a being so different from any other, imperceptible by the five senses?" But as was the case with Thomas, when the Way, the Truth and the Life engages the doubter, Christian reality prevails. "My Lord and my God" he cried.

So can we embrace those inside, and outside of the church, who have doubts of the risen Christ? Can we journey together with those who have questions or concerns about God? Can we lovingly walk with those who are marginalized, or different from us, who are still in the darkness trying to find the light and the love of God in this world? If so we will strengthen the blessed that Jesus spoke of: "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And thanks be to God for that. Amen.