

When my grandson turned 4 years old, I can remember the struggle we went through getting him to give up his pacifier. I'm sure a number of you parents out there can probably relate, because from what I have learned it is a fairly typical problem most moms and dads face. I remember that in order to help Asher find some acceptance that his binky needed to go, we lovingly warned him before his Birthday that since he was becoming a big boy his nooky was eventually going to disappear because he wasn't going to need it anymore. When all that happened, I can recall hearing about all kinds of problems that can be linked to pacifiers and how important it is to eventually get rid of them. After all, they can lead to cavities, to speech disorders, can cause overbites, can get lost, and they can cause quite an emotional disturbance — or tantrum — until they're found.

Pacifiers can also be unsafe if the parts are not attached properly. They can lead to parental frustration when they aren't accepted by their baby when you try to give them a different brand they are not used to. Not to mention the fact that some binkies can be choking hazards. And, of course, they can get dirty if they aren't cleaned regularly. All of which makes me wonder about the pacifiers we adults are sucking on in our spiritual lives — that is, those things that make us feel pacified, relieved, peaceful, calm, safe and comforted. The stuff we cling to for security, especially when our faith is under duress.

Our Gospel from John this morning says that following Jesus' death, the disciples were huddled together behind locked doors, rigid with fear that the powers who crucified Jesus would also put an end to them as well. For some reason, Thomas was not with the group of Christ's followers that had gathered that day. Maybe the disciples had drawn straws to see who would go to the market for supplies and Thomas got the short straw. Perhaps he got tired of being cooped up with n fearful men and women in a small house, waiting for a

clue of what to do next. Whatever the reason, Thomas was absent. Which we understand to be poor timing on his part, like the guy stargazing who bends down to tie his shoe at the very moment a meteor blazes across the sky.

Thomas eventually returns from whatever he was doing, and is immediately confronted by his companions, who declare they have seen the Lord. Which begs the question, who among us would not respond like Thomas, “Sure, you saw the Lord. Riiiiight, and what else happened while I was at the market?” “No, no, you don’t understand,” they cried, “our Lord, Jesus, revealed himself to us. He is risen!” Thomas then responds by offering his fellow students a deal, an ultimatum if you will, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Without that kind of evidence, Thomas was an unbeliever.

Have you ever had the experience of being on the outside looking in? When the whole group, except you, knows something you probably ought to know? It happens to kids all the time. Caught in the position of not knowing what you think you need to know, you have two options: pretend that you know — fake it — with the hope that you catch on real soon; the other option, a bit more risky, is to call time out, stop the motion long enough for you to ask questions, challenge the process, or do what you need to do to get on board. Of course, another option is simply to give up and go home, choosing to remain on the outside.

Our story today describes how one disciple responded to being on the outside looking in. Thomas was confronted with an empty tomb and claims of a risen Lord Jesus, as we are every Sunday. His initial response earned him the nickname “Doubting Thomas.” And his response may not be all that different from our response. For the apostle Thomas, the scientific rationalist, his binky, his pacifier, was empirical evidence.

This leads me to wonder how many of us are fascinated by scientific research that would seem to authenticate the claims of Scripture. Why else spend the millions of dollars that have been spent to search for Noah's ark on Mt. Ararat in present-day Turkey? Granted, there is a valid archaeological interest there, but would the discovery of the ark really make our faith any stronger than it is right now? And if so, what does that say about our faith?

Years and years ago, you may recall that many people were disappointed when carbon dating proved that the Shroud of Turin, thought to be the cloth that Jesus' body was draped in after he was crucified, was only 800-some years old, not 2,000 plus. Or more recently, back in 2002 the reputed ossuary or burial box of James the brother of Jesus caused a similar debate. Some argued that it was indisputable evidence of Jesus' family. A year later it was determined that the box was a fake. From an archaeological standpoint, these things matter. But does it matter from a faith perspective? Is our faith stronger or weaker when such things happen?

Some people stumble in their life of faith, as Thomas did, because the empirical evidence is lacking. There is no proof for the existence of God, and there's a lot that happens in the world that would seem to argue against a loving and powerful God. These individuals are similar to Thomas, who said he would remain an unbeliever until he could confirm that the testimony of the disciples was true.

Others grab the pacifier of cultural respectability. Any faith journey that calls for a life of radical discipleship, a life that pits us against the world, that risks us receiving ridicule or judgement from the people around us is not a life for us. We want our faith to be neat, clean, tidy, respectable, and non-confrontational.

Some of us move on steadily in a life of faith, while for others faith is a

lifelong struggle with doubt. The fact is, if you care enough to wonder, to question, to struggle for an authentic profession of faith, you may well be on the path to a life grounded in honest reliance upon God alone. Because for many, having doubt may be a necessary step on the road to faith. If you don't believe me take a look at a woman named Dorothy Day, for example.

Dorothy Day, the late founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, described her inability to pray as she was coming to faith. Whenever she knelt, she would be overcome by doubt and shame — “Do I really believe? Whom am I praying to?” “Is prayer for the lonely and religion for the weak?” .. But once while walking to her village to get her mail, she found herself praying again, this time out of a deep sense of thankfulness. Encouraged, she continued on, against her doubts. No matter how dull the day, how long the walk seemed, or how sluggish she felt at the beginning, the words of thanksgiving that she prayed began to slowly move into her heart and shape her conscience in faith. She came to faith through doubt and eventually gave up her doubts as freely as a child drops his or her pacifier.

While we can condemn Thomas for much, we can applaud him for his intellectual integrity. He was honest, refusing to pretend to believe something that he really didn't. He knew the claims being made about Jesus were of ultimate significance, and he cared enough to articulate his doubt, to challenge his friends.

In his Daily Study Bible devotion, Pastor William Barclay says, “There is more ultimate faith in the man who insists on being sure, than the man who glibly repeats things which he has never thought out, and which he does not really believe. It is doubt like that which in the end arrives at certainty. Thomas doubted in order to become sure; and when he did become sure, his surrender to certainty was complete. If a man fights his way through his doubts to the

conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, he has attained to a certainty that the man who .. unthinkingly accepts can never reach.

Thomas was a man who had spent three years of his life as a disciple of Jesus. He was the one who dared to ask questions when he didn't understand. Hounded by doubt, he nevertheless stayed the course. Tradition has it that he was the first missionary to India. Where did his search lead him we may wonder? Where will ours lead us? His willingness to follow his questions led him to faith, true and abiding faith, that was formed in the depths of doubt. In other words, when he encountered the risen Lord Jesus, Thomas declares. "My Lord and my God."

At the end of today's story Jesus' informs us that Thomas has missed out on a greater blessing. The blessing is greater when we can come to faith when all the contrary signs suggest that such a faith is foolish. In an age which demands solid evidence for everything, Thomas is certainly our brother. Authentic faith — pacifier, binky-free living — is often born from a dance with doubt. This faith is a faith that rests finally on what cannot be seen, but only believed. Sooner or later, we must drop the things that we rely on for security, but actually keep us from relying on God. Here is the word of the Lord addressed to us in a postmodern, post-Christian age of technology: Blessed are they who do not see — but believe. Amen.