

**“Prove It!”**

John 20: 19 - 31

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker newspaper and movement, was a wonderful writer as well as a committed, social activist Christian. Her faith was not separate from her desire to work with the poor. “She had spent her youth among socialists, anarchists, and Communists, and considered herself one of them. She had known the rootless bohemian life, the nights of bars and parties and unhappy love affairs. She shocked her ‘progressive’ friends by her decision to enter the Roman Catholic Church. In the view of her friends, she had gone over to the church of wealth and power, so often in open alliance with the interests of the status quo. Dorothy did not try to deny these charges. But the church was, she believed, for all its sins, the church of the poor and the dispossessed, the church was somehow the Body, in this world, of the Saviour.” [Introduction, Dorothy Day, Selected Writings, ed. By Robert Ellsberg, Orbis Books, New York, 1983, page xix].

Dorothy Day’s biography and the story of her conversion to Christ, The Long Loneliness, is a wonderful read, and one of the great modern spiritual classics, in my opinion. Day was called to serve the poor. That was clear to her. After the baptism of her infant daughter into Roman Catholicism, she herself felt drawn to be baptized as a Catholic. She did this with many doubts in her mind, for she had been an atheist. She writes of her baptism and its aftermath:

“I went to Tottenville alone, leaving my baby with my sister and there... I too was baptized conditionally, since I had been baptized in the Episcopal Church. I made my first confession right afterward, and then I looked forward to receiving Holy Communion the next morning...

I had no particular joy in partaking of these three sacraments, Baptism, Confession, and the Holy Eucharist. I proceeded about my own active participation in them grimly, coldly, making acts of faith, and certainly with no feeling of consolation whatever.

One part of my mind stood at one side and kept saying, ‘What are you doing? Are you sure of yourself? What kind of an affectation is this? What act is this you are going through? Are you trying to induce emotion, bring about faith, partake of the opiate of the people?’ I felt like a hypocrite if I got down on my knees, and shuddered at the thought of anyone seeing me...

I loved the Church for Christ made visible. I did not love the Church for itself, because it was so often a scandal to me. Romano Guardini said that the Church is the cross on which Christ was crucified, and one must live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction with the Church.” (pp. 38-39).

\*\*\*

When I was in seminary there was a remarkable teacher of Biblical Studies at the Lutheran Seminary in Berkeley, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. He was a great preacher as well as a teacher. I visited with a friend of mine simply to experience him. I will never forget the line he said: “Which Peter would you rather have as your pastor? Peter, saying to Jesus before the crucifixion, ‘I will never betray you?’ Or Peter, warming his hands at the fire after having betrayed his alliance with Jesus?”

Doubts. If we are honest, we have had our doubts in faith. Perhaps the journey of faith is mostly defined by doubts. Dorothy Day took her journey from being an atheist to being a Christian who radically served the poor, at the same time she had her doubts, those questions in her mind.

As human beings, perhaps it is easier to be certain than it is to doubt. It is easier to say, "I believe this or that" than it is to allow our doubts be part of our lives. The doubts so easily disrupt our orderly, simple lives. "I am a Christian," we may say. Or, "I am a United Methodist, this is my church." Or, "I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ." Where are our doubts?

And so, as satisfied Christians, it is sometimes easy for us to say about Thomas: "How could he doubt Jesus?" But that's the easy way out for us. When we cannot relate to these doubts, our faith is little more than sentimentality. And the faith is not about sentiment; the faith is a rugged, difficult way that involves the struggles of real life.

When we study the Bible together or sit in classes together, often our doubts are exposed. I like to hear the truth spoken when we study together. "I have trouble with this." I give credit to the people among us who have brought their doubts into the light, and then carried their doubts home with them.

It is hard to know whether this passage is based on an actual experience or not. It is good to remember that the early scriptures often included stories that were used to "prove" that Jesus, of Nazareth, was the Son of God, and even the Messiah who had been promised to the Jews in the ancient Hebrew scriptures. When you visit "the Holy Land," you find that there are other stories of risen saviors; this story of Jesus is not alone in its uniqueness.

There is a doubt that I am struggling with in faith now in my life. I have long had a walk with Jesus, and I think of myself as a Follower of Jesus, rather than a Christian. To me, Jesus is as close to me as I am to you. My faith is growing perpetually, like bamboo that doesn't go away once it is planted. I can honestly say at this time in my life that I am as grateful for the difficult times in my journey as I am for the wonderful times. I am grateful to God for those times, for they have opened me up as a human being, and they have often defined my life. I am one who has to know that things are true; things are either true, or they are not. I suppose that's a kind of doubt, isn't it? But I am fascinated by post-modern science, because it seems to me that physics, in particular, is journeying over the same territory as faith. Like people of all times, we are continually hoping to understand why – if there is a purpose – we are here at all.

Like Dorothy Day, I have never let go of my struggle with the institution of the Church. I suppose I never will. To me, the work of God happens, is happening all the time, all around us, church or not. We haven't saddled God in here!

My own doubt is this: are we really part of God? I can tell you that I am coming to understand that we are part of God, we are actually made of God-stuff. I can also tell you that every single human being on earth is made of God-stuff. But then I think about my life and I know that I am not totally free, I am not there yet. For all of me that believes, there is the part of me that doubts. That's part of who I am, too. I am not meant to be perfect – nor are you – but you are meant to be ever-journeying.

In other words, I have not come to terms with my own death. If I had, then I would be totally free. If I had, then I would have no fear, of anyone or anything. My own doubts are me sticking my hands in the side of Jesus, right after Thomas, making sure this story is for real!

What are yours?