

A little boy, growing up in a very religious family, was outside playing. He was doing all of the things that a little boy does. He was climbing trees. He was swinging on the swing set and jumping out. He was rolling and playing with his dog. His mother called him for dinner and all of the family gathered at the table. His mother looked at him and said, "Young man, let me see your hands."

There was some rubbing of his hands on his blue jeans before he held his hands up. His mother looked at them and asked, "How many times do I have to tell you that you must wash your hands before you eat? When your hands are dirty, they have germs all over them and you could get sick. After we say the blessing, I want you to march back to the bathroom and wash your hands."

Everyone at the table bowed their heads and the father said the blessing. Then, the little boy got up and headed out of the kitchen. He stopped, then turned and looked at his mother and said, "Jesus and germs! Jesus and germs! That's all I ever hear around here and I haven't seen a one of them."

I don't think that kid was another Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon is the character on the Big Bang Theory who is exceptionally brilliant but socially awkward and rather detached from the people and customs of society. To say the least, the Sheldon Cooper character is not given to poetic imagination. He seems not to have the capacity to stand in awe at the evening sunset or to rejoice at the sound of children laughing. Because of this particular characteristic, issues of faith do not come easily to Dr. Sheldon Cooper.

No, I think this kid just lack the experience to open his eyes. When he gets sick or has an infection, he'll definitely come to believe in germs. Today we are considering what it might take to open his eyes to the presence of the Lord.

And that bring us to the poor fellow in today's gospel that history has always remembered as "doubting Thomas.' I'd like to make the case that he got a bad rap and deserves to be remembered in a much more favorable light.

I'd like to point out that first of all that all the disciples ran off during the crucifixion and when Mary Magdalene reported the empty tomb they did not all jump up and down shouting, "See, I just knew it would all work out OK." They weren't even all that impressed when Peter and John reported the same story. It's safe to say that at some point they all refused to accept this new version of reality and act accordingly – which is pretty much the definition of doubt.

Their doubt changes to belief only when they experience this new reality in a way that they simply cannot deny. I like the way one of TV mini-series handled this scene. Jesus appears in sort of a blaze of light but then he walks around the room and rather playfully, intimately musses the hair of each disciple as he passes. No clever argument can contradict that sort of personal experience. But Thomas wasn't there that first night.

Without the experience that changes how you see the world, Thomas is in exactly time place and state of mind as all the other disciples before that Easter appearance. When he does return, he's not sure what to make of this seemingly impossible thing they are telling him,

but to his credit he doesn't turn away thinking them somehow deranged from grief. He stays with them – giving them the benefit of the doubt in a good sense – because he knows them and has shared so many other amazing things with them.

Thomas is there the next Jesus joins them in that upper room for a meal. He doesn't speak of doubt now; there is no indication that he actually felt the need to touch Christ's wound but he does make an amazing act of faith. It is the only place in all the NT where someone addresses Jesus as God and Jesus lets it stand.

In fairness maybe history should have called him believing Thomas or insightful Thomas. Or maybe we should have just dropped all the descriptives and just let him be Thomas who came to believe in just same way that all the other disciples finally did – through an unmistakable personal experience.

Beyond defending poor Thomas, I'd also like to defend doubt itself. It is usually the honest result of not having enough or possibly having conflicting information about a decision or judgment. In law reasonable doubt can save a life. Doubt is not a bad thing. Doubt is the not the opposite of faith; it is actually a component of faith. The opposite of faith is apathy – you don't care, it doesn't matter, you aren't going to do anything about it. But doubt means you are still taking a situation seriously, you want to go beyond any falsehood or deception, you care enough not to make a rash decision.

In adult religious education doubt is a powerful tool – among religious educators.

It's pretty much a given that you spend at least half your time trying to get people to question things they thought they knew and understood. There is an amazing amount of obsolete or simply incorrect information that people cling to as supposed doctrine. They need a little dose of doubt to move forward.

The fact that all the apostles had doubts about this seemingly impossible claim shows that, in fact, they were credible witnesses. They questioned and sorted things out; that makes them more believable because the claim of a risen lord wasn't something they immediately latched on to as a security blanket in their grief. So occasional doubt is a healthy thing, but it isn't some place you want to stay forever – it is tiring and unsatisfying.

Usually doubt is resolved not by the mental calculations that Sheldon Cooper relishes, but because you have an experience that makes everything come together. For the apostles it was the unmistakable touch of a friend they knew so well. For later believers it would be the experience of a joy filled and vibrant community where the presence of more than a human gathering was also unmistakable.

Last week there were a lot more people here. Why aren't they here this week? I think it's because they are still trapped in a state of doubt. The rich traditions of the church are enough to get them to participate now and then; but the lure of society and the cynicism of the media and the scandalous actions a few are strong enough to block a decision to make a real commitment. I think that we should be grateful that they still drift along in that state of doubt – it means they haven't decisively turned away.

I think they also need that experience that will unmistakably say that living the gospel is worth the effort. That is our job. It isn't a matter of answering all their questions; it is a matter of showing them by our own life and actions that the way of Christ is a rewarding, energizing, joyful life that the world can't begin to match.