

Easter 2
March 31, 2008

Dr. Martin Marty recalls a summer day of his boyhood, when one of those great miracles of childhood occurred. A watermelon truck overturned right in front of his house. The uninjured driver jumped out to watch helplessly as scores of neighborhood kids raced to the scene of that blessed event and dove into the spilled cargo for a sticky picnic on the pavement; right in front of his house. That was the good news. The bad news was that he was out of town that day visiting his grandmother.

Life is like that sometimes. We aren't where the action is. Such is the story of Thomas. The watermelon truck of Easter overturned in Thomas' neighborhood ... and he was out of town. The other disciples tried to tell him but he could not believe, 'not unless I see it for myself' he said. And it happened, the next week. And this time Thomas was there.

So we hear today about the man who had doubts about what his brothers and sisters were telling him when he was out of town. His doubts are so legendary that he is usually called: Doubting Thomas. Faith and doubt ...always in my experience close together.

In David Heller's book called Children's Letters to God, one child wrote:

Dear God,

What do you do with families that don't have much faith? There's a family in the next block like that. I don't want to get them in trouble, so I can't say who. See you in church. Alexix

OR

Dear God,

I have doubts sometimes. Sometimes I really believe. Like when I was four and I hurt my arm and you healed it up fast. But my question is: if you could do this, why don't you stop all the bad things in the world. Like war. Like diseases. Like famine. Like drugs. And there are problems in other people's neighborhoods too. I'll try to believe more. Ian

That one sounds like a letter I could write over and over and maybe you could too. The deep questions that elude easy answers.

One thing I believe though is that as Christians, we do not need fear having doubts and questions. Doubt is not a great enemy of faith. Doubt can be a friend of faith and can help us grow in our spiritual lives. Doubt is the state of uncertainty with regard to the truth or reality of something. The opposite of faith is not doubt but unbelief.

Unbelief is certainty isn't it ... I am certain that something is not true. I am an unbeliever. Doubting is open to belief and faith; it is active, it seeks answers. And we have big questions that we ask. The problem with children sometimes is that they come right out and ask the deep questions with the same ease as they ask what's for dinner.

Is there really a God? How do I know God hears my prayers? Where is God? Does God really care about me? About our world?

We could list pages and pages of really big, important questions that at various times in our lives we wrestle with ... and sometimes we learn that we have to simply have to live with the questions.

There is a story told about St. Augustine who was walking along the beach one day, struggling with the great theological issue of his day: the doctrine of the Trinity. (Isn't that the sort of thing you ponder when you walk along the beach?) He was trying to understand the Trinity and find words to express how it could be that God is three and God is one.

As he walked along he saw a little boy running to the ocean and filling up a sea shell with water, then taking it back and pouring it into a hole he had dug in the sand.

"What are you doing, my little man?" Augustine asked.

"I am trying to put the ocean into this hole," the boy replied

Aha, thought Augustine. My trying to understand God is like trying to put the ocean in a little hole in the sand.

But still we seek to understand. Our questions spur us to find understanding, for an experience of God real enough to give us hints that we are not alone. In truth our doubts are good evidence that we have faith, and that our faith matters to us. It is good to ask the questions and to hear how others deal with them. Otherwise we grow stale in our spiritual journey. I worry more about the person who has it all in a neat package.

Thomas could not believe until he had a personal experience with God. Jesus calls us blessed who believe even though we have not seen, but we do need personal experiences with God. “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us” we pray in one of our Eucharistic prayers.

So today on the second Sunday of Easter, life can still be full uncertainties and perhaps troubles. So we might pray:

Lord, I know you are all around me, but I do not understand how or why this has happened. Help me be like Augustine, when he walked on the beach and knew there was much he would have to leave it in your hands.

Lord, I believe.

Help thou my unbelief.

Amen