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# The beginning of change is the moment of doubt

Jamie Manson | Sep. 21, 2011 Grace on the Margins

?I have doubts! I have such doubts!?

So lamented Sister Aloysius in the final line of the play and film *Doubt*. She had just learned that Father Flynn, the parish priest that she suspected to be abusing children, whom she had tried so hard to remove, had been appointed pastor of another parish with a large school.

Sister Aloysius? unshakable certainty about things as various as the evils of ballpoint pens, the corrupting power of puberty, or the dangers of using secular song in Christmas pageants, dominates the entire show. So it is quite jarring, in the end, to see her so profoundly wounded, bent over with grief, and seeking consolation.

Of course, she does not doubt her conviction about Father Flynn. She doubts the power of truth over lies; she doubts the triumph of wholeness over harm. She doubts her vocation to serve a church that may not practice from the same moral high ground that it compels its followers to live by, a church that would sooner protect its clergy through complacency and secrecy than protect its children through honesty and accountability.

However we feel about Sister Aloysius? rigidity and fierceness, it is hard not to feel compassion for her at this moment. Many of us, no doubt, can relate to her. Her church has broken her heart. She has fought to protect the children in her school (children with whom she herself was hardly gentle!), and her questions were ignored, her concerns never considered. Even with all of her devotion to her school, she is powerless to protect them from the church to which she has consecrated her life.

In many ways, Sister Aloysius is like Thomas, perhaps the most famous doubter of all.

Thomas has been given a bad rap throughout the ages. ?Doubting Thomas? seems to be that lesser disciple who couldn?t believe when everyone else did. But if you look at the ?Doubting Thomas? text in John?s Gospel, and the narratives about the appearances of the resurrected Jesus that precede it, we see that all of the disciples had their doubts after the crucifixion.

How couldn?t they? The embodiment of love, justice, compassion and healing had just been brutally beaten, humiliated and executed like a common criminal. What happened to the ?kingdom of God is at hand?? Is this the ?more abundant life? that Jesus promised? Was it all just rhetoric, a delusion, a lie? How couldn?t the disciples lose hope and get caught up in sorrow and doubt?

Thomas, unlike most of the disciples, wasn?t in the upper room when Jesus? resurrected body made an appearance. When the disciples tell him about it, he says that he will not believe until he actually gets to touch the wounds of Jesus. A week later, Jesus reappears in the room. Incredibly, he does not shame Thomas. Instead, Jesus encourages him to touch the wounds. But Thomas doesn?t need to. Just seeing Jesus and his wounds is enough.

The real power in the story comes in Thomas? confession of faith: ?My Lord and My God!? These words

constitute lot more than an exclamation. They demonstrate deep faith and understanding of Jesus? true nature as the incarnate God. Very few disciples utter such powerful words in John?s Gospel, but interestingly, they usually only do it after moments of profound doubt.

It?s not hard to relate to Sister Aloysius or Thomas. How often have we responded to moments of pain, illness, betrayal, suffering and abandonment with doubt? How often do we question our commitment to the reform of our church? How often do we wonder if it?s worth all of the struggle and disappointment?

Of course, the disciples were lucky. They actually got to see that Jesus did indeed rise. They get real, physical proof that Jesus? promises of new life were realities, not just words.

This is why these resurrection stories are so important to the Gospel writers. They knew that those seekers -- like you and me -- who would read the Gospels years later would not have such certainty. They would not have the opportunity to literally encounter the resurrected Jesus. John is wise to remind of us Jesus? words, ?Blessed are those who have not seen, but believed.?

Our task then, is to find the ways in which we do and can experience the resurrection. We know that we experience much pain and death, but when is our suffering transformed so that we also experience new, more abundant life and wholeness? What can possibly give us hope when all seems so doubtful?

To help us answer this question, I think that Jesus gave us a good clue when he shows the disciples, and then later Thomas, his wounds.

There is a great Jewish belief called *Tikkun Olam*. *Tikkun* means ?repair? and *olam* means ?world.? The Jews understand well that the world is a shattered place. Our highest calling, therefore, is to help repair it. We are called to create healing in places where there are deep wounds. We are called to bring wholeness and resurrection to those places where there is destruction and death. In these most vulnerable places lies the deepest and most authentic power for new creation.

Once the disciples receive these visits from the resurrected Jesus, their doubts are transformed into faith. Jesus breaths on them, the same way that God breathed on Adam at the creation of human beings. The disciples are literally re-created in this moment. Their brokenness is repaired. Their newfound wholeness gives them courage to leave the locked room of doubt and fear, so that they can begin the work of repairing the shattered world outside.

John Patrick Shanley, the author of *Doubt*, writes in the preface to the play: ?It is Doubt (so often experienced initially as weakness) that changes things. The beginning of change is the moment of Doubt. It is that crucial moment when we renew our humanity or become a lie.?

There are endless opportunities to transform our struggles with doubt into an opportunity for repairing the world. These are invitations from God to create greater wholeness in our community. In doing so, we are often re-created ourselves, too.

The Gospel story that reaches its climax with the paradoxical mocking and execution of God incarnate concludes with an equally powerful paradox: Doubt is not weakness, but rather, an invitation to touch wounds. Because in these most vulnerable places lives our most powerful opportunity to breathe more abundant life into our afflicted church and world.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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