

Side by Side: Faith and Doubt

There are many English body part idioms that occur as doublets: for example, eye-to-eye (confrontation), face-to-face (communication), back-to-back (home runs), hand-to-hand (combat), and so on. Many show intimacies, like heart-to-heart, although I would like to consider one that can be more neutral: side-by-side. For example, it is possible to sit side-by-side with someone and not even know the person, as in a sports event. But if something special happens in the game, you will probably acknowledge your new neighbor. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, suggests that friends most often sit side-by-side; on the other hand, lovers sit face-to-face.

There are occasions when doubt and faith sit side-by-side and interfere with each other. I remember, for example, that as a young man I prayed regularly, in faith, for my father, but then watched his lifestyle and doubts crept (or ran) into my mind. I had trouble keeping the doubts from overcoming my faith. I have learned slowly, I think, that it is not unnatural or unspiritual to have the two side by side. However, now with COVID-19 doubt and faith seem to impede one other. This is not as unusual as we might think.

Consider the apostle Thomas, who is called the “doubter.” However, Thomas had faith enough to follow Jesus as a disciple, and we read in John 11:16 that he was ready to go with Jesus to visit Lazarus and die there. He also acknowledged (in John 14:1-6) his need for instruction from Jesus. With Thomas, like many, faith and doubt were side-by-side.

If I was in a boat in the middle of a lake and Jesus came walking on the water toward me, what might I do? Would I, like Peter, ask Jesus if I—walking on the water—could meet him? And if Jesus said “Come!” would I have faith to get out of the boat and start walking on the water? Or would I be like Peter, who feeling the wind and seeing the waves, began to doubt—and sink. Jesus saves him and says, “What little faith you have. Why did you doubt?” Considering the scene, I think I would have doubted as well!

On another occasion, a rich young man came to Jesus and inquired what he should do to live forever. Jesus replies that he should keep the commandments that he has just recited. The man replies that he has always kept the commandments, pauses to wonder if that is enough, then asks what else he can do. Jesus suggests that he distribute his wealth to the poor. The man doubts that he can do it and leaves.

Each of the Gospels comment on the doubts of Jesus’ followers following his resurrection: in Matthew we read that the 11 disciples worshiped Jesus when they saw him, but that “some of them doubted” (28:17). It wasn’t just Thomas who doubted: Mark 16:14 says that Jesus scolded the *disciples* “because they were too stubborn to believe those who had seen him alive.” When the women who visited Christ’s tomb after the resurrection reported to the disciples about seeing angels and an empty tomb, “the apostles thought that what the women said was nonsense, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:10-11).

Note also the words of Thomas himself in John 20:25: “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Jesus fulfills Thomas’ wish (v27) and tells him “Stop your doubting and believe!”

These instances from the Gospels clearly show that even Jesus’ most intimate friends had doubts about his resurrection and, at first, some of them did not believe that it was really him. It is therefore not surprising to me that some 2000-plus years later there are still doubters. To us, as to Thomas, he says: “Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!” (v29).

What is our own story? Do we have faith that our children (parents, grandparents, etc.) will in turn have faith in God? Is one or more of them so wayward that we doubt it? Do we have faith that God will see us through this pandemic or are some of us beginning to doubt? Our faith may waver like the fans of the Chicago Cubs who waited over a century to see their team in the world series. But it did happen, so keep praying for the Dallas Cowboys!

All of us, when we are honest, admit that at times we have doubted that God is in control of politics, the economy, or even our lives. At such times, we must pray for the gift of faith that God has promised and a certainty that he will give it to us. We must then not let doubt overcome our faith—even if, sometimes, they are side-by-side.

Praying to overcome doubt with faith
Karl and Joice Franklin