

It's no secret that most, if not all of the images we see advertisements are the result of Photoshop. It seems like every week or so there is some expose article floating around about this company's Photoshop fail or that celebrity's "untouched" picture being released. Someone is always doing something to make someone look better.

Sometimes it can be egregious, like making a woman's waist impossibly tiny or putting arms at unnatural angles. Other times it's pretty harmless. I can remember taking my senior pictures for high school and having them airbrushed to remove some pretty embarrassing acne. For good or for ill, these sorts of alterations happen.

And there is debate about just *how* good or ill they are. Some people say that all sorts of digital adjustments are fine in the media. After all, these companies are trying to sell something; they are presenting an *ideal* for everyday people to aspire to. The models aren't *supposed* to look ordinary—it's their *job* to be extraordinary!

The other camp argues that these representations can be dangerous. They keep people from having a reasonable perspective on their abilities or bodies. Companies should use models representative of the population, not a tiny minority. We should have *realistic* models. *Representative* models.

When we are looking for models and examples for our spiritual lives, we often turn to scripture. Regardless of what camp you may belong to when it comes to our secular culture, when we look at the Bible, it seems we are given nothing *but* "realistic models." In the Old Testament, there are stories like the time Abraham lied and passed his wife Sarah off as his sister, or when King David pursued Bathsheba despite her being another man's wife. The New Testament isn't all the much better. The disciples as a whole tend to misunderstand what Jesus tries to teach them. Judas hands Jesus over to the authorities and Peter denies that he ever even knew him.

And then we have today's story about Thomas, who was called the Twin, but who *we* so often refer to as "The Doubter." Thomas is one of the *most* realistic models we have. He doubts what he hasn't seen for himself. The other disciples had all been able to witness Jesus' resurrection for themselves when he appeared in the room. Thomas just wanted that same tangible sign.

We're often the same. We have trouble believing in things we haven't experienced for ourselves. When we are young, we learn about the five senses. We learn to explore things with our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. We use those senses to decipher the world around us, to determine what is real and what isn't. The trouble is, faith in God can't rely only on those senses.

Our experiences with God come in lots of other ways. We may feel God's love and presence in the relationships we have with other people. Or we may feel it in times of peace and tranquility. Or while experiencing and exploring nature. Or we may be overwhelmed by it during an exceptionally spiritual experience brought on through music, meditation, prayer, or worship.

But sometimes we, like Thomas, seek harder evidence. We look for those more concrete signs. We are hungry for things that we can point to and say, "There! There is God!"—because it's hard to maintain faith without them. We can find ourselves, like Thomas, having doubts and struggling to believe.

And then, in today's Gospel story Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Those are kind of discouraging words, aren't they? We can take them to mean that Thomas is somehow "less-than" for not trusting fully in the other disciples' account. We may begin to see Thomas as a bad example, a bad model for us because he doubted. We may begin to equate doubting with not being a good Christian.

Jesus *does* say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe..." The unspoken phrase that we tend to assume follows is, "Woe to those have to see to believe." But that's not what Jesus intends. Jesus doesn't speak words of woe to Thomas. He lifts up and blesses those who have faith in the resurrection without proof, but he does not condemn the doubters.

Thomas is not a bad example for us. Despite his doubts and concerns, he still boldly proclaims Jesus' identity: "My Lord and my God!" He recognizes the fully divine nature of Christ. He remains with the other disciples as Jesus continues to perform miracles and teach. And then, like the others, after the ascension he is sent out into the world to proclaim the Gospel.

I'll say it again: Thomas is *not* a bad example. Rather, he is a *realistic* model. Even though he has his time of uncertainty, he was still a faithful disciple. He still spread the word of God. God *still* worked through him. Though he doubted, Jesus still came to him. God can and does still work through all of *us*. Our loving Creator doesn't abandon us, even when we aren't so sure of it all.

And God *has* provided us with at least two visible and physical signs: our sacraments, baptism and Holy Communion. There are two parts that make up a sacrament: it is commanded by Christ and uses a material or earthly element. Through connection with the Word, is the bearer of God's promise. The elements of water, wine and bread give us something physical through which we can experience God's grace.

Through the water that washes us in baptism, we to die to sin and rise to new life in Christ, and we are also reminded that we are beloved children of God. Bread and wine, the body

and blood of Christ in Communion, nourish and sustain us and are signs that point to the love of God shown in Christ's death and resurrection.

Yes, doubts are real. They happen. We have periods of feeling disconnected from God. But the good news today and every day is that God is never disconnected from *us*. Sometimes we feel that divine presence strongly, other times it may be less noticeable, but God *is* there. In water, in bread and wine, in the Word, God has given us things we can see, taste, smell, hear and feel.

Our "realistic model," Thomas, shows us that doubts do not keep us from God's presence. They do not preclude us from seeing the signs and miraculous works God can do. They do not cause us to be shut out of the community of believers. Jesus came to Thomas and Jesus comes to us, embracing us in times of both faith and trust and in times of uncertainty and wavering belief.

Amen.