

## God Doesn't Do Delivery

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I spent most of my youth suspended in those eight days of doubt longing for something that time and again proved elusive.

Please will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our collective heart be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

I'm not certain when Jesus first entered into my consciousness. You see, I was raised in a largely secular home the daughter of a UU mother and a lapsed Catholic father who had a penchant for the teachings of Zen Buddhism. I guess ours was a matrilineal family with respect to religion, because I grew up being told that I was UU, too. But given the various places we lived and their lack of proximity to a church, it wasn't until I was in high school that I actually experienced being part of a UU congregation. And then I mostly left church as a college student and young adult until I wandered through these doors a number of years ago.

In the meantime, I encountered throughout my childhood many people, young and old, individuals and groups, who were only too ready to fill the spiritual void they perceived in me. One such effort came in the form of a bus that drove around the apartment complex where we resided scooping up children to take them to Sunday school. I asked my parents if I could go with a friend on occasion to which they agreed. I recall it being sing-songy and boring and intimidating. I don't know when I first was introduced to Jesus, but what I am sure of is this. It wasn't an invitation. I remember feeling challenged into accepting a seemingly rote set of beliefs based on obviously fantastic stories. In order to be saved?

Still, as a bright kid, I felt I had to hedge my bets against a fate of eternal damnation. Since I struggled to believe all the biblical stories presented to me, I began to bargain with God. You know, give him a chance to prove himself to me. I figured if He really could inspire Moses's parting of the Red Sea and Jesus's resurrection from the dead, then he'd have no trouble orchestrating a small miracle for me. Wouldn't it be worth it to Him if it meant gaining me as a faithful member of His flock? The test I gave Him? Make manifest a pizza. Right here. Right now. I made it easy on Him. I didn't even specify toppings that I recall. It didn't come.

What did Thomas feel like during those eight days? Why was he left out of the physical revelation of Jesus' resurrection? Why was I surrounded by people so certain of a truth that eluded me?

Fast forward about a decade, and my pre-faith journey, we'll call it, continued in loose association with a theme of pizza. When I was 15, I was invited by my friend Robin to attend a church youth group lock-in at, of all places, Chuck E. Cheese's. I readily accepted thinking only of how much I enjoyed playing Skee-Ball and amassing enough tickets to redeem for sundry trinkets. What I hadn't factored in, though, was what the church was hoping to gain from this endeavor. At some point, all of us, sweaty faced from playing games, were ushered into the large eating area and asked to sit among the tables. The youth pastor stood before us with the usually singing and dancing Chuck E. Cheese figures resting eerily dormant behind him. As he began his pitch, I thought to myself, "Oh no, here we go again!" And then his message reached its crescendo. He asked all of us gathered to close our eyes. And then he said, "All you have to do is this, just raise your hand. If you accept Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior, just raise your hand. It's this simple. You will be forgiven of all your sins and granted eternal life." When we were invited to open our eyes, I spied Robin searching out her mother among the chaperones across the room. Her mother gazed back with an expectant, hopeful look. But Robin shook her head "no." Because I hadn't raised my hand. In their view, my soul remained perilously untethered.

It's not that I didn't want to believe the message being shared. But I had doubts. And I knew raising my hand would have been a hollow gesture. Still as we were all released back to the game room, I couldn't help but feel jealous of all the kids around me. They darted about laughing and carefree, secure in the knowledge that they had cracked the code to the hereafter. I was left wondering.

I wonder, too, about Thomas. Did he look at his fellow disciples with the same jealousy I felt? I wonder about the other eleven as well. Did they feel self-righteous in the face of their doubting friend? Did it ever occur to them that they did not have to wrestle with their faith due to their good fortune of being in the right place at the right time? Poor Thomas. Maybe he was just outside answering the call of nature. And once he was able to see for himself the wounds of crucifixion in a reborn Jesus, did he feel ashamed or guilty for having ever doubted?

This is where my story diverges with that of Thomas. While he yearned to join his fellow disciples in their certainty, I came to a point that no longer was the proof in the pizza I'd asked for, because no

longer was I trying to answer the same question. And here's the blasphemy in my sermon. At some juncture, it became immaterial to me whether or not Jesus was the son of God and whether or not he rose from the dead. I learned that for me, unlike Thomas, faith came only once I accepted that belief and doubt could coexist.

Hearing our welcome statement for the first time was revelatory. I immediately identified as a questioning believer and for the first time felt a true invitation to explore Christianity in a meaningful way. And Jesus, he and I have become pals of sorts. I've enjoyed learning about him by way of what he means to many of you. And I've appreciated feeling more resonance with a religious tradition that has meant so much to people I love.

But ultimately my faith, with all its beliefs and doubts, transcends Jesus. It just so happens that he has been in the right place at the right time to be a window for me into the heart of God. But I am certain that I could find the same true of Buddha and Mohammed and others. I know this because each of you is a window for me, too, into the heart of God. That collective heartbeat we all share. That energy that moves among us and propels us to be more together than we are alone.

God didn't deliver me a pizza all those years ago, but he delivered me to you.