

A doubt and a promise: Matthew 28:16-20

by [Talitha Arnold](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

*When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.*

Passages like this assure me there's a place for me and the people I serve. Unlike John's story of Thomas, Matthew didn't single out one disciple as the doubter. He says that "some doubted." While Thomas was clear about his doubt ("unless I see the print of the nails . . ."), Matthew didn't say why they doubted--or what they doubted. Perhaps they weren't sure it was Jesus, or they doubted he had actually died. Maybe they had simply been through enough and weren't about to be fooled or hurt again.

Thomas demanded proof. Jesus gave it. But Jesus didn't address their doubt by telling and unpacking a parable or assuring them with another teaching. Not now. Now he simply commissioned them: "Go and make disciples, baptize, teach."

Apparently having doubts didn't let them off the hook. Believe it or not, they still had a job to do. As they say in AA, "Fake it till you make it." I think Jesus said the same thing that day on the mountaintop.

I'm glad he did. Some people seem born to believe. For others, myself included, "faking it" has been part of the process. Always one to hedge my bets, I went to seminary on a "trial year" fellowship. Sometimes it's hard to remember how passionately uncertain I was when I began 30 years ago. From the beginning, it was unclear who was on trial—me or the school. I'd started college as a biology major but switched to religion and political science after taking a course from a professor who was also a rabbi.

It was the 1970s. None of my classmates were going to church, much less seminary. I had a slew of doubts. I wasn't sure I had the right to be in a relationship with God. I doubted that I was patient enough, kind enough, loving enough, Christian enough to be a minister.

But as Woody Allen says, "Ninety percent of life is showing up." Like the disciples on the mountain, the trial year gave me the chance to show up—in worship, in class, in

the life of the community. To show up in the relationship with God, the Bible, and this thing called faith. By the end of the year, I still had doubts about my legitimacy as a minister and a Christian. But I had no doubt I wanted to continue the journey.

Two years later, an internship gave me a chance to show up—in at a hospital room, a youth retreat, the house where someone had just died, the pulpit. Those encounters gave me a chance to put flesh on my faith. They taught me the blessing Jesus offered with his commission: “Lo, I am with you always” (even if my fingers were crossed).

By graduation I hadn’t answered all my questions, nor had I dispelled my impatience, feistiness and other non-Christian virtues. But without a doubt, I’d learned that faith was always a process and not some kind of neatly packaged product. Faith has stood me in good stead over the last 25 years, especially the last 18 as a minister in Santa Fe. The church I serve is celebrating its 25th anniversary. When I accepted the call in 1987, I wasn’t sure if either the church or I would make it to the next year, much less our 25th.

The congregation was founded in 1980 and had 90 members and a half-million-dollar mortgage. Our children’s space was so small that if more than 12 youngsters showed up, we spent our time slowing unchristian fights and skirmishes. The church was generous in terms of outreach giving, but we had no staff, not even a part-time secretary. To top it off, the congregation had just gone through two years of difficult leadership issues and came close to splitting.

Suffice it to say, I had my doubts.

Sometimes I felt that the church wasn’t even sure it wanted to be a church. Santa Fe seemed to be a place where spirituality was in, but religion, especially organized religion, was out. Sometimes that led to new approaches. The sanctuary was the “Gathering Room,” the Sunday school a “Learning Center.” But the ethos could also be disempowering. One leader told me I shouldn’t ask people to “affirm their baptism” when they joined the church. Asking them to “follow in the paths of peace and justice” was OK, but not as a “disciple of Jesus Christ.” United Way, yes. United Church, not so sure.

But we’ve kept trying to live into our commission as a church. At times, I’ve felt like Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, selling the idea that United could be a church just as the professor promoted the idea of a boy’s band. But with others who share

that vision, it's paid off. We've been committed to a strong children's and youth program, and next month we'll initiate 13 confirmands.

Worship has always been at the center of our life, even when we couldn't afford a pianist. My first Easter we cobbled together a pickup choir to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus." We've sung it every Easter since.

When I get discouraged and full of doubt about our future, I remember this passage where true believers and doubting Thomases, Andrews, Johns and even Talithas all were assigned a job to do and a promise to go with it. No doubt that's why it's called the good news.