

Kerry Patterson recalls the following story from his childhood:

“You know what I’d like for dessert tonight?” Kerry asked his mother one morning as he hovered over a bowl of cereal. “Does it look like I’m taking orders?” his Mom replied with a smile. Kerry was twelve at the time. He continued, “I’m sorry. I just was wondering what it would take to have a plate of homemade cream puffs sitting on the dinner table tonight.”

His Mom then walked over to a shelf that contained cookbooks, grabbed one, returned to the counter where Kerry was perched, placed the book in front of her child and said, “Think of it as a chemistry project.” “What is that supposed to mean?” Kerry asked—wondering if he was in trouble but didn’t know it yet.

His Mom then explained. “You spend hours tinkering with your chemistry set, heating chemicals in test tubes, mixing compounds in beakers—to no real purpose—and you do it for fun. How different is that from making cream puffs?”

Kerry then asked her, “Who’s the lady on the book?” “She’s Betty Crocker,” his Mom explained, “and she’s about to become your new best friend. She’s written this entire book of formulas, complete with methods for working with cooking tools.

Turn to the section on baking, find the formula and steps for making cream puffs, write up an ingredient list, look up the section that teaches how to work with dough, I’ll fetch any ingredients we’re missing, and a couple hours from now you’ll be sliding your first tray of cream puffs into the fridge.”

Kerry said that up until this point in his cooking career his entire food-preparation experience had consisted of blending milk with his Cocoa Puffs. And he hadn’t always done that right. Cream puffs seemed miles out of his league.

Spotting his defeated look, his Mom then explained, “You’ve been reading for seven years. You’ve been following directions with your chemistry projects and plastic models for at least three years. Inside this book, Mrs. Crocker gives you what you must know and do to make almost any dish. You simply need to read and carefully follow her directions—the same way you would when mixing up a smoke bomb.

Finishing her speech, his Mom helped him get started on the project and then quietly watched. She stepped in occasionally to help with a new technique, but mostly she let him read and follow instructions. She wanted her son to discover for himself that he could open a book, follow the directions, and produce something that would make his Mom proud.

Later, as he sifted powdered sugar onto his finished product, his Mom called around the neighborhood and set up a game of bridge. When her friends arrived a couple of hours later, she asked Kerry to serve the cream puffs. She said nothing about who had made the dessert until one of the neighbors exclaimed, “Why Melba, your cream puffs are heavenly!”

Kerry’s Mom paused for effect, called her son back into the room, and casually said, “Kerry, Mildred thinks the cream puffs you made are heavenly.” “Thank you.” Kerry politely responded.

By the end of the year, Kerry says that he and Betty Crocker were making chocolate cream pie, blackberry cobbler, and all sorts of delights. With each new success, he came to believe that if an expert cook wrote instructions, he could follow them. Better still, he didn’t merely gain confidence in making cream puffs, or even cooking in general. Kerry became confident that if he put his mind to it, he could learn skills that had once seemed out of reach.

I wonder if Kerry Patterson's experience of learning to make cream puffs is similar to what Thomas was learning in the story that we read today. We may know this story as the story of Doubting Thomas. But to call this the story of Doubting Thomas is to misunderstand the relationship between Jesus, Thomas, and the disciples.

This story is set on Easter night. Earlier in the day is the event which we celebrated last week on Easter. In John's version of events, one woman, Mary Magdalene, goes to the tomb after Jesus had been buried there. She finds the tomb empty and she encounters the risen Lord. She then leaves the empty tomb and seeks out the disciples. She informs the disciples that she has seen the Lord.

And what is the response from the disciples? They close the doors, lock them, and are overcome with fear. This Resurrection thing is not exactly taking off among the closest followers of Jesus. In fact, when this part of the story refers to the disciples this is probably a bigger group than the original 11 apostles minus Judas the betrayer who is now dead.

This group of disciples probably represents the entire early church. So the tomb is empty, the closest and most dedicated Jesus followers know it, and their response is to huddle in fear. This Resurrection thing is not exactly lighting a fire in the early church.

But what is an interesting part of this story is that one of the original 11 is not with the rest of the group. His name is Thomas. Why is he not with the others? What is he doing? Is he out serving in some way? Is he out doing meaningful work while the others are huddled in fear? Is he disappointed in Jesus and so he has gone out for a long walk to try to sort it all out? We don't know. All we know is that he is not present with the others.

But while the others are present in a huddled mess, an unexpected revelation occurs. Locked doors and fearful followers cannot keep Jesus out. Jesus appears to this group and shares words which he will repeat 2 more times. "Peace be with you." Jesus appears in front of his scared followers and passes the peace. Jesus doesn't appear to them because of their faith. Jesus appears to them in spite of them lacking faith.

But Thomas misses out. When he returns he is told about the miraculous appearance. But Thomas wants the same experience as the others. "I want to touch him," Thomas says. "I want to know him. I want to experience him," Thomas tells the others.

Rather than berate him for these desires, Jesus instead comes to see Thomas as well. Jesus invites Thomas to know him fully and completely. Jesus invites Thomas to truly know him by touching the wounds that Jesus has endured.

When a deaf person today speaks of Jesus through sign language, do you know how Jesus is represented? (fingers into wounds) That symbol comes from this story. So it seems to me that every time a deaf person speaks of Jesus, they are inviting the other person to become Thomas. They are inviting the other person to touch the wounds of the risen Jesus Christ.

Thomas needed that physical contact with Jesus to begin to truly know Jesus. But to get to this point Thomas had to be honest with his doubts. Thomas had to honestly admit that he had questions that he did not feel had been answered. And Jesus does not turn Thomas away because he has doubts and questions. Instead Jesus uses the doubts and questions of Thomas to draw him closer.

Like Thomas we may have entered worship today with lots of doubts and lots of questions about Jesus. Doubts about who Jesus is. Doubts about what Jesus did. Doubts about if Jesus is still alive today. Thomas is not put down by Jesus for having doubts. Jesus uses his doubts as a way to let Thomas and others know that in the future faith will come through belief and not through physical touch.

In our opening illustration, Kerry Patterson had doubts about his ability to cook. But his Mom saw a potential in him that she wanted to encourage. His Mom met him where he was and allowed him to explore more questions. She then took his doubts and questions and helped to teach him possibilities within himself that he did not know existed.

And that is what Jesus does with our doubts and questions. Continue to ask them and share them with Jesus. Allow him to use your doubts and questions to reshape you into the person that God is calling you to be. Doubts and questions are OK to have. But we are invited to allow God to take our doubts and questions and make us into something new.

Doubts and questions are OK. Allow God to use these doubts and questions to help you discover something new about God and about yourself. AMEN.

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-Patterson, Kerry, "Cream Puffs and Confidence," <http://www.crucialskills.com/2016/03/cream-puffs-and-confidence/>

-Text: John 20:19-31

-Given: April 3, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)