

About eighty miles to our southwest, you will find the small but important town of Tuscumbia, Alabama. There you will find the house museum named Ivy Green, the birthplace and childhood home of Helen Keller. We all remember her story. In 1882, at nineteen months of age, Helen developed a fever that left her both deaf and blind. She communicated with gestures and sounds until, when she turned seven years old, she first met her teacher and soon-to-be longtime companion Anne Sullivan. Under Sullivan's tutelage, Helen learned how to read and write. Eventually, after graduating from the Perkins Institute for the Blind and the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, she became the first deafblind person to graduate from Harvard with a bachelor's degree. She lived a life full of adventure and accomplishment. She wrote fourteen books and hundreds of speeches and essays. She became deeply involved in political advocacy not only for people living with disabilities but also for a variety of social causes. She met with the Queen of England and twelve U.S. Presidents from Grover Cleveland to John F. Kennedy. And, famously, on an already-airborne airplane, she took the controls to briefly become its pilot. Sally and I made the pilgrimage to Ivy Green last week and took the tour. Many of you have as well. It was amazing to see the actual water pump where Anne finally helped Helen break through her world of isolation to realize that the letters W-A-T-E-R meant, as Helen later described in her autobiography, "the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!"

When the tour was over, while talking with the docent and several others on the tour, we learned that just the day before—like many days over the previous two years—the museum had received over thirty prank telephone calls from young people who were convinced that every one of Helen's accomplishments were fake, the product of a conspiracy promoted by the media to make Helen to be more than what she was. The media's conspiratorial agenda is apparently to promote the seemingly harmless notion that anyone

can do anything. It seems that a substantial number of “Generation Z”—those teenagers and young adults born between the mid-90s and the early 2010s—have read and made posts on social media like TikTok and X (formerly known as Twitter, and when can we just call it “X”?) asserting that it is simply impossible for a person with Helen’s disabilities to read, write, or do any of the things that she did. Not every person in that generation believes that Helen Keller is a fake, and I want to be clear that I am not judging those in that generation who do. But it does make me curious. Why would people in that generation be especially willing to believe such a thing? Is it because their traumatizing experience of government-mandated isolation during COVID has led them to be especially suspicious of the media and other information authorities? Or are they are rebelling against the soul-crushing pressure our culture places upon young people always to be remarkable and always to do amazing things? As one young person posted on the platform Medium, “Does it stem from our own insecurities—could it be that a blind, deaf woman with more success in life than all of us is too much to grasp? Possibly.”

This is not merely a sociological question. It is psychological and even spiritual one. Consider the things—anything—that we deeply believe in or firmly reject. If you and I were presented with new data about them, would we be open to changing our minds? Contrary to the doctrine of the European Enlightenment that human beings are fundamentally rational, human beings are fundamentally passionate. Overwhelmingly, our beliefs about the most important things in life are the result not of inductive or deductive reasoning but because of our emotional need to believe in them. This is why Christian Apologetics, which is a school of theology that trains people to refute objections to Christian teachings with systematic arguments, is usually pointless. It may be helpful to the person who learns the words to describe his or her experience of God, but it is not helpful to the one who has not yet experienced Him. This is why Spiritual Direction, which is a school of Christian formation

that cultivates a life of prayer and other spiritual disciplines, starts not by talking about God to the person learning to pray but by asking and listening to that person about how they have already been experiencing God. Faith and doubt are not fundamentally speculative, but experiential. Faith and doubt are not fundamentally intellectual, but emotional.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus leaves the town where, as we heard last week, He healed the woman with a hemorrhage and raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. He travels to His hometown of Nazareth where He begins to teach in the synagogue. At first, His former neighbors are astonished at His bold teaching and the tales of miraculous healings, but soon their astonishment sours into rejection; their intensity of disbelief that He is who He not only says but also shows He is amazes Jesus Himself. In fact, their unbelief inhibits His ability to perform any miracles, "except," as Mark writes, "that He laid His hands on a few sick people and cured them (6:5)." Why did the Nazarenes refuse to believe in the Son of God when He was right in front of them? Or, to frame it in terms of our Helen Keller controversy, why would they want to refuse to believe?

I cannot pretend to be able to answer that question. It is hard enough to understand my own heart, much less others', much less those who lived long ago and far away in a totally different culture. But maybe that is the point. Every human heart is a mystery, a subterranean archeological artifact to be dug up and brought to the light, a black box on an airplane that sometimes is cracked open only after a crash landing. Contrary to what some might say, doubt is not a virtue—there is no such thing as healthy doubt when it comes to the things of God. But neither is doubt a sin. Doubt is a wound scabbed over. Doubt is a stifled cry of deep disappointment. Doubt is a chalk outline that marks the death of something dear. But, as our Lord told Nicodemus who was lost in the dark of his own doubt, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17)." In Christ, God has not come to punish our doubts, but to heal them.

Almost twenty years ago, on October 2, 2006, a 20-year-old rookie Firefighter and First Responder named Matt Swatzell was driving home after a 24-hour shift at his station in Dacula, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. He was tired and knew better than to drive but he was determined to sleep in his own bed. Just a few miles from home, just for a few seconds, he fell asleep at the wheel. He heard a terrible sound, and when he woke up he learned that he had drifted across the lane into oncoming traffic and had hit another car head-on. The passengers in that car were a 30-year-old pregnant mother named June Fitzgerald and her 19-month-old daughter Faith. Miraculously, the 19-month-old suffered only mild abrasions and bruises. But the mother, an Elementary School teacher, and her unborn son, due to be born in just two months, were killed. June's husband, Erik, was a Youth Pastor at the Hebron Baptist church in town. Matt was charged with second-degree vehicular homicide and failure to maintain a lane; while these charges were misdemeanors, Georgia law provided the possible punishment of a year in prison, and everyone expected that the Erik would insist on the maximum sentence. Shockingly, concluding that too many lives had already been ruined, the widower stood in court to plead for Matt's mercy, which the court granted. But the story doesn't stop there. On October 1, 2008, one day before the accident's second anniversary, Matt Swatzell walked sobbing to his car in a shopping center parking lot. For two years he had been wracked with helpless guilt; he had sought to be a First Responder to save lives, not end them, and he doubted he would ever find the peace he was certain he did not deserve. He went to the shopping center to do the only thing he could think of: to buy and then send a condolence card to the family he had shattered. As grace would have it, when Matt returned to his car, Erik was exiting his car which was parked next to Matt's. They looked at one another for a long moment, and then without saying a word, Eric walked to Matt and simply embraced him. They sat and talked for two hours. Erik told Matt that he forgave him and that neither of them should let what happened in the past define the rest of their lives. Since

their reconciliation, they have become close friends and breakfast buddies at their local Waffle House. Since then, both have married and started families. And since then, Faith—the sole survivor of the wreck that took her mother—loves to play with Matt’s children.

Faith in God, like His forgiveness of us, is not something we need to work on to make stronger. It is a gift that He eternally rains down upon us. Regardless of our capacity to receive it at any given moment, He constantly pours it upon us the way Anne Sullivan poured water over Helen Keller’s hands until we, like Helen, mysteriously and suddenly experience and then understand to be “the wonderful cool something” that awakens our soul, gives it light, and sets us free—first to be loved and to love and later to understand. Did Christ die to forgive us? All of us? Has He risen to save us? All of us? Will He return to raise us from the dead? All of us? Why wouldn’t anyone want to believe these things? Whether we believe it or not, it is all true. It is all real. Maybe all it takes is for us to want to believe—or even *to want to want to believe*. And even if today we do not want to believe, Christ in His love and mercy and trust in Our Father knows that one day, we will.