

Second Sunday of Easter
April 8, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Bob Becker

Doubting Thomas

This past week I was in Virginia Hospital Center to visit a parishioner. After my visit I made it to the lobby to ask somebody how to get to parking level G-2. A kindly elderly volunteer directed me to the right elevator and I hobbled off with my cane in hand.

That may have been a tip off for another elderly volunteer come up to me and offered to take me to G-2 in his wheelchair. "Nah," I said. "I'm ok with my cane. Thanks though." But he insisted. "God put me here to help people" he said. "And today, I'm here to help you."

Can't argue with that. So I plumped myself in the wheelchair and off we went. On the way, I noticed he had a plastic picture of Mary and Jesus pinned to his lapel.

When I asked him about the picture, he explained that 27 years ago he had been attacked by a young man with a knife who sliced him from his stomach to his throat.

"I knew I was about to die," the old man recalled. "But I did say a quick prayer to God before everything turned black. 'Lord forgive me for my sins and forgive me for doubting you.' The next thing I remember," he said, I was lying in a bed in a hospital, all stitched up and still alive. Jesus had given me a new life and a mission for my life. And this is it."

This delightful old man taught me two lessons that morning. First, Jesus is really beside us all through our lives. Despite our doubts. He's just there even when we discount his presence. Or ignore his love for us.

The second lesson that man taught me was something I'd never considered: Jesus doesn't wait for us to call out to him.

He comes to us unexpected and unbidden. He takes the initiative to save us, not we, ourselves. I think that little lesson goes to the very heart of this story about Thomas. For some reason, Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus suddenly appears to them. During the week that followed they tell him about Jesus' appearance. But he discards the story. He not only doubted the story. He discounted the possibility that Jesus was alive. A short step from unbelief.

Reminds us of the story Mark tells of the father who begged Jesus to heal his epileptic son. When Jesus tells the father, "All things can be done for the one who believes, the man cries out "I believe; help my unbelief."

Thomas' momentary unbelief brands him forever as Doubting Thomas.

I wince to tell you this. But we all are doubters. We live in a society which discourages us from trusting anyone with information about our lives. It's like a war between our need to protect our privacy and someone else's scam to invade our private lives and even stripping us of our identity.

My favorite caller is the guy who calls me from somewhere in India. He calls about once a month to tell me he's a representative of Microsoft and he's detected a virus in my computer. For \$300 bucks he can fix the problem. All I have to do is turn on my computer and give him my VISA card number. No wonder we've become a nation of doubters.

But I sometimes fear that we also let our doubts overcome our trust and belief in Jesus.

For the past couple years, I've interviewed hundreds of people who have lost loved ones. These people have one thing in common: they all are in bereavement. A shadow of sorrow that never goes away. Invariably, they want to know "Where was Jesus when we needed him?" Why has God abandoned us?" Many of these folks also express deeply rooted anger. A common reaction to grief that gets in the way of seeing Jesus in their search for meaning and solace.

All of those reactions came to life for me the day I visited a family in the hospital where the mother had just passed. The mother's three adult sons were in the room when I arrived. It was clear that she had been the cornerstone of their lives. And now their grief had turned into anger and distrust of anyone who would invade their sorrow and loss. I didn't have a collar on that day. Which prompted them to demand, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

What can you say to these young men who were struggling to understand how and why their mother had died? I explained that I was a volunteer chaplain and I simply wanted to visit them and offer some prayers. One brother replied, "Our mother raised us to believe in God and Jesus." But another brother's anger erupted when he demanded, "Where was this loving God you talk about when our mother was sick."

I just spoke whatever came out of my mouth and said, "He was right here," I said. "He's still with you right now and he was with your mom during her illness and death. His love for her and for you is for real." It seemed like another voice had come out of my mouth.

Then I asked them to look at their mother lying on the bed. "Look at her face. It's a face of peace. It's the peace Jesus gave her this morning. He's in this room with you. He's been with the three of you your whole lives. He will remain with you in the days and months ahead. That's what your mom taught you to believe."

That is St. John's message as well. He wrote his gospel toward the end of the first century when non-believers and Jewish believers were struggling with what to believe about this Jesus.

I think there are times when we struggle like those early Christians and as Thomas did.

St. John is teaching us a new lesson in this story. Expect and believe in the resurrected Christ who comes to us unbidden and unexpected to rescue us in times of doubt and despair.

Toward the end of the Letter to the Hebrews Jesus makes this promise to all of us: "I will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid. Or Doubt."