

Skeptic Sunday Easter 2C

Flying to Washington DC this past week my plane had a problem with its wheel and we had an hour and a half delay not uncommon into today's travel experience. No one complained and I suppose passengers felt good about the attention to safety.

Unlike the passengers on a small commuter plane that were waiting for their flight to leave.

They were getting a little impatient, but the airport staff assures them that the pilots will arrive soon, and the flight can take off.

The door opens, and two men dressed in pilot's uniforms walk up the aisles. Both are wearing dark glasses, one is using a Seeing Eye dog, and the other is tapping his way up the aisle with a cane.

Nervous laughter spreads through the cabin but the men enter the cockpit, the door closes, and the engines start up.

The passengers begin glancing nervously around, searching for some sign that this is just a little practical joke. None is forthcoming.

The plane moves faster and faster down the runway, and the people at the windows realize that they're headed straight for the water at the edge of the airport runway.

As it begins to look as though the plane will plow into the water, panicked screams fill the cabin.

At that moment, the plane lifts smoothly into the air. The passengers relax and laugh a little sheepishly, and soon all retreat into their magazines, secure in the knowledge that the plane is in good hands.

In the cockpit, the co-pilot turns to the pilot and says, "You know, Bob, one of these days, they're gonna scream too late, and we're all gonna die."

The Sunday after Easter is known as Joke Sunday. The joke is on death. The power of Christ's resurrection leads us to laugh at what is certain in this life. The Christian Faith tells us that death's punch line is not the last laugh.

Yet there are those nagging questions that plague skeptics, like Thomas. "What if" questions are a driving force of pop-culture curiosity. "What if Jesus actually fathered a child? (*Da Vinci Code*) What if aliens invade Earth (*E.T.*, *Alien*, *War of the Worlds*)?"

Consider the "what ifs" that make up our doubting adult thought patterns. What if I moved to a warmer state? What if I go back to

school and change jobs? What if I never had children? What if I hit the lottery?

One of the only places that “what if” *isn't* a normal part of our thought processing is the church: “What if God didn't exist?” Hey, don't ask that question here!

We've not always handled our outside inquisitors, our faith-teetering skeptics and our wearied doubters with gracious elegance and honest engagement. This can happen in the Episcopal Church though we say, this is a place where your spirit can connect without disconnecting your mind!

”So what if Jesus stayed in the ground after Easter?”

That wasn't just a “what if” for the disciples. That was their soul-shattered reality. Jesus was indeed God in the flesh raised from the dead, but for the first three days after the tomb they had no way of knowing. They found themselves suddenly living in a world that imploded.

We have to stop and put ourselves into their experience. These were confused faith-misfits who appeared to be totally wrong about the King of the new kingdom. Their rabbi was dead, and now they feared what could happen to them (v. 19). Imagine all the haunting “what-if” questions they thought of, based on what they had seen and heard for the last three years.

To summarize their world in one word, it would be “doubt.” So how does God engage his skeptics?

Jesus meets with them behind closed doors that first week of Easter. But in that room, what did the 10 disciples experience? Their world-ending fear was turned back into the joy they had hoped in (v. 20). Their secluded gathering is turned into a powerful commissioning (v. 21). Their despair was turned into the tangible presence of the eternal Lord and the empowering Holy Spirit.

In short, they had a spiritual awakening.

But only 10 of them had that experience. One of the 12 may have never believed in the Christ and killed himself. Another of the 12, Thomas, was still an outsider to the Christ the 10 had experienced. He was still locked in the tomb of doubts.

What was the experience of Thomas? Was he so distraught that

he just needed to be alone? Was he bitter and hardened because all he had learned of Jesus seemed a lie? Did his mind refuse to permit the supernatural so he had to redefine these Jesus sightings as merely psychological phenomena? The text doesn't tell us, but this is what our Thomases today tell us.

Their prayers seem to bounce off of the ceiling. They don't know how to relate to an invisible God. Life is hard so God hardly seems loving. They are beset with disbelief as they watch hypocritical church leaders ensconced in scandal. Pain is a problem, dinosaurs have evolved, and the supernatural is unnatural.

So when the 10 report on what they had just experienced, Thomas the skeptic could not relate to their experience. Thomas needed tangible proof (v. 25), and he's merely expressing sentiments that countless pilgrims after him will echo. Jesus appeared to Paul, why doesn't he appear to me? God spoke audibly to Moses, so why don't I get a burning bush? God gave Gideon a wet fleece, so why won't he tell me his will for my life?

We read that when Jesus did return to visit the disciples it was a week later (v. 26). What was that week like for Thomas? Though he may have felt alienation from what he believed he was welcomed back into his community. Those in doubt need community, but tend to avoid it. It's like people who get laid off and no longer easily pal around at happy hour with those still gainfully employed by the company. It's like alcoholics who, rightly, cut distance from the old party crowd. After all, their community holds dearly to things they are questioning and wrestling with.

As Jesus returns to engage his last doubting disciple, he appears as dramatically as he did when he met with the 10. He offers the same ironic words "Peace be with you" to Thomas who is miles away from peace at that point (v. 26). And to further his understanding Jesus gives what Thomas needs: he provides tactile evidence of himself as living and risen (v. 27).

As we encounter those who doubt, we remember that God knows their needs more than we do. Perhaps he is testing and strengthening them through their exploration. Perhaps they need to lay down their idol god or their ideal god in favor of the Real God. In any case, God knows best what they need and God is working their doubt, like all things, for their good (Romans 8:28). Therefore, there is no better way to partner with people in their doubt than to pray that in his kindness God would address their deepest needs and make

known the ways he is shaping them through their questioning.

But God reaches out to those of little faith.

Jesus gave Thomas the help he needed even when he was in a “what-if?” mode. Even though Thomas was wondering “What if Jesus is still in the tomb?” Jesus still was willing to meet him in the vortex where faith and doubt intersect.

Today many in our churches stand in the legacy of Thomas. How do you engage a God who seems as unable to touch us as we him? But as was the case with Thomas, when the Way, the Truth and the Life engages the doubter, Christian reality prevails. “My Lord and my God” he cried.

Can we embrace, dignify, and journey with those inside and outside of the church who have doubts of the risen Christ? If so we will strengthen the blessed that Jesus spoke of: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29). May we pray and seek God asking him to help us reach out to visitors, un-churched friends and neighbors. Let us pray....Amen.