

So the news is out. It's all over town. Alleluia! Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead. (And you say: The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia!) If you, like Thomas, have been away – it was spring break for many after all -- I'll let the disciples from John's Gospel catch you up with the events of the past week. I think they would have described it something like this:

*So you remember what happened to Jesus a week ago Friday, right, how he was crucified right before Passover? So most of us didn't see it either – we went into hiding, figuring we were next. We ended up here, in the place where we ate the night before, laying low.*

*Then Sunday afternoon, Mary of Magdala came bursting in, insisting that she had met the Lord. She told us how she went to the tomb, and found it empty. She thought Jesus' body had been stolen. Then she said that later, Jesus himself appeared, and she said she didn't recognize him until he said her name, Mary. And she cried out Rabbouni, teacher. That he sent her to us with the strange message that he was ascending to his father and our father, his God and our God.*

*So we were all like, No Way, but you know Mary, she's not the hysterical type. If she says it's true, it's true. But we weren't taking any chances, and we kept the doors locked. Then that night, all of the sudden Jesus was standing there among us. And he says "Peace be With You" and I'm telling you peace was the last thing we were feeling.*

*So he shows us his hands, where they nailed him to the cross and his side, where they stuck him with the sword. And we couldn't deny it was the Lord. He was alive. And we kind of lost it there, we were so happy.*

*Then Jesus told us he was sending us out, like he had been sent -- to bring God's forgiveness, God's freedom. He breathed the Holy Spirit on us like a sigh. And it brought us to life.*

*So that was last week. Thomas wasn't there. He didn't join us until today. And this is the story we told him. Do you believe us? Cause Thomas didn't ... at first.*

And so we arrive here, first Sunday after Easter, and the question for us is the same as the one for Thomas: Do you believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? Because you gotta believe it in order to see it. Believing is seeing in the Gospel of John.

Now who doesn't love the story of Doubting Thomas? I think he might be the patron saint of Episcopalians. We get how he would only believe if he could see and touch the actual wounds of Jesus. Then Christ appeared and called his bluff. And it turned out Thomas didn't need to see those wounds or touch them. He believed. Then he saw – not just Jesus but God. Thomas is the only person in the Gospels to put the two together. Pretty good for a doubter.

John in his Resurrection story uses all these personal encounters with Jesus – Mary of Magdala, Peter, the Beloved Disciple, the folks in the locked house, Thomas -- to remind his post-Easter audience what belief in Jesus really is. Because for all of these, recognizing the risen Christ did not happen until they believed that's who was in front of them. Before that they don't really know who they're looking at.

And I think that's true for us as well. We call this seeing with the eye of faith – and actually opening that eye requires a graced mix of relationships, of stories told in Christian community, of chance encounters with Jesus himself. And when that eye finally opens, faith knows who it was looking at all along. You gotta believe it to see it.

So I wanted to ask you today: When have you recognized Jesus in this way, when have you found the pieces falling together in a way that opened your eye of faith? Then I realized it wasn't fair to ask you unless I could come up with an example for myself. And I remembered this story, which happened to me about 20 years ago

We had just moved to Baltimore, where we lived for two years. I would occasionally take the light rail to work. Several hundred of us would gather within the sealed doors of the train that would take us downtown to Baltimore. One morning a man got on at the Woodbury stop. He was tall and thin, rather striking, and he wore a black baseball cap with white letters that said "Believe" across the front – a souvenir from a city PR campaign. He stood at the head of the car and in a commanding voice announced, "My name is Ezekiel and I'm a poet from New York city, and I'd like to share some poetry with you." Then he launched into some incomprehensible verses after which he took off his hat, held it in front of him and walked down the aisle of the car as though taking a collection. And I thought. So, this is Baltimore.

The same thing happened again some days later. The same name: Ezekiel, same hat: Believe, same story: Poet from New York City. A few nasty comments from some passengers stopped him in his tracks though, and he sat down angrily across the aisle from me. And then something came over me. I'm not sure what it was, but I felt compelled to break the unwritten rule of non-engagement in the light rail. It felt a little like either the Spirit of God or the spirit of stupidity. I said: I'd like to hear a poem. And Ezekiel smiled and began to recite. Then he told me about himself – a story as strange and convoluted as his poetry. He showed me a scar on his leg from a wound that he said he got in prison – it went all the way through to the other side. He told me about his kids. And he told me his name: it was Fred.

Weeks passed on the light rail commute. No Ezekiel. No poetry. One evening on the commute home from downtown, we all found ourselves dangerously packed together on the train, which was short on cars and running late. People were anxious and unsettled. We lacked air. Then an argument broke out. Two men, obviously drunk, were shouting at each other. Which was alarming in downtown Baltimore, where people are often armed. I stood on tip-toe to see who was fighting and recognized – the face of Ezekiel the poet way up in the grill of a man who was clearly about to blow.

"I know that guy" I heard myself say. And then something came over me. I'm not sure what it was, but I felt compelled to break the unwritten rule of non-engagement in the light rail. It felt like either the Spirit of God or the spirit of stupidity. I found myself pushing my way through the bodies until I got up to the two men and I heard myself say: "Hey Fred." Ezekiel looked me in the eye. "Can I hear one of your poems?"

And the tension broke. The poem started. The train stopped. Someone had reported the fight to the driver, who called the authorities. Another train pulled up to remove the passengers. Fred and I sat together while our car emptied out. Police arrived. The poems ended. Then Fred said "I think I have some people waiting for me." And he stepped off the train, shared some choice words with the waiting cops, and I never saw him again.

This is the story that comes to mind for me when I ask myself: when has Jesus walked through the closed doors of my life and said Peace be With You? This is the memory that surfaces when I ask myself, when has the Holy Spirit entered my lungs like a breath or a gasp, inviting a face-to-face meeting, even for a short time? When did the strange pieces fall together in such a way that I recognized the Risen Christ? Was it a poem in a train car? Was it the recognition of a name?

Was it the Word on a Ballcap?

Maybe that. Because sometimes you gotta Believe in order to See.

Amen.