

Experiencing Resurrection

Easter 2 (A)

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Peter is probably my favorite disciple. I identify with Peter. He means well — his heart is in the right place — but he's often impulsive and kind of clueless. So frequently in the Gospels, Peter says or does the wrong thing, at one point earning Jesus's rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan!" And yet, he is the rock on which the Church was built. In this morning's first reading, we hear Peter proclaiming the resurrection. Peter's name is attached to the beautiful words of this morning's epistle. Despite his flaws, Peter wants to do the right thing, and his heart is firmly tied to Jesus. All of us can probably identify with that.

But if I had to pick a second-favorite disciple, it would be Thomas. Thomas gets a bad rap. He doesn't deserve the scorn heaped on him for millennia for being "doubting Thomas" — an epithet based on the Gospel story we heard this morning.

Thomas isn't satisfied with words. With hearsay. Thomas longs to experience the risen Lord, as his brethren did. It's hard to fault him for that.

Experience is the best teacher, so they say. That's certainly true for me. Today, I'd like to share my most profound experience of God. It's appropriate for Eastertide because it's a story of resurrection.

It was April 25, 1999 — almost 24 years ago — and my father was dying of cancer. He was here in Rochester, where he had been living with Ian and the kids and me while he had treatment. The tumor had progressed rapidly, and we knew it was a matter of hours. Dad was at Methodist Hospital — there hadn't even been time to go to hospice — and my brother and sister had flown in, with their spouses and kids.

I have to say, it was a hospice-like experience because the nurses — God bless the nurses — said they would leave us alone with him, but to call if we needed anything. Dad spoke on the phone with his sister and her family on the Iron Range — heartfelt goodbyes and lots of love — and afterward, he kissed his grandchildren. One by one, as they came up to the bed. Then everyone left, except my brother and sister and me.

Pretty soon, Dad was slipping into unconsciousness. I remember my brother turning off the machine that made the mattress shift, to prevent bed sores. It made a terrible racket. Once that machine was off, a blessed silence settled on the room. Then the three of us climbed into the hospital bed and took Dad into our arms. We just sat and talked — told him what he meant to us. Laughed about some memories. I think I sang a little bit. And we prayed.

I don't have the words to describe the peace in that room. I remember the window faced west, and the sun was setting — brilliant orange and pink. Dad's breathing gradually slowed, and then it stopped. My brother — the oldest — closed his eyes. Very tenderly.

I can tell you that the Holy Spirit was in that room. I can't explain it. But I felt it. I experienced it. I felt my own spirit soaring upward. It was elation.

In the coming days, I grieved, of course; I grieved intensely. But I remember telling close friends that amid my grief, I continued to feel this elation. And I realized it was because I had witnessed resurrection.

Unlike Thomas and the other disciples, in our space and time, we cannot reach out our hands and literally place them in the wounded side of our Lord. But we *can* seek moments of recognition in our own experiences, however profound or mundane. Those times when we feel the light and warmth within us. When we experience beauty or kindness that stops us in our tracks. When we are reminded of God's constant presence, surrounding us and all of creation with love. When we, too, say, "My Lord and my God!"

As Episcopalians, we love to say our faith rests on a stool with three legs: Scripture, tradition and reason. I recently came across a different metaphor for faith: a tricycle. The back wheels of this tricycle are Scripture and tradition; the big front wheel is experience. It is the front wheel of experience that moves our faith tricycle forward.

If we allowed ourselves to be propelled *only* by experience, we'd be unicyclists. Flashy, and maybe fun. Until the cycle starts wobbling, we careen into something, and fall off. We are not solo artists. Our faith is grounded by Scripture and tradition. But experience is essential for moving our faith forward.

Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed are we—who have not seen and yet have come to believe—when we seek the living God, in all persons and in all creation. May we honor that holy longing in ourselves, climb onto our tricycles with open and humble hearts, and pedal forward, in faith. Amen.

--Barbara Toman