

A recent New York Times Magazine article entitled, 'On Libya's Revolutionary Road', written by Robert F. Worth described some of the odd, bizarre, crazy behavior, antics and actions of the Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and ways these actions negatively impacted the lives of ordinary Libyans.

Worth writes about how in Benghazi prior to the current uprising, under Gadhafi's rule, raw sewage was diverted into a lagoon that lay next to the city's downtown, so that a foul stench would drift over the downtown plaza – a snub to the citizens of this city that Ghadaffi had no time for. Worth also describes the lives of several ordinary people who had just had enough and who were driven to desperate actions of resistance against the regime when they reached their breaking points.

The section of the article that most grabbed my attention was where Worth recounts the story of a man named Emad al-Imam who was captured and tortured by Libyan soldiers in the Katiba, a military compound in the heart of Benghazi. After the rebels took control of the city, and the Ghaddafi Army fled, al-Imam woke up in a hospital bed. Gathering his strength he left the hospital, and stumbled his way home only to discover that his family was holding a wake in his memory. This man literally walked into his own funeral.

Something very much like this – someone walking into their own wake - happens in the first section of today's Reading from the Gospel of John. It is the evening of Easter Day, the disciples are shut away behind locked doors, they have the blinds drawn tight, the alarm system is activated. The disciples are fearful, every strange sound causes them to twitch and twitter – and by twitter I don't mean texting 140 characters into their cellphones, which as it happens were all muted and on vibrate, for fear that the new "Thine Be the Glory" ringtones that Mary Magdalene had insisted they all download would attract attention from the authorities. The disciples are sacred out of their minds, their imaginations are in overdrive; they are, as we say in the south, as nervous as long tailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs.

Yes, earlier in the day, when it was daylight, some of them had ventured out just briefly when the confusing, baffling story began to spread that something strange was going on at Jesus' tomb, when some of their friends were reporting that they had seen Jesus alive.... But they hadn't stayed outside long. Like the good townspeople of every Western cowboy town when the gunslinger faced off with the Sherriff they cleared the streets. They felt better, safer, more secure when they were indoors, when they were together, able to lick their wounds, shut away from whatever was going on "out there!", still numb from all they had seen and heard, the sights and sounds of their Master's execution, burial; reeling at the memory of their stunning betrayal, and wondering what would happen next.

It was like it is in most families, maybe even your family – when the distant, awkward part of your family, stays too long after Thanksgiving dinner is finished, or when the extra guest lingers too long after everyone has opened their presents on Christmas Day. There were just too many people, too much emotion unable to be shared, too much worry and stress that couldn't yet be relieved. Things were starting to get musty and moist and uncomfortable. The talk had turned to remembering Jesus, mourning his death, recalling the scene, wondering about the future, when, suddenly in their very midst is Jesus! And Jesus in their midst is speaking, offering the first word, a word of greeting and welcome and reconciliation and forgiveness – "Peace be with you!"

With Jesus' arms outstretched in greeting and friendship they see the marks of the wounds on his bruised and battered, yet somehow strong frame. And in this recognition hope increases, faith returns, awareness is restored, this is Jesus. Jesus is here, right here with them... And a second time, aware that some in the room could not absorb what was happening before their very eyes, their very wide, wild eyes, a second time in Jesus' own voice, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And breathing on them, Jesus offers them the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Helper whom He had previously promised would be with them when He was no longer with them.

After Jesus' departs, poor Thomas returns from the errand he had been running, whistling to relieve his fears and ward off his sadness. In truth Thomas had needed a bit of a break, he needed to escape for a time but he also needs to get back with the group and upon His return the whole scene, the entire atmosphere is different and he cannot take it in. You have seen Jesus? Here? Jesus was here while I was gone? You say you have seen Him, that Jesus was here - unless I see, unless I see with my own eyes, I am not ready to believe. I need to see this, I need to see Jesus for myself. And thus Thomas earned his first nickname, "Doubting Thomas", though truth be told, Thomas never doubted, not fully, not really, he only did what all the disciples had done, he described what it would take for him to believe! All it would take for him to believe was the same as what it took for the others - he needed to see Jesus for himself, to see and touch Him and His wounds and so to know, for sure, that his Jesus, Thomas' Jesus was alive. An encounter with Jesus, a direct encounter, face to face with Jesus is what would draw Thomas back into the flock, re-unite him with the entire group of disciples, and connect him once again with the band of followers and with Jesus Himself.

And so it was, one week later, today in actual fact, that Jesus meets again with the disciples and, thanks be to God, Thomas is there! Truth is Thomas has never stepped out the entire week, he stayed right where he needed to be, right where he thought Jesus would be present once more, how is that for faith! Thomas, not doubting but trusting, waiting, waiting, waiting, a whole week until Jesus bursts into Thomas' view and sight and touch and the reunion was deep and sweet and full Thomas restored in his friendship and fellowship with His Lord and Thomas and the disciples united and reunited in the cry of faith, "My Lord and my God!"

There are many different places, many different ways, many different opportunities and possibilities by which and because of which you and I can be confronted by and comforted by our Lord. There are many means by which we can and are greeted and embraced and welcomed by the Risen Jesus and so gathered into the community of grace and faith that is the Church.

The realization that we are held by the love of the Risen Jesus comes to all of us, and it comes in a whole variety and manner of ways.

Some of us sense the welcome and embrace of our Savior as we read and study scripture OR as we devote time and energy to prayer and meditation OR as we participate in corporate worship.

Some are brought into the nearer and dearer presence of Christ as we sing and make music to the glory of God OR when we serve people in need as we act out a living faith with and for our neighbors OR as we share in group study together.

Some discover a closer nearer experience of God's love when we share love and express care and concern for those who face loss or endure pain OR when we demonstrate care for creation, as they tend their garden or as they seek to be good and faithful stewards of all the resources with which God has blessed us in Creation.

Today we have the opportunity to see members of our church's Green Team share in leading elements of our Services. Our Green Team exists out of the desire to remember that our God is a very worldly God who desires that we care for the fabric of this world. The Green Team acts to remind all of us to use resources wisely, to steward and care for creation. All elements of the ministry undertaken by the Green Team make it possible for some of us and indeed all of us to experience the common call to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ and to be reconciled to one another in order that church results. A church results, a team, a community, a fellowship comes into existence in which God is worshipped and others helped.

Thomas received a new nickname when he was encountered by the direct presence of His Lord and our Lord. Many of us can recall how cruel and hurtful some nicknames can be to those who receive them. I think especially of youth in Middle or High School where a nickname can focus peer pressure and antagonism well beyond what is acceptable behavior.

The new nickname of Thomas was likely something like "faithful" for in the tradition of the early church Thomas traveled far and wide to live out his new nickname and share his experience of Jesus Christ even so far as India, Thomas is revered as the apostle who carried the faith to that land and region.

Faithful Thomas sounds much better than doubting Thomas wouldn't you say? For sure most of us would rather be Richard the Lionheart than Ethelred the Unready; Good King Wenceslas rather than Mad King Ludwig. It is not at all fair that a child fumbles a ball in a schoolyard baseball game and for long after is known as "Butterfingers" or that the smallest kid in the neighborhood is tagged "Pee-wee" or that the roughest kid in town is known as "Bruiser" at least by those afraid of him. Truth is, few people get to choose their own nicknames, and some find it very difficult to escape the first nickname they are given but here in the very midst of an intimate conversation between Jesus and Thomas, new faith results and is given life, a new relationship starts and thrives, and thus a new nickname is required, one that reflects the depth of Thomas' affirmation towards Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" and the forgiveness and welcome that Thomas sense from Jesus His Master and Friend.

The word translated in English as put – as in Thomas saying that he must "put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side" – can be translated as throw in the original Greek. That word gives a sense of vitality and action to what Thomas asks and to how Jesus responds. Many of us know what it means to "throw" ourselves into some cause or effort or mission or ministry. Thomas had "thrown" himself into his search for the truth of the Easter promise, and the risen Christ offers all of himself as the expression of God's love and grace and mercy and forgiveness.

The intimate conversation and encounter between Thomas and Jesus is a powerful invitation and encouragement for each of us to ask questions, to present our spiritual needs, and to persevere until we are helped, fully helped. Thomas demonstrates how we should ask bold questions and what it means to

act boldly and decisively. Jesus shows us how to listen to what is really being said when difficult questions are advanced and how to offer welcome and acceptance to and for the questioner. In the intimate conversation into which Jesus invite all of us, we can each and all discover a renewed faith, a deeper care, a fuller passion, a faith that will change us so we can be about helping change the world around us.

If you have been here all along OR if you have been on the run from God; if you have been avoiding the moment AND if you have hidden behind all manner of distractions; if you have ever been tempted to imagine that you don't matter to God and that Jesus couldn't possibly love you or forgive you or have a purpose for you; if you have been focused only on your own agenda – Jesus would still come to you and say, “Shalom”, Peace, my peace be with you!”

So whoever you are and whatever you have done - very suddenly, when you are least expecting it - Jesus will come and be present to you and with you saying, “Shalom”, “Peace, my peace be with you”. Jesus comes calling, inviting, nudging, welcoming, all of you to live as His friends and disciples. Jesus has a new life for you to live, a renewed purpose to follow, a new nickname to embrace. Jesus sends you out just as the Father sent Him, to live out your faith, your Easter faith. Amen.