

*Do not doubt, but believe*

Last week at work, I had to spend time doing my annual cyber security training. I work for a huge organization - the City of Oklahoma City - and keeping employees trained in the do's and don'ts of safe computing is critically important.

Cybersecurity involves protecting computer devices, networks, and data from unauthorized access or criminal use. Cybersecurity breaches cost companies time, money and embarrassment, causing huge problems from stolen and misused data, a disruption in business operations, and damage to the company's reputation.

So there I was, in the midst of Holy Week and a myriad of other deadlines and responsibilities, watching a series of training videos at my desk.

One video traced the experience of a fictional character named Dakota as she encounters various cybersecurity threats throughout her workday. First, she gets an email saying that she needs to "click on the link below" to set up a meeting with the Personnel Department to discuss her performance. She notices that the information in the email looks strange and is full of misspellings, making her realize it's probably been sent by hackers.

Later, she gets an alarming phone call from the Finance department, saying she's under investigation for misusing her company's credit card. The caller asks for the credit card number so that they can verify the transactions. Fortunately, Dakota suspects this is a spoof attempt to gain her company's protected data and she hangs up the phone.

Finally, after this very stressful day at work, Dakota stops by her favorite coffee shop where she receives a text saying she's just won a Peloton exercise bike; all she has to do is click on the link provided and the equipment will be delivered to her. She is very excited to have won, and is just about to click on the link when she realizes this is likely yet another phishing scheme designed to provide hackers with a way to overtake her personal data.

We don't have to know much about cybersecurity risks to understand Dakota's skepticism of these encounters. In our modern world, it seems it's getting more and more difficult to know who or what to trust. The random phone call from an unfamiliar number, the e-mail asking for our help with an unknown charity in another country, the online advertisements that populate our screens. It's hard not to feel like we are being

constantly targeted, cajoled, or deceived. To protect ourselves, we've been trained to be instantly suspicious of almost anything new that's in front of us.

So it's pretty easy for us to understand what appears to be Thomas' skepticism of the new world he has just encountered through the other disciples' story of their experience with the risen Christ.

It's the evening of the day of the resurrection. Remember, Mary Magdalene had discovered the tomb empty that morning, and had rushed to tell the other disciples.

Frightened that the authorities might come after them and persecute them also, the disciples (not including Thomas) were hiding inside their home.

Jesus comes to greet them, his body still bearing the wounds of his crucifixion but obviously very much alive. The disciples are thrilled to see him, and in this moment of joy, Jesus breathed on them to bestow the Holy Spirit upon them. It is the Holy Spirit that will empower their ministry going forward.

When the disciples see Thomas again and tell him what they have experienced, he appears dubious. How can he know this is legitimate, that it isn't a spoof or phishing attempt designed to prey on his emotions and manipulate him into doing something dangerous? How can he know that he can safely, wonderfully let Jesus into his space, and not be taken advantage of?

One thing that makes cybersecurity attacks so effective is that they play on our emotions. Dakota desperately wanted to clear her name of fraud allegations, so she was tempted to divulge her personal data. She was so excited at the idea of winning an exercise bike that she almost clicked on the fraudulent link.

Thomas was unimaginably excited at the prospect that his faith had been realized. He expected Jesus to rise from the dead, he expected Jesus to reveal himself to the disciples, and he expected to be empowered to continue his ministry.

It's not that Thomas' faith was wavering. In John, Chapter 14, when Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for his followers, it is Thomas who responds, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?". He was always trying to understand Christ's kingdom and his place in it.

After the crucifixion, Thomas' faith was as strong as ever, and perhaps even stronger.

Some writers have proposed that the reason Thomas wasn't in the house with the other disciples was because he was already out sharing the Good News and serving the community. Like Mary Magdalene, he knew he had to run and tell others immediately about the miracle of the risen Christ.

Thomas didn't have time to stop and mourn after the crucifixion; as a dedicated disciple of Christ, Thomas was excited and impassioned to begin the work that the disciples had been called to do after Jesus' death: teaching others to follow Christ, welcoming others into Christ's communion through baptism, and serving the needs of the community by comforting the sick and poor.

It was the other disciples, not Thomas, who were living in fear, who had locked themselves away from the community, and who were literally hiding behind security walls.

When Thomas says "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe", perhaps he is simply acknowledging his desire to be drawn so close to his Savior that he experiences Christ's wounds and experiences Christ's suffering first hand. Where faith is concerned, sometimes a second-hand experience just won't do. We have to experience it for ourselves.

Perhaps in this moment, we are witnessing the fulfillment of Thomas' deepest desire to truly touch and know the one, only, and true Living God.

Perhaps Thomas' exclamation, "My Lord and my God" isn't as much of a discovery as it is an affirmation and declaration of his longstanding and deeply rooted faith.

Perhaps Jesus's response that "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" is not an admonishment, but instead a recognition of Thomas' strong and sincere faith that he has already put into action, before he met the resurrected Christ himself.

Like Thomas, may we also not be afraid to experience the one, truly, and living God, and dedicate ourselves to knowing him more fully through worship, study, and service. May we recognize Jesus not as an unknown imposter but as a life-giving spirit. May we allow Jesus to pass through our walls and security systems and liberate us from

whatever prevents us from having life through him, and having it in all its fullness” (John 10:10). Amen.

References:

<https://sacredspace.com/scripture/john-2019-31/>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/thomas-2/commentary-on-john-2019-31-17#:~:text=Thomas'%20belief%20that%20he%20could,could%20be%20asked%20or%20imagined.>