

April 16, Easter 2A (*John 20:19-31*)

There is a blessing for those who have not come to believe and yet keep trying to see.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

Before I went to seminary, I dated an atheist for a few months. He was a doctoral student in philosophy at the University of Chicago, specializing in ethics. He did not believe in God and thought religion was a joke. But the man couldn't stay away from church. In fact, I met him in an inquirer's class at our local Episcopal parish. We got to know each other during a car ride with some friends, driving back late at night from Easter Vigil at the cathedral where some of our friends were confirmed.

He told me he was endlessly fascinated that people whom he deeply respected, who were clearly highly intelligent, believed in things he could not. He felt there was something good about church people—a goodness he felt drawn to. He said he had no capacity for faith or belief, but it haunted him all the same.

He reminds me of a Jewish story about an avowed atheist who goes to synagogue every week. When asked why, the atheist replies: "I don't believe in God, but I know old Mr. Goldberg does. I come to sit next to Mr. Goldberg. Goldberg talks to God, and I come to talk to Goldberg." Maybe my atheist boyfriend was dating me in part because I was talking to God, and then he could talk to me. We broke up, and two decades later, I'm not sure whether he attends church anymore. But during my ordination liturgy, four years after our breakup, I looked up and saw him in the back of the cathedral. He didn't stay to greet me, but he was there.

I have known a number of atheists, agnostics, and doubters in the pews during my time as a parish priest. The churches I have been part of made room for them. Some came to sit with a believing spouse. Some came to sing in the choir. Some were teenagers whose parents made them come. One was brave enough to ask to meet me for coffee, and she told me she didn't think she believed in God and she certainly never felt anything when she received communion—what did this mean? I do not remember what I said to her, just that I felt wholly inadequate trying to explain how

spiritual presence did or did not happen to people.

A friend said to me recently, "Faith is a gift." Belief happens through grace, not effort, the church often says. We either have it or we don't. The lousy thing about the story of Doubting Thomas is that when he confesses that he cannot believe, Jesus comes right into the room to show him. Not only that, Jesus asks Thomas to touch him. Why didn't this happen to the teenager who met me for coffee, who was all but asking for it to happen?

I used to be the kind of Christian who might say that all we need to do is ask Jesus to come to us and he will. That Jesus invites us to touch him in the Eucharist, in the water of baptism, in the hands and embraces of other people, and we will be sure to meet him there. After 15 years in ministry, I simultaneously believe this is true and know that meeting Jesus or feeling God's presence is not that simple.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." I also believe that there is a blessing for those who have not come to believe and yet keep trying to see. Perhaps there is even a blessing for those who have tried and given up. As [Debie Thomas said recently, "God is fully present in the absence and the hunger, just as God is fully present in the communion and the feast."](#)