

St. James Lutheran Church  
Easter 2  
April 11, 2010  
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First Reading: Acts 5:27-32  
Second Reading: Revelation 1:4-8  
Gospel: John 20:19-31

## Believing

As Christians we don't believe in the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed. Likewise, we don't believe in the bible. Instead, we believe in God. We believe in the God who speaks to us and is made known to us through the scriptures. We believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as we say each week in the creeds. The creeds express our faith – they are not the focus of our faith.

Christians have been described as Easter people. There is a Christian Church because of what happened on Easter – because of the resurrection. Easter faith, however, is not faith in the doctrine of resurrection – it is faith in a person: the person of Jesus Christ.

Now please don't misunderstand or misquote me! The scriptures and doctrines and creeds are valuable and needed – but ultimately, our faith is in a person with a story, not in an idea or a theology or a set of rules. (There will be no bibles or creeds in heaven – no need)

This is why the apostle Thomas wanted to see Jesus in person – just as all the others had seen him in person on that first Easter evening. His faith depended on Jesus – not on what others said about Jesus. And so when Thomas came face to face with the risen Lord, his immediate response was not: “These propositions of resurrection must be true.” No, he responds in worship and adoration, saying: “My Lord and my God!” His faith is personal and passionate – not abstract or conceptual.

Our faith is also personal. We don't believe in a set of doctrines about Jesus, we believe in Jesus. We believe even without benefit of seeing Jesus with our own eyes. In a way we are like the blind man whom Jesus heals in chapter 9 of John's Gospel. Before ever laying eyes on Jesus, that man comes to believe he is God's son.

Jesus commends such faith in the words he speaks to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This is the whole purpose of John's gospel, the entire aim of telling the Christ story: not to share information, but to stimulate faith formation. John puts his cards on the table quite openly: “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John doesn't say: “so that you have to believe”, but “so that you may come to believe”, so you have the opportunity to believe.

The gospels are the window through which we can see and hear Jesus, we can experience the reality of Jesus. They are not biographies that tell us about Jesus. They are the good news of Jesus, providing direct access to the person Jesus. You and I are afforded the opportunity to believe, not in a system or a philosophy, but in this person, who is Lord and Savior, God's own Son come down to earth. And the direct consequence of believing is a new kind of life – life in his name, abundant life full of goodness and mercy.

All the same, believing in Jesus is no easy thing. Thomas is hardly the only one who had a hard time believing. It was difficult for all the disciples. Recall our gospel story from last Sunday. The women came running from the empty tomb with exciting news of Christ's resurrection – but those disciples could not believe it, not at first. They dismissed this report as an idle tale.

Even with the benefit of 20 centuries of hindsight, it can be hard for us to believe today. We live in an age of science and technology, where facts need to be tested and proven. We struggle to believe what we can't see. Faith is challenged by all the pain and suffering and injustice that are ever present in this world. In our time there is a surge of Atheism. A number of prominent authors have published books aggressively determined to deny the reality of God and Jesus Christ. These cultured despisers are quick to mock anyone who would believe in a living, loving God.

Actually, for those of us who claim the name "Christian", atheism is not a great threat. Few are tempted to stop believing altogether. The real challenge is: Can I believe the whole thing? Can I depend on all God's promises? It's tempting to hedge our bets a bit – to hang back a little – to go part way- to wait and see.

Which is why I want to return to a statement I quoted last Sunday. Peter Vardy lays out the alternatives: "Either Christianity is true or it's false. What it cannot be is a little bit true." That's a path some would like to follow: "I believe some of this Christian stuff – just not all of it." That option isn't available to us. Christ isn't partially raised from the dead. There isn't a vague and fussy middle ground where we can abide. It's true or false. And Vardy continues: "If it is true, then it demands that everything take second place to living our relationship with God."

This is the truly hard part about believing: believing in God, believing Christ is alive has consequences! John says that through believing we have life in Christ's name – which is a rich and tremendous blessing, a life full of grace.

Yet to live in Christ's name is also a tremendous challenge.

- \* Consider those first disciples. As they came to believe, they were transformed. They took on the awesome responsibility of continuing Christ's mission: going into all the world to make disciples. Our First Reading from Acts tells how Peter and John defied the authorities – the same authorities who had Jesus crucified. Peter and John say: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Ultimately, such defiant faith cost most of the apostle's their lives. Christian history is filled with stories of those who were willing to die for their faith.
- \* You and I may not face any threats on our lives for believing, but believing still means living against the flow. Believing means going against the usual ways of this world.

Consider two instances from today's gospel.

- A. The risen Jesus comes speaking Peace. Over and over Jesus seeks to assure his followers that he comes not to reprimand them, but to bring peace. You and I are called to believe in this peace that the world can't give. And believing means living our lives in that peace. It means keeping our heads when everyone around us is losing theirs. It means refusing to operate with the anxiety this world

generates. It means being willing to keep Sabbath – trusting that it all doesn't depend on what we are able to do, trusting God to provide. It means refusing to buy into all the frivolous appetites that this world proposes. It involves living as active instruments of God's peace, bringing light and joy where there is darkness and despair.

- B. The other thing the Risen Jesus speaks of is forgiveness. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” Getting forgiveness is great – yet in order to truly receive it, we must acknowledge that we need it: admitting our failures, incompleteness, and self-centeredness. And we can only be blessed by forgiveness when we are willing to extend it to others. Forgiving is risky and costly business. It includes loving enemies, blessing those who persecute us, setting aside all notions of getting even. It is an absolute contradiction to say something like: “Oh I believe in Jesus – I just don't believe in forgiving everyone.” (We may not ever say such a thing – we might just think it.)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us of the responsibility that comes with believing: “Only the one who believes obeys, and only the one who obeys believes.”

It's hard alright!

Which brings to mind one of Martin Luther's crucial insights: That we can't believe by our own strength. That believing is not a matter of intellectual assent or rational choice. “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him.” Faith is the working of the Holy Spirit. Which is why Jesus gives the gift of the Holy Spirit as his parting gift: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” You and I can't believe without it!

Believing is a blessed and tenuous endeavor. Authentic faith can be a fragile thing – just like love. It's strong, yet vulnerable (like a finely spun spider web).

To love is always to expose yourself to disappointment.

To believe is to step into the unknown, to break new ground.

Fortunately, our faith is not in our faith or in ourselves. We are saved not by our beliefs, but by the One on whom our faith depends: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen