

Stop Doubting and Believe!

John 20: 19 - 31

I remember a story that an old preacher told in a chapel service way back when I was going to school in Kentucky. I can't do the Kentucky accent any more, so I'll have to give it to you 'straight', but this guy was from out in a hollow somewhere, and had one of those great Southern story-telling voices.

He told us about a boy that he knew of some years before, back before the days of mass communication, internet, dish networks, and all that... a boy about 10 years old who came from one of those little Eastern Kentucky towns stuck in between a couple of the Appalachian foothills, out there surrounded by coal mines and tobacco farms. Life was hard for this family; the Depression was 'over' but word hadn't yet reached this part of the world and every day was a struggle.

Well, one day this boy was delivering something from the family farm into the 'town center' (for whatever that was worth) ... and while he was there he saw posters that were plastered on every storefront window: bright, colorful posters announcing that in a couple of weeks a traveling circus was coming to town. The boy's imagination was peaked, and images of elephants, trapeze artists, clowns, acrobats, and all the rest ran through his head. He had never been to a circus – no one in this neck of the woods had, either.

All the way home it was all he could think about. "If only I could go!" But the chances were slim... admission was a dollar... and he had no money at all. He also knew that his dad, although a good man, just didn't have a dollar to spare. But he had to ask, so he got home and went to his dad, and ... and he asked him. "I'd really love to go to the circus in two weeks. I know it cost a lot of money, but I'll do extra chores... whatever it takes I'll do it."

His dad knew that life hadn't been easy for any of them recently; as a single parent, there were lots of responsibilities on him and even though he tried, truth be told, there wasn't a whole lot of fun or laughter in this household. So, dad figured out a way that this boy could do some extra chores and he would in turn, get his dollar. He could go to the circus!

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Well, as you can imagine, this little guy hardly could sleep for the next two weeks! He did all his extra chores – and *more* – just out of the joy of anticipating the things he was going to see.

It seemed like forever, but finally the big day arrived. And the boy walked early into town, he didn't want to miss anything, a dollar coin in his pocket. Just before noon he heard it... drums beating, horns playing, a general sense of excitement building in the air. And he stood there on Main Street and watched as the great procession made its way to the circus grounds. What a parade! He had never seen anything like this before - it was better than any of his imaginings.

Clowns, elephants majestically pulling painted wagons with all sorts of exotic animals in them, tumblers in the street, men on stilts, jugglers it was overwhelming.

The last of the parade passed by. And the boy put his hand in his pocket and there was his dollar coin! Well, he was taught to be honest. And he certainly didn't want to cheat anybody. So he stopped a man standing nearby and asked him, "Excuse me sir, who do I pay?"

The man said, "I'll take it!" And he did.

And the boy went home.

Last week was an incredible week, wasn't it? The entire week, building, building... and the worship services on Sunday morning were probably the most energized services that I've ever been involved in. God was here. Powerfully!

But you may have noticed that we're probably not going to reach 1,250 people here *this* weekend. And I certainly don't say that out of frustration or anger, or anything like that - we had a lot of guests here to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord with us last weekend, and we were honored by the presence of every one of them. And our prayers are with everyone who was with us last weekend – whether they are local or came from a distance, as well as our regulars, and I hope that there are some who have come back today, who were here last week for the first time.

I think of that story about the boy and the circus parade often after Easter. We had a great celebration last week, as I said. But in so many ways, a worship service, no matter how powerful

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the music is, how beautiful the floral arrangements, how timely the message and all that, a worship service in itself is kind of like the circus *parade* compared to the circus itself.

We talked about a lot of stuff last week – about God’s promises, about victories, about spiritual realities that have shifted in the universe because of the Resurrection. And as we told the story – through words, and music, and scripture, dance, and mostly through the power of the Holy Spirit that was so obviously among us – as we did all this, hearts were touched. I’ve been overwhelmed, amazed, at the things I’ve been hearing. Emails, text messages, personal contacts, voice mails, on and on.

But, you see, I know that *hearing* about these things is not the same thing as *experiencing* them. If someone’s heart was touched, if there was anyone who left one of our services last weekend, or on Holy Thursday, or Good Friday (out of the something like 1,700 people who were here!) one person who heard the call of Christ in their hearts, saying, “Follow me!” “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life!,” one person who hear: “this was for *you*” – if people heard this, then the first part of our task was accomplished.

And praise God for that! Praise God for the musicians, the Sunday School teachers, the youth leaders, who helped everything come together over the course of Lent/ Easter. Praise God for our ushers and greeters, the worship committee, and all those who decorated the building; praise God for the people in our congregation who invited your friends, neighbors and family members to “Come and see!” Praise God for the faithful prayer warriors of this church who make *everything* go! We would not have had a weekend like last weekend without hours of people on your knees interceding for our community.

Praise God for all of you, but listen... our work isn’t finished!

People have seen the ‘parade’, now, we want to invite them into the ‘big top’. (I need to be careful how far I press that picture, don’t I? “Hey, come in and join the rest of us clowns!” I can hear it now.) but you know what I’m saying: there is more to this! Much, much more!

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And when God engages our hearts, when we not only hear about these wonderful things, but *experience them*, when we allow the realities of Christ to touch the core of our being... then services like last week take on even greater meaning for us.

And there are many people who haven't yet come to that place. Maybe you know some of them. Maybe you *are* one of them? If so, I simply share with you the words of Jesus to one of his disciples... to a man named Thomas, who has kept a pretty dubious nickname over the past 2,000 years: "Doubting".

The one who said, "Yes, yes, I've heard all the stories... I heard the testimonies of people that I've known well for a long time. I know their character, I can't imagine that they would lie... and yet, this is just too much for me to believe. People do not come back from the dead."

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Well, Jesus appeared to Thomas. One week later. And Jesus gave him that invitation that we've come to know so well – *"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

Erik Weihenmayer, is a blind mountaineer who recently successfully scaled Mount Everest. He writes in Outside magazine:

A few days after I arrived in the Khumbu Valley for the Mount Everest climb, a rumor began circulating. Because I wasn't flopping on my face every few minutes, the Sherpas thought I was lying about my blindness. Women would approach me in the alleys of the Namche Bazaar and wave their hands in front of my face. I'd feel the wind and flinch, which only confirmed their suspicions.

Finally, I resorted to drastic measures. I asked Kami Tenzing, our climbing sirdar, into the kitchen tent. "Kami," I said, "I want to give you a message to take back to the Sherpas." I pulled down my left lower eyelid, leaned my head forward, and my prosthetic eye plopped into my palm. "I can take the other out if you want," I said. "No!" he said firmly. "Not necessary."¹

¹ Erik Weihenmayer, "Tenacious," *Outside* (December 2001), p.55

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I have to say, as a pastor, constantly I wonder about the same question, an issue raised right from the start with Thomas, and continues to this day – what would it take to help people move from hearing to knowing?

²⁸ *Thomas [saw Jesus and] said to him, “My Lord and my God!”*

²⁹ *Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

Those words of Jesus: “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” are referring to all of *us*! These people who have “not seen and yet believe” are *us*! I wonder: what was it that helped you make that step from head to heart? What was it that convinced you, that even though you weren’t ‘there’ in a physical sense, even though you didn’t have the opportunity to physically touch the wounds of Jesus, yet you have chosen to believe... and now you are **blessed**... what was it for you that moved you?

Listen to these words:

For much of my life I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist. To me, there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, of ancient mythology, or primitive superstition. How could there be a loving God if he consigned people to hell just for not believing in him? How could miracles contravene the basic laws of nature? Didn’t evolution satisfactorily explain how life originated? Doesn’t scientific reasoning dispel belief in the supernatural?

As for Jesus, didn’t you know that he never claimed to be God? He was a revolutionary, a sage, an iconoclastic Jew—but God? No, that thought never occurred to him! I could point you to plenty of university professors who said so—and certainly they could be trusted, couldn’t they? Let’s face it: even a cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates convincingly that Jesus had only been a human being just like you and me, although with unusual gifts of kindness and wisdom.

But that’s all I had ever really given the evidence: a cursory look. I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism—a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I had a strong motivation to ignore them: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to abandon if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus.

As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.²

² *Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ, (Zondervan, 1998), p.15*

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These words come from the opening of a book that many of you have read: [A Case for Christ](#), by Lee Strobel. Lee was the legal editor and an investigative reporter for the Chicago Tribune. He is now a pastor, and writer on Christian apologetics.

His answer to my question, “What was it that convinced you?” was a very thorough study of the Scriptures and other historical sources...which led him, quite to his surprise, to a faith in Christ that turned his life around. He discovered an experience of the fullness of a life in Christ. He moved from skepticism to the joy of belief.

A man by name of Lee Eclov, from a small town in Illinois made this interesting observation about a little cross, adorned with roses that someone he cared for gave to him. It bears this inscription, “*Hope raises no dust.*”

He says, looked at that phrase and tried his best to penetrate its mystery. “I didn’t want to look stupid, so I didn’t say anything. After pondering it for a little while, I just had to get to the bottom of what it meant. It had been written on a cross, so it had to mean something! He Googled “Hope raises no dust”, and found out that the phrase was originally uttered by Paul Éluard, a French poet associated with Dadaism.

He looked up Dadaism, and found this definition: “*The Dada movement tried to express the negation of all current aesthetic and social values and frequently used deliberately incomprehensible artistic and literary methods.*” He then read some of Éluard’s other famous quotes—quotes like “Elephants are contagious” and “Earth is blue like an orange.” All of which brought him back to “Hope raises no dust.”

Then he said this: “Everyone believes hope is vital to people, but most folks’ hope is about as vague as the Éluard quote that is painted on that little cross. But for Christians, hope is not vague. We have a hope that is historical, personal. We know a hope that stands in front of the empty grave of Jesus and clearly preaches, “You, too, can live as Jesus does!”

Amen!

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I don't know what it would take to help any who hear this message – today, or via our Website, or who read it in an email... help you, if you haven't already done so, to move this information from your head to your heart... I don't know what it would take to help you let go of your doubts. To “stop doubting and believe.”

But I do know that there is more for you, I know there are answers that are satisfying: intellectually, and emotionally and spiritually. I know that my Redeemer lives, and as that song says, “I talked to him this morning!”

May you never give up your quest for the truth, until you find that the truth is yours, and has set you free!

Amen