

Pastor's Message – 4/16/23
John 20:19-31

Anybody recognize this picture? Anybody ever seen it? Do you believe it exists?



When I was pastoring the Dells-Delton United Methodist Church, I would drive down Main Street everyday on my way into the Church office and pass by Ripley's Believe It or Not. I never visited that attraction; it never held any appeal to me. But you could see the advertisements on the outside of the storefront and imagine the wonders that were displayed inside. Is that two-headed turtle real! A chair and the man behind it completely made of duct tape! It wouldn't be possible for a person to lift a car, all by himself. A spool of thread, the same spool, used through 50 years? Become an explorer and survive the curse of King Tut as you explore the hidden rooms of the pyramids! That's the way it was, one thing after another to be amazed over. How can you believe it if you've haven't seen it with your own eyes?

That's the way it is with the resurrection of our Lord. the disciples were left to "believe it or not." Mary Magdalene comes back from the garden to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" The disciples are in the upper room and Jesus comes through the locked door. But Thomas isn't there. He doesn't believe their eyewitness testimony.

Eyewitness testimony.

Many television stations throughout the country have what they call "Eyewitness News." But eyewitness news can be problematic. Is eyewitness news trustworthy? Can we believe everything we see?

A report by the Innocence Project (an organization that uses DNA testing to exonerate those wrongfully convicted of crimes) says that since the 1990s, when DNA testing was first introduced, 73 percent of the 239 convictions overturned through DNA testing were based on eyewitness testimony. One-third of these overturned cases rested on the testimony of two or more mistaken eyewitnesses.

There's research showing that 75 percent of false convictions are caused by an inaccurate eyewitness statement. This is attributed to factors such as memory decay, poor eyesight, induced stress, and something known as *eyewitness talk*, where witnesses discuss what they saw with each other after the event and then change their minds about what they thought they saw based on the statement of another witness.

One survey found that 86 percent of real eyewitnesses claimed to have discussed the event with other witnesses prior to giving testimony. *Researchers say that this talking among eyewitness can result in the process called "co-witness conformity" where eyewitnesses are influenced into including in their statements things they didn't actually see.*

"It couldn't have been him," Philip said. "They crucified him. All Jerusalem saw it. Nobody could have survived that. He's dead. I didn't want to believe it, but it's true."

Mary Magdalene could hardly stand still, even though she'd run all the way from the tomb. "But it was him," she said. "He spoke to me."

"You've got to be mistaken, woman. It's not him."

"Actually," replied Mary, "John and Peter have been to the tomb. It's empty."

"Yes. They told me. But all that proves is that his body has been moved."

Mary realized that Philip was not going to be convinced by anything she said, so finally she simply told him, "You just wait. You'll see."

Much later that day, she entered the house where the Eleven had been staying. Except for Thomas, they were all there.

One of the primary reasons Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead is because of eyewitness testimony. Without the eyewitness testimony of those who saw him alive after the crucifixion and said

so, it would be hard to make a case for the resurrection.

In Acts 10, for example, the apostle Peter addressed Gentiles gathered in the home of a centurion named Cornelius. Peter, referring to himself and some fellow believers with him, said, “We were witnesses to all that [Jesus] did in Judea and Jerusalem,” meaning during Jesus’ ministry.

Then Peter, speaking of Jesus’ death and resurrection, said Jesus appeared “not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses” (Acts 10:41).

This is one of at least ten references in Acts to eyewitnesses affirming the resurrection of Jesus, and there are several verses elsewhere in the New Testament that allude to it as well. Paul even reported that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred believers “at one time” (1 Corinthians 15:6).

You may have heard or read this Bible passage many times. “Doubting Thomas” has made its way into the vernacular. But, note that Jesus never refers to Thomas as a doubter. First, keep in mind that the other disciples had the benefit of evidence which they saw with their own eyes — evidence that was not available to Thomas. Second, Thomas’ doubts are not about the resurrection of Jesus, but about the *reports* of the resurrection of Jesus. When he saw Jesus, he had no doubt that Jesus was alive. He was quite skeptical, however, about the veracity of what he was hearing. Third, although Jesus says to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe,” he is not saying that Thomas has a problem with belief. He’s really saying, “Thomas, it’s me, in the flesh. Don’t doubt. Believe. It’s okay.” And finally, what Jesus says to Thomas in verse twenty-nine applied equally to all of the disciples, not just Thomas. He said, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” *All of the disciples* believed that Jesus was alive *only* because they saw Jesus in the flesh. Like Thomas, they did not believe the reports of Jesus’ resurrection either. So, you have to ask: *How are the disciples any different than Thomas?* Thomas didn’t believe the report of the disciples, and the disciples did not believe the report of the women. They were all doubters, and their doubt was only suspended when they saw Jesus alive with their own eyes.

Thomas responds to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (v. 28). It’s a confession of faith. Note that John doesn’t tell us that Thomas takes Jesus up on his offer and actually touches his wounds. It seems that the presence of Jesus is finally enough for Thomas.

And what John implies, powerfully, is that the presence of Jesus should be enough for us, too. “Have you believed because you have seen me?” says Jesus. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29). John is speaking to his audience and to future generations like us about the truth of the gospel. He is giving us the evidence and asking us to believe it, but not just on the basis of the evidence itself. He wants us to believe also because the Holy Spirit given to us continues to act as a witness to the resurrection and ongoing presence of Jesus with us.

I know I’m dating myself, but do you remember the old TV sitcom, “Home Improvement”? In these shows, Tim, one of the lead characters, would often be given advice from Wilson, his neighbor across the fence in the backyard. Often, but not always, this advice was unsolicited. But in one of the episodes, it was Tim who gave Wilson some advice. Wilson was feeling down and spoke about wanting to move back to the place he first met his deceased wife, because his memories of her were beginning to fade. In a somewhat unusual twist, Tim tells Wilson about hearing a retired race car driver say, “You don’t need an ignition switch to keep the memories alive; just a pit crew.” We’re Jesus’ pit crew and we, along with all the other believers starting with the disciples, are challenged with keeping his memory alive.

The church ought to be in the faith-creation business? When the risen Jesus appears to his followers in the gospel of John, he doesn’t ask them to take out an insurance policy to provide protection in the afterlife. Instead, he says, “Peace be with you,” “I send you,” “Receive the Holy Spirit,” “Forgive sins” and “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus comes back from the dead to do the work of faith *creation* so his followers will move forward as strong, healthy, and vigorous disciples.

He gives them a bicycle — or maybe a faith-cycle — and sends them out, saying, “Ride!”
But just what exactly does this spiritual cycle look like? In this case, God is in the details.

The first thing to see is that *this cycle has a sturdy frame*. The disciples are scared to death on Easter evening, hiding behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews,” and when Jesus pops in among them, he says, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). He immediately assures them that they are safe and secure in his presence and that their world is no longer in danger of falling apart. When he gives them his peace, the disciples feel a sense of health and wholeness that has been missing since his death, and John tells us they *rejoice* when they see the Lord (v. 20).

The peace of Christ is a sturdy frame that the disciples can lean on and trust, knowing that it can hold them up as they cross any terrain. It was true for them then, and it’s true for us today.
But Jesus doesn’t let them stand around admiring the cycle. He says to them, “As the father has sent me, so I send you” (v. 21). Jesus pushes them out on what we would call today “a mission” — a word that comes from the Latin *missio*, which means “to send.” The faith-cycle that Jesus is creating for them *is not meant to stand still*. It comes equipped with strong wheels and knobby tires so the disciples can travel to the ends of the earth on their mission from God.

Christ’s peace is a sturdy frame, and his mission rolls on knobby tires. The disciples know they’re going to have to mount up and ride.

Of course, pedaling is hard work, so Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (v. 22). He literally inspires them by putting the Spirit into them; to “inspire” means to “breathe into” or to “put spirit into.” Jesus fills his followers with divine energy and insight so they will move forward with God’s own power and guidance within them. *While competitive cyclists today might get strength from a PowerBar, these followers of Christ receive their power directly from the Holy Spirit of God.*

Believing is hard work and it happens every day. Matters of faith are never really settled. We continue to learn, evolve, and deepen our faith. There is no last word in the life of faith. We can actually identify stages of faith.

The earliest stage of faith is simple, **experienced** faith: the faith young children hold, faith they have learned from their parents. In this first stage, faith is based around a child’s experiences in church. The child will feel loved by God if they feel loved by the church they attend. This understanding is the foundation of all that is to come.

A subsequent stage of faith-development is called **affiliative** faith. This is common in later childhood and early adolescence. This is faith based on belonging. Writer and theologian John Westerhoff says that if a child feels part of a community, then they will adopt its beliefs and values. Therefore, the most powerful thing you can do for the child in this stage is help them to feel that they belong. It is also a key time to engage children in a way that prepares them for the next stage.

After that, it’s common for Christians to enter into a type of **searching** faith. We ought not to apologize for this common feature of late teens and young adulthood, but simply to acknowledge that it’s the way things happen for many of us. Suddenly the old certainties seem not so certain anymore. The spiritual mentors who once stood so tall in our estimation prove to be standing on “feet of clay.” There may be moments for those going through this transition when they question whether they believe anything at all.

It can be a trying time for parents, teachers, youth advisors -- anyone who’s got a stake in a young person’s spiritual development. It can be a time of fearing that the active youth-group member who’s gone off to college or the military (or who’s simply drifted away from the church) may never come back. In truth it can be a dangerous time, for young adulthood is the time of greatest vulnerability to cults: simple-minded groups offering all the easy answers in exchange for a rigid structure of obedience.

Yet that time of distancing oneself is often necessary for a true searching and testing and trying of one’s faith. We ought never to advocate that kind of distancing from the church, or to consider it completely normal -- we’d all much rather that our young people asked their questions inside the church than out of it -- but we can acknowledge that it does happen this way for many. The troubling aspect comes when a Christian *never* goes

through this time of questioning -- when he or she becomes stuck in the affiliative faith stage, without ever having searched or questioned. Faith to such a person can end up being shallow, two-dimensional -- and utterly joyless. It can become the lifetime membership card they see themselves as having signed at confirmation: a membership decision that, once made, need never be considered again.

Finally, those who persist in their testing and questioning -- particularly those who find a way to do it within the church rather than outside of it -- end up with what Westerhoff calls an **owned faith**. After exploring the question "Is this truly what I believe?" The joyful and hopeful answer comes: "Yes, it is. This faith is mine." It is at that point the individual accepts and chooses the gift of faith.

1st man: "Do you think that there is life after death?" 2nd man: "I hope so!" 1st man: "But I would like to know now -- to be sure if there is or isn't life after death." 2nd man: "Why? What difference would it make?" 1st man: "It would make a big difference to me, to the way I live, if I knew for certain that there is or isn't life after death."

There is a poem attributed to a Jew in the Cologne concentration camp, written on a wall during WWII.

**"I believe in the sun
even when it is not shining
And I believe in love,
even when there's no one there.
And I believe in God,
even when He is silent. ..."**

And it goes on from there to end in a prayer,

**May there someday be sunshine
May there someday be happiness
May there someday be love
May there someday be peace...."**

No doubt, the resurrection was a spectacular miracle. But who says all miracles have to be spectacular? Garrison Keillor has some wonderful words to say on the subject of miracles and where to find them:

What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word.

What is the last word, then?

Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids -- all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through. (From Garrison Keillor, "The Meaning of Life," in *We Are Still Married* [New York: Viking, 1989])

Before he was the nationally famous chaplain at Yale University, before he was the minister of the great Riverside Presbyterian Church in New York, before he was a well-known activist in the field of peacemaking, William Sloane Coffin Jr. was searching for faith. He described a crucial transition in his faith-journey this way: "Slowly, I found myself changing from the seeker who looks hoping something's there, to the kind who knows something's there, if only he can find it."

We come to worship for different reasons. Some come in doubt, some in certainty, most somewhere in between. The church that is truly ministering in a Christlike way welcomes all comers. To them it displays the wounds of Jesus: "Come ... see ... touch."

It is acceptable to come to such a church -- even to join it -- while still asking the hard questions. Such was true for Thomas, who -- like most of us -- didn't have it all together. Jesus welcomed him. He welcomes us, as well.

And he sends us out to welcome those who are searching that that might know the Son-shine of Jesus, find contentment in God, experience the love of a perfect Father, and that peace might come in our lives and on earth.