



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: April 11, 2010

Believing in What Seems Impossible, Shannon A. White

John 20:19-31

How would you like to be remembered throughout history as the guy who didn't have enough faith? Poor Thomas...This story isn't too flattering of the disciple who was embarrassed in front of his peers. He needed proof that the one standing in front of him was indeed the risen Lord. It was only after he conducted his own litmus test that then, and only then did he believe.

It's a story which some have used throughout church history to put down rational thinkers when it comes to believing the greatest miracle of all...Jesus' Resurrection from the dead. People have pointed to Jesus' words, "Blessed are you have NOT seen and still believe." Not helpful... On the other hand, if we live our lives without any room for mysticism, we can miss out on some of faith's greatest gifts.

Theologian Brett Blair says, "If the goal of your life is for someone to show you a photograph of God, then you will be forever disappointed. Let me tell you what happens when we live in a purely rationalistic world, one where miracles are removed from our way of thinking. It happened to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson ranks as one of our nations greatest intellects but not many people know that he rejected the notion of miracles. When he approached the scriptures he could not tolerate those passages, which dealt with the supernatural. So what did he do? He wrote his own bible. In the Thomas Jefferson Bible you will find only the moral teachings and historical events of Jesus' life. No virgin birth. No healing of Jairus' daughter. No walking on water. And, no resurrection. Here is how his bible ends: "There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulcher and departed." For Thomas Jefferson the Gospel ends at the foot of a grave." (Brett Blair on "Thomas")

I don't know about you, but that belief system leaves me feeling pretty flat and disempowered. But as one commentator writes, "It is clear in the Gospel of John that characters are led to faith with differing experiences and varying degrees of evidence. Not all are the same." (p. 283 Year C Commentary)

So, maybe we can let Thomas off the hook a bit. He's like some of us, or at least like a part of us. Many of us need to SEE something before we stake our reputations on it. Things need to make sense to us...And when we get to a point of KNOWING that experience or piece of information as truth, deep in our guts, watch out...that's when we may be willing to stake our lives upon it.

There are so many things in our lives which we believe and yet cannot prove "why" they happen...the reconciliation of a stale or dead relationship through a sudden opening of a heart; the recovery of a person strung out on drugs or alcohol; or the sudden change and breakthrough in perspective which alters a person's life. Some stories even make the news, such as the sudden kindness of a stranger jumping into the East River to save a baby who had fallen in and almost drowned. What made him do that? And what made a Long Island woman dig in her own pocket and rally her town to financially rescue a food market to keep it from closing. There was no personal gain for her, but the joy and disbelief of the store owner was priceless. That story made the front of the New York Times last week. And then there are some other spiritual things which one just can't explain...

I was out for a morning jog the other day, when I was overcome with a feeling of support and encouragement from my Dad. The funny thing is, as many of you know, my Dad died 20 years ago this week. I've told you that my relationship with my father was a bit complicated during my early years. While we looked like the "white picket fence" idyllic family from the outside, there was A LOT going on inside our suburban New York home. Dad was a bit of a tormented man inside, and that torment seeped out into some of his relationships.

Over the years I have become at peace with what went on with my father. And by the time he died, I was able to speak about him with nothing but love during his memorial service.

I firmly believe, based on what I know from my faith and what I read in the scripture texts that life does not end after our physical bodies die here on earth. I'm not sure what happens or what it looks like, but I believe that our wounded earthly spirits become whole...that those things which kept us bound up inside while here on earth, those wounds which keep us from loving and being loved all vanish once we die. Our spiritual selves become free to love and serve and worship without hinderance.

That's my belief and I have imaged my father's spirit that way since his death. Amazingly, I have felt his presence with me over these last twenty years in ways I never felt when he was alive. I imagine him as a whole, spiritual being. In these decades since his death I have felt the warmth of his support in my efforts to be of service to others (interestingly in life, we was a financial executive who was a bit stiff and wasn't very generous. He didn't give away his time or his affection often). I have felt him apologizing to me at different moments for all of the mistakes he made long ago...and really meaning it. I have felt him urging me to continue when

I have wanted to collapse and give up on a dream. I have felt him time and time again encouraging me to have integrity in my relationships. But mostly, I have felt him telling me how much he loves me and is proud of me in my endeavors... things which were extremely difficult for him to say when he was alive. Strangely, when I have taken those healing thoughts into parts of me which were starved as a little girl, I can feel some of that old woundedness diminish. My heart opens to offer back regret for the ways in which I kept myself guarded from him out of fear of being hurt. I am made more whole. Those are experiences of Resurrection for me.

In this season of Resurrection and New Life...I believe Dad is still at work, helping me work through the mistakes and failures I make based on remnants of old wounds, so I may live more fully with those I love right now.

(For a little comic relief...I had to laugh...because right after I wrote this section of the sermon, the new Nike advertisement with Tiger Woods came out...and all of the controversy surrounding it. The ad depicted a remorseful Tiger looking straight on into the camera, with the words of his deceased father voiced over his face...speaking reflective words to him supposedly apropos to his recent behavior.)

I think this story has an even greater impact for us as believers of faith in the 21st century. By the time those in John's world are hearing these words of: Jesus appearing to the disciples... revealing himself, commissioning those gathered and empowering them to continue in ministry, they are reading the recorded accounts of witnesses to the Resurrection. Those in the Johannine community, are, in effect like us. They weren't around to see it all, and yet they are charged to believe just as those who WERE there...Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet believe. Just like us, they are relying on the written word of others who wrote of their first hand experiences with Jesus. One commentator says, "The church then, is depicted as a people of the book. It lives not by oral tradition nor by a continuum of mystical experiences but by encountering the signs of Jesus found in the text."

We have our own experiences of faith, but they are rooted and held up in the context of the experiences found in scripture which have withstood thousands of years of theological scrutiny. That is precisely why churches need to be scripturally literate. Not literalists...but literate. We need to know intimately of Jesus' ministry and the response of those who knew him here on earth and how God's saving love and grace has been enacted throughout history in the lives of humankind. We need to ponder, "How it is that over the last 2000 years, believers of vastly diverse backgrounds have managed to stake their lives on someone whose public ministry only lasted for three years? And as one theologian asks, "Why is the faithful interpretation of the text so critical to the life of the congregation?"

Those who choose to follow the risen Christ today have the same challenge, just as those back two thousand years ago, to believe or not to believe the story of faith found in the scriptures...

and if we believe it, to live it...questions and all...in a way which makes a difference in our world.

I close with a “Prayer with Scientists” by Maren Triabassi

The path to believing/ travels through doubting, /and understanding/
Means accepting not knowing,/ and testing is the way/ to joy—even when/
It’s hard, long/ and lonely.

The inheritance/ of others/ is a story of signs/ pointing to a reality/
Which is shadow/ and wall-walking/ and wonderful.

There are new galaxies/ and new elements./ There are possible/
Particles and species/ and cures./ Our faith is search/ and research.

If I doubt enough/ I can put my finger/ inside the hole/
In the hand of God. / If I believe enough, / I will be blessed/ by what I cannot see/
Or measure or touch--/ the experiment of/ the Resurrection, / a hypothesis/
For life/ and quantum/ holiness.

Maren Tirabassi and Joan Grant, The Improbable Gift of Blessing