

John 20:1-18

*Who Will Believe?*

Why is it so hard to trust the eye-witness story of a friend?

Have you noticed how often we reject someone's report about an experience they had? "Nuh-uh! No way!" we say.

Several years ago, one of our neighbors who went to school with our daughter called the house to say a truck had turned over on the street near the school. The kids had just walked home five minutes before the call and passed the intersection but there was nothing then. Ashlee told her sister Courtney, "Let's go see! A truck turned over on Madison Avenue." And her response? "How does he know?"

How does he know?

If we have such trouble believing something as real and verifiable as a wreck on the corner, how will we ever be able to believe the Easter story and the empty tomb?

How did the caller know about the wrecked vehicle? He was an eyewitness!

That exchange between the two girls seemed so ridiculous to me – until I saw how frequently people disbelieve one another.

Some will remember the Buffalo Creek disaster in 1972. One family tells the story of a phone call received from older son; he reported the damn had broken. "Get out of the house!" he warned. But Papa didn't pay attention to the warning. For one thing, it was too early in the morning and he wanted to go back to bed! And they had heard these false warnings before!

But shortly after, the house was swept away in a crushing flash flood!

Let's think about this a minute. Why do we have such trouble believing one another?

- 1) First of all, is the story reasonable? Does it make sense?
- 2) Secondly, do you trust the one who's telling the story?
- 3) And thirdly, what kind of action does the story demand from me?

This father who lived along Buffalo Creek – had a trusting relationship with his son, but ...the warning didn't make sense! They had heard these false reports every time there was a hard rain. And it was too early in the morning to get on the move to higher ground. The action demanded ...was too bothersome!

You know, the Bible tells us that those who were present on that first Easter had a hard time believing! And people have had a hard time believing ever since!

Simon Peter ...went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,<sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head...<sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;<sup>9</sup> *for as yet* they did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead.

This seems a little odd. The Bible said, "They saw and believed," but what did they believe? "For as yet they did not understand ...Jesus would rise from the dead."

It seems that they didn't *quite* believe what Mary would soon believe: she would stay to see – Jesus alive again! Risen from the dead!

READING John 20:11-18

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing

there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to Me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that He had said these things to her.

I’ve wondered about faith – in our lives. I’ve wondered how we come to believe, and why is it that some members of a family *love* the Lord ...and others in the same family are really just *lukewarm*. Oh, they believe in God – they believe there is a God, but that matters about as much as believing that kittens are cute. Okay? Isn’t that a nice kitten? But we don’t take every little kitten home.

When you read the Bible you find that this conflict with believing or disbelieving is pretty common. Tragically common. Even for those who were Jesus’ closest friends:

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you...?” And returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest ...But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb. (Luke 24:6-12)

And one more, before Jesus ascended into heaven:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. (Matthew 28:16-17)

We get that odd footnote again: “but some doubted.” And Jesus was *right there*. Talking to them!

And over and over and over ...we see this same awful pattern with those in a crowd or those in a household; people believing differently when it comes to the power and glory and love of God!

Careful students of God’s Word notice this same shocking pattern in the bible. It seems whenever faith and the power of God’s love *rises up* we find, too, the evil one (the devil) springs into action to squash faith-action:

- With all God’s blessings in the Garden of Eden – we also find the serpent asking about one simple restriction, “Did God really say you should not eat from any tree...?”
- When Moses led God’s people from slavery in Egypt to freedom – the spirit of fear rises up within the people to want their bondage again.
- Following the holy night when Jesus was born – Herod sent thugs to kill the babies of Bethlehem.
- When Peter proclaimed Jesus as a King with a heavenly crown – he later questioned whether Jesus should really be talking about serving and dying on a cross.
- And when waves of revival sweep across a land – the devil drags in terror and destruction through crusades, inquisitions, witch trials, slavery, and the molestation of children by spiritual guides.
- On the one hand we have a trail of victory from the empty tomb – and on the other, we

find the devil planting in the minds of the believers insecurity, pessimism, criticism, and the recurring self-talk – the internal argument – that questions whether we should believe, surrender, and obey. “Bah!” we argue. Logic and scientific knowledge remind us “Easter doesn’t make sense! The resurrection isn’t believable! This mystery may be fine for other folks, but I don’t have room for it in my life!”

Yes, everything between heaven and hell swing into action when Jesus appears, creating chaos or fear or doubt. So you can imagine the turmoil Satan wants to bring into your family, into your marriage, creating hostility through the instruments of internet and facebook and text messaging, free porn, headlines and news programs declaring a hopeless economy, radio and political commentators provoking fear and hate, relatives and neighbors feuding over ideas, quarreling about charity.

Some of you feel these maddening emotions of rage or panic polluting your spirit so that you’ve refused or forgotten the greater qualities of believing, trusting, loving and forgiving.

We don’t have to live with this anxiety! God has a better way for you, and He can recondition your minds and your thoughts and your desires!

Several years ago a conference at Cambridge University was answering the question, “What causes certain persons to become visionaries or achievers in society?”

I hear in that question, “Why are some people moved to faith and others remain baffled and paralyzed?” How can we help people live above the ruts of the mundane and monotonous?

The conclusion at the University conference was really very simple: *The greatest visionaries and achievers live as though they are seeing another world.* They live very much in this world, but they appear to have some other dreams and goals in mind, and everything they do is driven by that other world.

Imagine being stuck in this world with no idea of real purpose, no notion of God’s plan. That’s what we call *hopeless* – living selfishly.

But Easter proves that we can look confidently beyond this world. Whether He was being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, confronting an opponent, or struggling with His own future in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus always lived in the grip of this other world!

When He talked about it to His disciples, He called it *faith*. The Bible took that vision to describe faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen!” (Heb. 11:1)

So the question begs to be asked: Are you living in faith? Can you believe surrendering your behavior to Jesus has benefits for your relationships? Do you believe that it’s important to really practice forgiving your partner, looking for ways to love your family as they need to be loved, and praying for ways to serve your neighbor?

Doesn’t faith in Christ call forth this new kind of living? This new way of perceiving the world? Relationships are impacted by your Christian faith! If faith doesn’t change you, if the empty tomb is nothing more than an “ordinary story,” can we really believe we are followers of Jesus Christ?

I believe that the Spirit of God has prompted us *many times* to be creative in serving and loving – but we’ve refused and rejected that nudging – because of selfishness. It demanded too much from me!

But if you want to experience the power and glory of the living Lord in your life – try being obedient! Try living into this faith that declares heaven as our destination and self-giving love as our purpose. Try it!

You can change the level of conflict in your life and in your relationships – trusting that

God is here for you! And when you nail to the cross your cynicism, when you put to death your petty criticisms and put-downs – under your breath – you give space to the life of Christ to grow up in you!

I'm talking about communing with Christ! Conspiring with the Holy Spirit to love – the way God loves you! And when you submit yourselves to love practically, you find a new you! God giving new life to your spirit!

How do we come to believe?

- The bible tells us God is the One who gives faith. Okay?
- I believe we have great opportunities to act on faith, as God nudges us to forgive, to love, and to serve.
- Are we mature enough to act ...or does obedience seem *bothersome*? The risk we take rejecting the Spirit of God is replacing the will of God for our lives ...with our own will and desires!

So as you walk away from the empty tomb today, will you listen to the witness of His Spirit ...teaching you? Trust God – to take advantage of you. You won't be disappointed.

We're talking about the ancient idea Jesus brought: *Repentance*. Changing the way that I think, and chose, and act. It's a part of my daily life! Can you make a new habit – to conform your life with the Spirit of God's love?

Oh yes! Because He lives, we can!