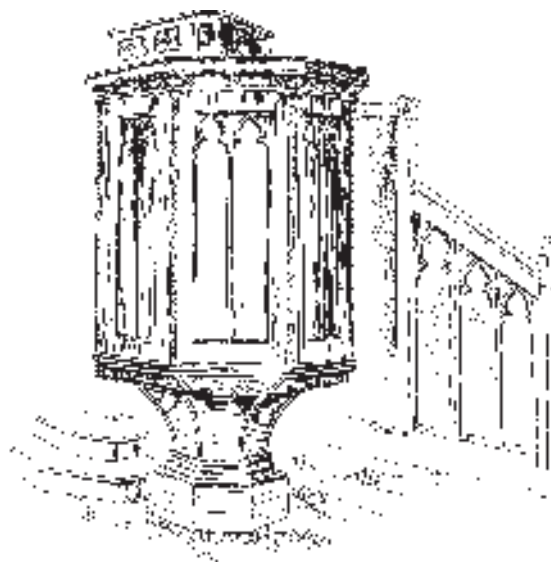


April 12, 2009
Easter

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

That You May Come to Believe by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

John 20:19-31

I went to grade school with a boy who would believe anything. His name was Perry Caffery. During recess once we told him that the boiler had broken in school, so we could all go home. He ran straight home. He was so gullible and we, his classmates, were pretty mean. Seeing us eat ice cream he'd ask, "Where did you get those ice cream cones?" "They are giving them out for free down at the drug store." And off he'd go. We used to love teasing him.

One day when President Eisenhower was campaigning for a second term, Mamie and he came to Pittsburgh. Our whole grade school was taken out by the expressway and we stood with students from other schools as Ike came by in a motorcade from the airport. He and Mamie waved at all of us from the convertible and someone threw out "I like Ike" buttons from a trailing car. We told Perry that Ike was coming to our class that very afternoon. Of course he believed us. When we got back to our room, he cleaned up his desk and combed his hair. He sat straight in his chair all afternoon thinking the President was going to walk in at any moment. We were incorrigible.

I remember another time—someone invited Perry to our church. He didn't normally attend church. That day the minister said in his sermon, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." And you know something, Perry Caffery believed him. He actually believed him! Perry made a confession of faith that very day, joined our church and came every Sunday after that. Whew!

The verb credo “to believe” is an important word in the Gospel According to John. It appears about 80 times in the Gospel—four times more frequently than the other three Gospels combined. In this Gospel, more than once Jesus turns to the crowd and asks if they believe. He asks Martha and the disciples about their belief. In fact, John summarized the intention of the Gospel at the end of Chapter 20 by writing: “These [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

It is natural then that the belief question should play a big part in the climax of John’s Gospel—the resurrection. It was Mary Magdalene who was first at the tomb in John’s account. Seeing the stone had been rolled away she runs to Peter and John, the beloved disciple. They immediately set out for the tomb. They went at a run; and John, who must have been a younger man than Peter since he lived on until the end of the century, outstripped Peter in this breathless race. When they came to the tomb, John looked in but went no farther. Peter, with typical impulsiveness, not only looked in, but went in. For the moment Peter was only amazed at the empty tomb; but things began to happen in John’s mind. If someone had removed Jesus’ body, if tomb-robbers had been at work, why should they leave the grave clothes?

Then something else struck him—the grave clothes were not disheveled and disarranged. They were lying there still in fold—that is what the Greek means—the clothes for the body where the body had been; the napkin where the head had lain. The whole point of the description is that the grave clothes did not look as if they had been put off or taken off; they were lying there in their regular folds as if the body of Jesus had simply evaporated out of them. At first, it was just a hunch, but the sight suddenly penetrated to John’s mind. He realized what had happened—and he believed.

There is a faith like Perry Caffery’s—like John, the beloved disciple’s, that needs very little evidence: it simply believes. It’s a gift to have faith like that. Of course, not everyone reacts the same way. Peter saw the same arrangement of grave clothes, but reacted quite differently. John saw and believed.

The story in John now returns to Mary, the first witness of the empty tomb. In John’s account she also is the first human being to whom the risen Lord appears. After she alerted Peter and John, they must have left her in the dust in their race to get to the tomb, because by the time she got there Peter and John were gone. Through her tears Mary first mistakes Jesus for a gardener, but when he says to her, “Mary,” then, as a sheep that knows her shepherd’s voice, Mary recognizes the Lord and she exclaims, “Rabboni!” The word, as John remarks, means teacher. However, what John does not tell us is that it is a form of the word “Rabbi” which at the time was used almost exclusively in address to God. Mary believes only when the Lord called her by name.

Later that same night Jesus appears to the troubled disciples behind closed doors. They were afraid and Jesus came to them showing them the stab wounds and scars. They saw him and they knew he was alive! For the disciples, they needed to see in order to believe.

Thomas, however, was not present on that occasion with the other disciples, and he did not believe his friends’ testimony. Thomas had to experience it himself—had to reach out and touch. I wonder what you think of that, or of him?

Throughout the centuries, Thomas has been maligned as the one who brought his doubts to bear. Old “doubting Thomas” is the label we use to stifle any open conversation, to shush any probing questions, and the barb we use to nail down the edges of our guilt, as if it were somehow more Christian just to accept it all in acquiescence and rest content and never ask a question.

You know, I think there is a secret touch of Thomas deep in us all. Every time we use the brain God gave us to stretch a little further, every time we peek over the edge of disbelief, every time we cannot understand and want to know some more, the patron saint we need to hold our hand is doubting Thomas, the twin.

Thomas had two great virtues. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about him. He would never still his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. He was not the kind of man who would rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about. Thomas had to be sure.

Thomas's other great virtue was that when he was sure, he went the whole way: "My Lord and my God!" he said. There was no halfway about Thomas. He was not airing his doubts just for the sake of mental aerobics. He doubted in order to become sure. And when he became sure, his surrender to trust was complete. When a person fights his way through his doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, she has attained to a level of trust that someone who unthinkingly accepts things can never reach.

So there you have it—John's account of resurrection belief. John, himself, the beloved disciple, believed without much evidence—only some grave clothes and an empty tomb. Mary Magdalene believed because of hearing a word. The disciples believed because they saw him. But for Thomas, neither the word of witnesses nor the sight of Jesus would be sufficient. His faith could be sure only after physical contact.

The spectrum of faith in the risen Christ is now complete; the beloved disciple alone has that faith which needs no proof. Mary Magdalene believes in response to a Word; the disciples see and believe; while Thomas must touch in order to trust.

Whether Thomas ever actually did touch Jesus is not clear (vv.27-29), but what is clear is that faith is not for all the same experience, neither is it generated for all with the same kind and degree of "evidence."

For some, belief is born and grown as quietly as a child sleeping on his grandmother's lap. For others, belief is a lifetime of wrestling. Some cannot remember when they did not believe, while others cannot remember anything but wrestling with doubt.

Given these varieties of faith experiences, it is most important to observe that not one of the four episodes is made normative for everyone. What the Evangelist does insist upon is that the possibility for faith is not limited to that circle of original disciples, nor to their experiences of the risen Christ. In fact, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon all who have not seen and yet who believe (v.29). This is to affirm that belief is available to all persons, at all times, in all places.

A minister was invited to eat the evening meal with a family in his church. As he stopped his car and walked up the sidewalk, he was met by two boys, ages seven and five. The five-year-old was mentally challenged. As they walked to the house, their father drove up into the driveway. Both boys left the minister and ran to their dad. On the way, the seven-year-old stopped and picked up a flower to present to his father. The retarded son did not quite understand. He reached down, picked up a handful of dust and rocks. The dad picked each boy up and hugged him, and said, "Thank you for the flower. And thank **you** for the rocks."

Let us pray...

O God, as you dealt with the individual needs of Thomas and those other believers that first Easter, deal with all of us here, that in our faith experiences we too might say, "My Lord and my God!"