

Easter 2015
John 20:1-18
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The disciples' long week of celebration, confrontation, betrayal, arrest and execution has come to a close and in the darkness Mary Magdalene walks toward the tomb. Maybe she is hoping to spend some quiet time to grieve her loss, or maybe she needs time to try to make sense of all that has happened.

But when she arrives, the stone has been pushed back and the tomb is empty, Jesus is gone, and her quiet morning seems to give way again to the chaos and confusion of the past week.

Mary doesn't know what to do, so she runs back to tell the others. Peter and one who is called, the disciple whom Jesus loved, (which for all you Harry Potter fans always reminds me of calling Lord Voldemort, he who must not be named) any way, the beloved or other disciple gets there first, he looks in and sees the linen wrappings and steps back.

Peter gets there next, and he goes all the way into to the tomb. He notices the linen wrappings and the cloth that wrapped Jesus head neatly folded. The beloved disciple then follows Peter in, ...and then we're told in the scripture, ... that at that moment, he believes. The beloved disciple experiences something that changes him, he senses something that changes him...but Peter, not so much, at least not yet.

Can you believe in the actual fact of the resurrection? That God took Jesus, raised him from the dead and transformed him into something new?

This may surprise you, but I've always had a little bit of trouble wrapping my head around it. For much of my life, I was just a little bit uncomfortable making that claim on Easter morning...He is Risen! It was a little bit embarrassing when everyone else was running around saying to each other, he is risen! He is risen indeed when I wasn't so sure about the claim. I wanted to believe it, but something held me back.

It made me wonder, what is belief? Does it require some kind of factual proof? Does it mean we throw our rational minds to the wind and... rely on something else?

In the early church, belief was characterized by how people lived. They were called the people of the way...they lived lives that were modeled on the way Christ lived; healing, serving others, sharing, praying, studying, teaching,

breaking bread together, and speaking out against injustice, spreading peace and love.

Early Christians modeled their lives in opposition to the imperial and social powers of their time.

Like Jesus, they sacrificed themselves to stand against the world of oppression that they lived in.

When the church moved from being *persecuted* by the state to *being* the religion of the state, belief changed from how people lived to what people thought. The church became a creedal church, *what* people believed became much more important than *how* they lived.

Now, I think that believing has become a barrier for many people. Sometimes when I ask people who have lost their faith what their stumbling block is they say “I just can’t believe all that.”

The word belief in English has come to mean something quite different from what was originally intended in scripture. Any of you who have ever studied a foreign language know sometimes there isn’t a word that directly translates, that meaning often is lost or changed in translation. As time passes, words take on new and different meanings.

In “The Case for God”, theologian Karen Armstrong, explains that

When the New Testament was translated from Greek into Latin by Saint Jerome at the end of the 4th century, the Greek *pistis* became the Latin *fides* (“loyalty”). *Fides* had no verbal form, there was no way to be loyal so Jerome chose the Latin verb *credo*, a word that derived from *cor do*, *cor* meaning heart, *do* meaning give... “I give my heart to”

It’s important to note that...he did not think of using *opinor* (“I hold an opinion.”) But instead chose *credo*...I give my heart to.

In the 17th century,... when the Bible was translated into English,*credo* and *pisteuo* became “I believe”...

But the word “belief” meant something different in the 17th century than it does now.

In Middle English, *bilieven* meant “to praise; to value; to hold dear.” It was related to the German word *belieben* (“to love), ...

So “belief” originally meant “loyalty to a person to whom one is bound in promise or duty.” ...I am bound by my heart in promise or duty.

During the late seventeenth century... as our concept of knowledge became more theoretical, the word “belief” started to be used...in a different way.

It was used to describe an intellectual assent to a hypothetical—and often dubious—proposition.

Do you believe in magic, do you believe in fairies, do you believe in ghosts?

So when I ask you if you believe in the resurrection, I’m wondering if your modern understanding of belief as opinion or intellectual assent makes you squirm a little bit in your seat.

But if we focus on the original intent of the meaning in scripture, do you give your heart to, do you give your loyalty to, do you model your life on the idea that he is risen, can you wrap your heart around this claim?

I can give my loyalty, my heart to the idea that Jesus continues to live in the world, was not contained in the tomb, but was transformed and let loose in the world...

I can give my heart to the idea that we are saved, we are made new, we are transformed into the body of Christ to participate in the saving of the world, to participate in building a new realm where God rules, where the powers that be distribute God’s gifts to everyone, not just a select few.

He is risen!! The power of this claim is deeper than my rational mind can fathom.

In my heart of hearts I know that Jesus came here as God’s own self not only to live among us, but to live.... as one of us. To experience what it is like to be human. To know human suffering and loss as well as human joy.

He experienced the human powers that had taken hold of God’s creation and distorted power to serve the few while the many suffered.

He spent his life advocating for the poor, the oppressed the outcast and the downtrodden.

The authorities said no to a redistribution of wealth and power, and so they took his life.

The authorities said no to the rising tide of people who heard the truth in the message Jesus proclaimed,

They said no to a new kingdom where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and for this they took his life.

And then somehow, in the darkness of the tomb, God entered in, and Jesus rose from the dead, transformed, changed but still able to connect with his followers, who also were transformed into his new body, the Body of Christ to say yes to the kingdom of heaven on earth.

To say yes, to serving the common good, to say yes to the transformative power of God here, now and forever. This eternal cycle of dying to old ways and rising to new ways...that is both intensely personal and political. It's as personal as learning how to stop and pray before lambasting that person who has offended in some way, it's as political as advocating tirelessly to end hunger.

This other disciple was moved in the very core of his being, somehow he sensed God's presence working in that tomb and he knew something significant had happened there. He believed.

He himself was transformed. He could see that God's spirit was going to continue to have a difference in his life and the world around him. He could sense that the movement that began and grew and flourished was not coming to an end, but was starting over in a new way.

Pause

From this point forward in John's gospel we watch as his other disciples come to this realization at different times and in different ways.

Maybe we can take comfort in this, that we all come to belief in a different way and in God's time.

Being able to make the claim, "he is risen" comes to each of us in our own unique way.

For Mary, her turning point comes when she hears Jesus speak her name...she turns once to speak to "the gardener" and then she turns again at the sound of her own name...he didn't look like Jesus, he didn't even sound like Jesus until he spoke her name. That was the moment she knew.

When he appears later in the day to the disciples in the locked room, even though Jesus has apparently just walked through a solid wall or locked door, they don't come to belief until he shows them his hands and his sides...it's not until "then that the disciples rejoiced".

Thomas can't believe by word of mouth, just because his friends tell him so, the moment of belief comes for Thomas when he reaches out and touches Jesus. Then he believes.

For Peter, the moment of belief in the resurrected Christ comes as he is fishing with his friends...Jesus appears on the shore and somehow, the disciple whom Jesus loved recognizes him and says to Peter, Look, "It's the Lord!" Unlike Thomas, Peter hears the truth in what his friend is saying, he throws his clothes on, jumps into the water and swims for shore. That's a little backwards isn't it...it turns out that following Jesus is at a times a backwards thing.

The gospel of John which is really quite verbose, concludes with these sweet words..."But there were also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Too many possibilities to contain them all!

So too are the many, many ways we experience the risen Lord and come to hold dear in our hearts the claim...He is Risen!