

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 17, 2022

(Dis)Belief

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, once again things could have happened much quicker if men had simply believed the women when they shared their testimony. This small detail, relegated to a single (verse 11) which reads, "But these words seemed to [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe [the women]," shows one problem humanity has with belief: one of many. Using the excuse of patriarchy, the first believers didn't believe.

Apart from some frustration with those stubborn, misogynistic disciples, I do find this fact somehow comforting. The first disciples, the ones who got to learn at Christ's feet, the ones who witnessed him raise Lazarus from the dead, got belief wrong all...the...time! I need this example from the disciples because I know I get belief wrong all the time too. I can find excellent ways to ignore the words and call of Christ. I am a master at distracting myself from what I know is at my core. I am an expert at wandering off from the Way of Christ.

So, I find my own faith journey strengthened by the knowledge that the saints and apostles struggled too. You can sense some of Paul's struggle in the verses that lead up to our Epistle reading today:

"Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished."¹

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:12-18, NRSV

Paul, and the church in Corinth, is struggling with questions about the resurrection. Those early disciples and Christians would have had to defend their belief in Christ's resurrection from all sides. We read in the book of Acts how the captain of the Temple and the Sadducees were "much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead."² When Paul preached about the resurrection of Christ in Athens, we read that some there "sneered"³ at the message. And later, during one of his trials, the Roman governor of Judea, called Paul crazy, saying to him, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you mad."⁴

Disbelief in the resurrection was a huge part of the original story, and we would do well to remember that! Faith, belief, does not always come easy to us. And if anything, that knowledge should make Christians ever more patient and compassionate when sharing the good news of God's triumph over death. The journey of faith is rarely a simple one.

Perhaps that's a more important take away from the resurrection accounts than we realize. It's okay to struggle with faith at times. It's **okay** to doubt. If anything, our doubts and struggles force us to acknowledge the complexity of the human experience. And I tend to find that acknowledging complexity is an important step towards deepening and living out our faith.

So, let's acknowledge complexity! There are a lot of stumbling blocks to belief, some internal and some external. Patriarchy and misogyny reared their ugly heads in the resurrection account and caused the disciples to not hear the resurrection witness of the women, delaying the joy of their belief. Fear of losing of power and control as arbiters of access to God gets in the way for many religious leaders that heard those first resurrection testimonies. Classism plays a part when these "provincial" apostles from an unimportant backwater of the Roman Empire dare to bring their message to the centers of culture and wealth, Rome and Athens.

Those are just a few of the challenges the Gospel faced in the early church! There were others too, persecutions and oppression. Families were split and loyalties tested all because of belief, or disbelief, in Christ's resurrection. And

² Acts 4:2

³ Acts 17:32

⁴ Acts 25:19-20

yet the church endured, it even thrived in the midst of all this complexity. It's enough to make one wonder, how?

Clearly there is something powerful and compelling about the message of Christ's triumph over death. We desperately want to believe that death does not have the final say. We, who know the joy of life lived in connection, never want that connection to be severed. So, the good news of Christ's resurrection becomes all the more appealing because it means that in Christ there is no end to our connection. In Christ we are brought into one. That spark of the divine that rests in us will always rest in God!

But here's the thing, we'll never logic our way to belief. Reason and evidence will eventually fail. In the end they are distractions too and can cause us to stumble. Belief, faith, these come from **experiences** of the divine more than anything else. We grow in faith because we have experienced the love of God in those who walk with us on our journey. We come to believe because we have had some experience of God's steadfast and unconditional love in our lives. And those experiences speak volumes about the nature of love and the nature of God.

As I have been preaching a lot lately, Christ came to earth to shatter our delusions and to show us the Truth. The Truth that no matter our stumbling, no matter the ways in which we drown out the call, no matter how much or how often we fail; God's love will overcome. It overcame the multitude of challenges faced by those first disbelieving believers. It overcame persecution and oppression. It overcomes every resistance and barrier that we erect. The message of Easter, the Truth, is that God's love wins. Even over death. And while it can, at times, be hard to believe, we **can** believe because we have experienced the Truth of it.

We have experienced the Truth of a comforting embrace when we're grieving. We have experienced the Truth of unexpected forgiveness from someone we've wronged. We have experienced the Truth of being confronted with our own brokenness, yet knowing we are still loved and accepted. And we have the privilege of sharing the Truth of those experiences with others. And when we aren't believed, we just keep sharing, much like those women returned from the tomb must have kept sharing the Truth: God's love wins. And then we trust that God's love will do what it always does...express itself persistently in the lives of those we share it with.

This is the message of resurrection. This is the message we are called to bear into the world. And not just with words, but with actions. Striving to ground all that we do in God's *agape* love. Acknowledging that belief can be hard, and life is complex, but in the end...God's love wins. In the end we know we are on the path of life, living out the Truth, following the Way of Christ, when we are living and sharing the love of God. Love which calls us to solidarity and substitution. Love which knows no conditions. Love which leads us to faith, obedience, connection, and eternal life.

Amen.