

## **Belief with Meaning**

April 20, 2014 Easter

### **Luke 24:1-12; John 3:1-8**

#### **READ Luke 24:1-12**

On Friday afternoon, the body of Jesus Christ had been laid in a tomb. Crucified, dead, and buried. It was important to the followers of Jesus, at least to the ones who were still around, that they get that done before sunset, before the beginning of the Sabbath. None of the Gospels record any activity among these followers until early on Sunday morning, when the women went back to the tomb with the spices and perfumes that they had prepared for the body.

We are left to speculate how all these people observed that particular Sabbath. That they would observe Sabbath would not be surprising – they were all devout Jews, plus it was still the week of Passover. It would have been a different Sabbath than they had ever experienced, just as these followers of Jesus had been through a Passover like they had never experienced. On that Saturday, this suddenly leader-less group would likely have hung closely together, still processing all that had happened in the past week, from the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday through that remarkable Passover meal, then the horror of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. I can imagine them all gathered at a friend's home, talking quietly, wondering what was going to happen to them now. I can imagine them feeling completely lost and afraid and hopeless. But I can also imagine that they began to tell stories. We've all been there, and it is one of the greatest times in the life of a family. It always seems to happen something like this when there is a death of a loved one. After the funeral service, some people drift on back home, but the family gathers for a meal. It may take a while for the conversation to start, but at some point, somebody starts telling stories, and pretty soon everybody is telling stories. You could piece together a lot of a person's life just from the stories told by family and friends in the time between the death and the funeral.

As the disciples and others were gathered on that Sabbath, they would have at some point started telling stories. Philip might have told about when Jesus said He had seen Philip when he was under a fig tree as a child. Andrew might have told the one about finding that little boy with the bread and fish that fed 5000 people. James might have told about seeing Moses and Elijah with Jesus at the Transfiguration. Peter might have talked

about walking on water, and maybe cried as he told them about denying that he ever knew Jesus. Maybe Mary was there, and took them all back to the beginning and told them about the visit of the angel and the shepherds and the Magi. In a culture where oral tradition was so very important, it was this kind of story-telling that connected them as a people and connected them to their historical relationship with God. But there was important recent history, too, and it would have begun to come together in this story-telling time. Sometime in there, somebody suddenly remembered that Jesus had told them that He would be raised from the dead on the third day. It had only been a week or 10 days since this happened:

**READ Luke 18:31-34**

Surely somebody remembered this, and then when the women came back with the report of the empty tomb, they started to connect the dots. They were at least able to put together the facts, and with the appearances of the Risen Christ to them over the coming days and weeks, they would know without doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead.

In the process, they would have still been telling stories, reassembling the whole ministry of Jesus – all the miracles, the teachings, the parables, the opening of the real meaning of Scripture, the nature of the Son of God. They would have begun to move past the facts to the meaning of those facts – to continue the process we find Peter starting as he left the empty tomb on that Easter morning, mumbling to himself. It is clear from the Gospels that this was not the first time that Jesus had done something that was so completely outside of the experience of everybody present that left them all wondering “What just happened here?” Things like calming a storm and healing people and raising Lazarus from the dead and interpreting Scripture in a totally new way – and now Himself raised from the dead. All those stories were coming back to them now.

I imagine a new story-teller in the group, and he has a story that they may not have heard before. This new story-teller remembers something from early in Jesus’ ministry that the others were not a part of – a story that brings meaning to the facts that they all believe. This new story teller is named Nicodemus.

We read of Nicodemus only in the Gospel of John, and there in only three places. John tells us that Nicodemus was involved in the burial of Jesus, and that he had earlier spoken up for fair treatment of Jesus by the Pharisees. We are not told much else about

Nicodemus, but his role in the burial of Jesus always leads me to the hope that he became one of the leaders of the early church. He was just that bold and that respected. When the story-telling got around the table to Nicodemus, and he looked at the rest of the group and said “Let me tell you about the first time I talked to Jesus”, he had their attention.

**READ John 3:1-8**

Christian belief has to have at least these three elements to become the faith that connects us to the grace of God for our salvation. First, there is the intellectual knowledge of the facts. We have to believe in the facts of Jesus life and ministry and death and resurrection. But belief in the facts is not enough – even Satan believes the facts. Second, knowledge of these facts must reach beyond our heads and into our hearts. The facts must generate an emotional response. Specifically, we must be convicted of our sin, and acknowledge the desperation and hopelessness of our inability on our own to overcome the power of sin in our lives. We get to Nicodemus’ story in the third element. For Christian belief to be complete and to become the faith that connects us to grace, it has to transform us. Belief becomes faith in that transformation.

Jesus used a vivid image with Nicodemus – that of being born again. Nicodemus had a tough time with that, as we would have, too, until we recognize that what Jesus is saying is that our acceptance of His love and mercy and forgiveness and grace will work a transformation in us that is as radical as being completely remade – as radical as going back into the womb and starting over.

This transformational element of Christian belief has to move us beyond the warm fuzzy feeling of Easter. It is not enough just to believe in the fact of the Resurrection. It is not enough to look at the power of sin and death and realize we are bringing nothing to that fight that is going to matter. Those are steps on the path, but for our belief to have meaning, for it to be the faith by which we are saved, it has to re-make us, it has to re-shape us, it has to create a new thing in us that is what God meant us to be from the beginning.

John 3:16 is a continuation of this conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus. When Jesus says there that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”, the belief He is talking

about, the belief that connects to eternal life, is the belief that transforms – the faith through which we are born again.

This is a critical point for us, just as it was for Nicodemus. Those were words spoken by Jesus to a good man. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a scholar in the law, respected and honored. But Nicodemus initiated this conversation with Jesus because he recognized that something was missing in his faith – that intellectual belief in the facts of God was just not enough. He came to Jesus looking for that extra something, but left with an entirely different answer than he expected. Jesus didn't tell this good man to do one more thing that would make him into what God wanted him to be; Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be radically transformed.

This is an especially critical point for us good people on Easter Sunday. Jesus did not come to earth and live and teach and suffer and die on the cross and rise from the dead so we could just believe all those facts and become better people. All that happened for us to know – really know, deeply know – the radical, transforming power of the love and mercy and forgiveness and grace of God made real for us in the person of Jesus Christ. All that happened to show us that we have hope for this life and the next through the Resurrection. All that happened to show us how simply being good people leaves us short of right relationship with God. All that happened so we could know the reality of being born again through real belief-become-faith.

The reality of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not some cold historical fact – it is the ground of our hope and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death. If there is something missing in your faith – if you are like Nicodemus and are hungry and thirsty and spiritually lonesome, hear this great good news on the day of Resurrection: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. Christ has died – for you – Christ has risen – for you – Christ will come again – for you. Praise be to God.

Amen