

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' 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.

Why Do We Believe?

That was a beautiful song by Jody McBrayer: "We Believe. Certainly that is who we are in the church – we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We believe he came to save us on the cross. And there's a need for all the world to know his love.

The question that we must ask ourselves is *why* we believe. It's very important, because there are some things that we *stop* believing and there are some things that we believe *instead of* Jesus. It can be very confusing, especially when other things are *easier to believe*. There are a lot of people who believe that Jesus died, and that was the end. They believe that what the Bible says about Easter is just not true. And let's be honest; that's an easy thing for many people to believe, isn't it? Children, and grown-ups, you know that if you go and tell people that Jesus is alive, there are a lot of people who will say you're crazy. After all, the Bible was written a long, long time ago, and anybody who knows of anybody who has died knows that the person who died is DEAD. Why should Jesus be any different? There are many people who will say that the Bible is wrong, and that Jesus' disciples were lying. And can we really blame them for believing that? I mean, if we believe the Bible, we believe what was written there about Jesus, but if we don't believe what was written in the Bible about Jesus, there's no reason to believe anything particular about Jesus.

I'll bet that there are a lot of people here who are not very bold in declaring that they are Christian, and they're even less bold in saying that they believe that Jesus is alive or that Jesus rose from the grave. It's probably the sort of thing that you keep private because you don't want to be called out on your belief. You don't want people making fun of you. "You believe Jesus came back from the dead?! I suppose you also believe that the moon is made of cheese! How many people do YOU know who have died and come back to life three days later? How many people do you know who are alive over 2000 years after they were born?"

The truth, my friends, is that it is very easy to NOT believe. And one reason that the Church has had some very hard times is that many Christians themselves have a hard time believing. Another reason the Church struggles is that the Church has tried to put PRESSURE on people into believing. "If you don't believe, do you know what's going to happen to you?" That kind of threat just doesn't have as much impact as it once did, though I suspect that some people are here today because they fear what might happen if they didn't publicly show that they are among those who really believe, and though I don't believe that showing up in church necessarily proves that you actually do believe in Jesus, there are people who may believe that God is taking attendance, especially on Easter.

But fear of unbelief cannot turn you into a believer; the only thing that leads a person to belief is *knowing Jesus!*

But how can you bring yourself to know Jesus if you don't believe in him in the first place? If you don't believe what is written about him in the Bible, how in the world can you really know Jesus? "Pastor, you're saying I have to know Jesus in order to believe, but how can I know Jesus if I don't believe in him?" The answer is that you must read the Bible with an open mind, and let the words of Jesus sink into your mind and heart. Read it with a yearning for truth, and see where it leads you.

Because you can't really come to accept the Christian faith unless you truly know who Jesus is, and you can't know who Jesus is apart from what is written in scripture. Once upon a time, I thought that Christianity was all about DOCTRINE...or what I referred to earlier this morning as *dogma*. That doesn't sound like a very nice word, does it? DOGMA! It isn't a very nice word, actually, although every religion has DOGMA. By definition, dogma is a set of principles that is considered ESSENTIAL to those who claim to belong to whatever religion the dogma belongs to. Christians believe that God is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that's Christian dogma. Is it wrong to believe that? NO. Are you in danger if you DON'T believe it?

Those who don't really know Jesus would likely answer "yes." Those who don't know who Jesus is based on what the Bible tells us about Jesus are likely to think of God as a boss or supervisor, making sure that you believe all the right things to assure that you have the right theology and therefore qualify for heaven, and so you profess a "faith" out of fear that failure to confess it will have negative repercussions in the hereafter.

Which brings us back to the resurrection; *do you believe that Jesus rose from the grave because you're afraid to believe otherwise?* (I'm not sounding "pastoral" on this Easter Sunday, am I?)

That question illustrates the problem of trying to take shortcuts. I said we need to know Jesus before we can, in faith, confess that he is the Son of God, yet some people would start out by confessing him to be the Son of God, then say that the Resurrection *proves* that he is the Son of God. That means that their faith, or what they call faith, hinges on Jesus' resurrection. But like so many things that we read about in the Bible, it can become hard to believe.

You have to know who Jesus *is* before you can have any confidence in the resurrection. Our belief is not that Jesus rose from the grave and is therefore the Son of God; **OUR BELIEF IS THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD; THEREFORE HE ROSE FROM THE GRAVE.** Only if we start with faith that Jesus is the Son of God will the resurrection make any sense to us.

In our Gospel reading we see different levels of belief, even before anyone actually sees Jesus alive on that Sunday. In our Gospel reading for today, we do NOT encounter the risen Christ. We have Mary who's not sure of what happened to Jesus, and we have the disciple whom Jesus loved, who does believe without actually seeing Jesus. Both see the same thing, yet one believes while the other doesn't. The evidence proves nothing; the tomb is empty, but in those days there were plenty of grave robbers; someone could have taken the body. In fact that's exactly what Mary assumes – that someone has taken the body. Why does the disciple who Jesus loves believe while Mary doesn't? What is the difference between the one who believes and the one who's puzzled?

The clue is in how the believer is described; the one whom Jesus loved. I know Jesus loves us all, but how conscious are we of that love? Donald Trump tells his supporters he loves them, but do any of them describe themselves as “the one who Donald loves”? I would say that *in order to identify yourself as one who Jesus loves, you need to know Jesus.* And that's where we get things backwards too often. We think that Jesus is the Son of God because he rose from the grave or because he walked on water, or healed a lot of sick people. **BUT IN FACT, IT'S KNOWING JESUS THAT LEADS US TO BELIEVE THAT HE ROSE FROM THE GRAVE.** We know Jesus primarily by what the Bible teaches us about him, and there's much more to him than the resurrection. I was reading an interview with Kurt Vonnegut, a man who confessed that he was NOT Christian; he declared himself to be a humanist. The Church in Vonnegut's parents day was having a hard time dealing with the theories of Charles Darwin, and the way his parents saw it, it was either believe what Darwin was saying or believe what the Church was saying, and Darwin won!! To Kurt Vonnegut there was more truth in Darwin than there was in the doctrine of the Church.

And yet Vonnegut *did* believe in at least some of the truth that Bible had taught him; he referred repeatedly to the truth of the axiom *forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us.* I believe that if Kurt Vonnegut had spent more time studying the teachings of Jesus, he would have confessed him to be Savior and Lord, but because the Church presented their doctrine as an ultimatum, Vonnegut rejected Christianity. Unfortunately the Church does the same thing today, presenting doctrine as the criteria for being a Christian rather than *emphasizing a relationship with Jesus Christ as the main qualification.*

Jesus taught truth; Jesus was truth; and that truth that he taught and the truth that he lived make it clear that HE WAS THE SON OF GOD. His life was so abundant in love that anyone who truly knew him could easily describe themselves as “one who Jesus loved.” His friend Lazarus is described that way by his sister Martha. All the people who wrote the New Testament witness to Christ’s love, a love that is nothing short of DIVINE, A LOVE THAT COULD LEAD A DYING MAN TO ASK FORGIVENESS FOR THOSE WHO ARE EXECUTING HIM, A LOVE THAT COULD LEAD HIM TO DIE FOR THE SINS OF THE ENTIRE WORLD.

THAT’S HOW WE KNOW THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD. And because it makes sense to us that Jesus is the Son of God, the Resurrection makes perfect sense to us as well. How can God’s own Son remain in the tomb, unless there is some power greater than God that can keep him there. And there is no power greater than God. There is no love greater than Christ’s. It’s not belief in the DOGMA that saves us. It’s belief in Jesus Christ, God’s Son, that saves us. It’s knowing his love.

And when we know that love, we are no longer reluctant to share our faith with others. We aren’t called to share our doctrine. We are not called to share our dogma. We are called to share none other than Jesus Christ, and the love that we know intimately.

If you are here this morning as one who wishes to be counted among those who believe out of fear of being an “unbeliever,” I encourage you to join a Bible study or a covenant group or a prayer group and meet people who believe because they know Jesus, who can identify themselves as “one who Jesus loves.” Those will be the same people who take his word to heart and live it to best of their ability. Those are the ones who will not disappoint you, who will not threaten you into belief but will patiently *love* you into believing.

That is the thing about God’s love; it knows no end. It takes on the world to prove itself to you. It takes on death itself to prove itself to you. And it will not falter, it will not surrender, it will not compromise itself. It will go to ends of the earth to embrace you and lead you along with all others to declare that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.