John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.21Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin\*), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.25So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’27Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’28Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’29Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.31But these are written so that you may come to believe\* that Jesus is the Messiah,\* the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Difference Between Belief and Faith

I want to begin by putting some minds at ease. We often hear church leaders telling people how important it is to *believe* in certain things. People will tell you that you have to *believe* that Jesus Christ is your Savior and Lord in order to go to heaven, in order to be a Christian. But I ‘believe’ that such a ‘belief’ is false and damaging to both the church and the people who go there.

I best explain myself, and to do so I want to appeal to the wisdom of a 20th century protestant theologian named Paul Tillich. Tillich was a brilliant man who loved the church and was greatly concerned with the direction that the church was heading in America. He asserts that what we believe matters little, but faith is all that matters. What does he mean? Well, Tillich defined faith as *being grasped by something that concerns us ultimately*. Two things to note here: first, we *are grasped* – we are a passive agent. Something or someone grasps us. Second, it is our ultimate concern. Jesus chides his disciples saying, “If you had the faith of a mustard seed you could move mountains.” It matters little how much faith you have, but rather what you have faith in. Is it faith in yourself? Is it faith in your husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, mother, or father? Or is it faith in God? What concerns you ultimately?

Because faith concerns our ultimate concern it draws from us an emotional reaction. We are Vulcans like Mr. Spock from Star Trek who analyze everything logically. Faith brings us pleasure and pain; having faith in our husband or wife can be a source of great comfort and joy, while having our faith betrayed by the same husband or wife can lead to despair and anger, fear and depression.

Belief, on the other hand, *is thinking that something is or is not true*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The new brickface looks nice. I *believe* this, yet this belief doesn’t affect me much; as nice as it is, it is not something that grasps me or concerns me ultimately. Belief can be logical; I believe that gravity will exert its force upon us during this sermon and we will not all be floating around the sanctuary, and I’ll even plan my future based on the assumption that gravity will still be exerting its force tomorrow and the next day. Yet I can believe things and still act in ways that logically defy my belief. For example I can believe that cigarettes are bad for my health, but I may continue to smoke with little emotional conflict. Likewise, I can also *believe* that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and not be affected by that at all. There are plenty of “believers” who have confessed with their lips that Jesus is the Son of God but whose lives are not at all impacted by this. They can be at a party and talk about ‘belief’ in Jesus Christ just as a friend can declare his ‘belief’ that there is no God, and the conversation can move to baseball without any emotion at all. They consider religion to be a dimension of their lives, and they have chosen the Christian ‘belief’ to fill that dimension, but their belief does not grasp them, nor is it an ultimate concern to them. People with such belief are very prone to leave the church when events or discoveries somehow challenge those beliefs, and unfortunately those who try to convince them that their belief is vital to their salvation end up driving them out of the even more quickly. I belonged to such a group in college – nice people, but their focus was all on believing the right doctrine and making sure that their members believed likewise.

These people really do the church more harm than good. They put so much emphasis on the importance of a particular doctrine at the expense of faith in Jesus Christ. The result is that many people go through life not with faith but with a belief system that they may feel is adequate to assure them of a good life after death…maybe. Because they *believe* that they have the right doctrine, God will accept them. They *confess* that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and they know the creeds (“I *believe* in God the Father almighty…”), but they only believe inasmuch as they believe that their *belief* is somehow important to their ultimate well-being. And there is a danger to this emphasis on belief; throughout history, men and women have made discoveries, scientific and archeological, which throw into question certain Christian ‘beliefs.’ And those of little faith quickly abandon the church when scientific or archeological discoveries contradict their ‘beliefs.’

In today’s reading from the Gospel of John we find Thomas, *doubting Thomas*, not believing that Jesus had been resurrected. We give Thomas a lot of grief, but be honest: would you have believed the testimony of others? I don’t think I would have. Like Thomas I would want to see for myself. Thomas doubted for sure, but note this: Thomas did not depart the disciples. He didn’t just say, “That’s it. I quit. Jesus didn’t rise from the dead. Game over.” He continued to hang out with the other disciples, perhaps because amidst his doubt their was a hope that he was wrong. Perhaps he was grasped by something that concerned him ultimately. He was! We find proof of that when Jesus *does* appear to him. Jesus says, “Thomas. Come here. Put your finger here.” Thomas doesn’t say, “Okay, you got me, Jesus. I was wrong. You did rise from the dead.” Instead Thomas declares, “My Lord and my God!” Thomas was emotionally invested in Jesus. Through years of living with him, watching him, talking to him, learning from him, Thomas had put faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Thomas was grasped by the divine, but didn’t know how the divine related to this man Jesus. And the resurrected Christ helped him make this connection. “My Lord and My God.”

The people that we read about in Acts, who are living together with the disciples, who sell everything they have and take care of one another’s needs, they are not merely ‘believers’ in Jesus’ resurrection; they are grasped by God, and they are able to declare as Thomas did, “My Lord and my God!” Their lives are transformed by their faith in Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Jesus did not merely *believe* in God; Jesus had faith in God. Jesus was grasped by God. God was Jesus’ ultimate concern. He went out early in the morning to pray to God. He constantly gave thanks to God. He talked incessantly about God. In fact, Jesus was so grasped by God that he could say things like, “The father and I are one.” He was so tight with the Father that he called him “Papa.” Did Jesus have doubts? Yes. He prayed in the Garden of Gathsemane “Father, take this cup from me.” He cried tears of blood his struggle was so intense. He shouted from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

What’s the take home? I want you to ask yourself if God is your ultimate concern. Have you been placing your hopes in your ‘belief’ system, or have you been grasped by God? There is more to God that we don’t know than we *do* know, and what you believe may be disproved in some ways. But what is important is that you pursue God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul, because God should be everyone’s ultimate concern. Being a Christian does not mean having all the answers; what it means is placing your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. This is core of your faith. And dwelling in God’s presence is your ultimate desire, and the only place that you find refuge from all the uncertainty in life. Be at peace with your doubts, but let yourself be grasped by God and place your faith in his love, his grace, his forgiveness.

1. One can find Tillich’s definition in an interview recorded on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-bcTHeAU9o&feature=relmfu> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)