

LIVING THIS SIDE OF EASTER

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(Luke 24:1-12) But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. {2} They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, {3} but when they went in, they did not find the body. {4} While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. {5} The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. {6} Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, {7} that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." {8} Then they remembered his words, {9} and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. {10} Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. {11} But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. {12} But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

BELIEF-O-MATIC

For those who don't know what to believe anymore especially in a culture filled with cynicism and disbelief there is finally help. This help, of course, is available only on the internet at a website called "Belief-o-matic." After answering only 20 questions, they will tell you what religion, if any, you ought to practice. Well, I for one was hooked. I answered the questions and got my results. Within a few minutes, it determined that I was best suited to a mainline Protestant Congregation. Whew! That's a relief. I would hate to make a change at this point.

Belief-o-matic also suggested that I would do well as a Quaker. Since Quakers don't have pastors or sermons, I've decided not to make a switch. Reformed Judaism was another high pick but I'm not sure they would accept any of my post graduate work which didn't include Hebrew language studies. I don't think a non-Hebrew speaking balding gentile would make a very good Rabbi.

We all have beliefs in some form or another. I go to the doctor believing that he or she will give me the right medication to keep my cholesterol

regulated and my blood pressure under control. We get on jet airplanes expecting the pilot(s) to know how to fly the thing. Beliefs—you can't leave home without them.

So let me ask you this morning, what do you believe about God in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Where do you stand?

According to a 2007 Harris Poll:

- 82% of Adult Americans believe in God.
- 75% believe in Heaven
- 72% believe that Jesus is the Son of God
- 70% believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ¹

It's good to know that, at least on paper, we are a nation of believers. I wonder, though, how strong our beliefs really are. Researcher George Barna suggests that most of our beliefs are loosely held. In other words, we aren't all that committed to them. ***“There is not much that Americans believe with unshakable confidence,”*** Barna concludes. Maybe the culture of disbelief and cynicism has infiltrated our psyche more than we realize or want to admit. As someone has suggested, it's easier for us to believe in the material world of our existence. What is most unreal for us is the world of God. Maybe that's the reason most of us, at best, are just ***“Weathervane Christians”***² (I think you get the point).

It's Easter. The tomb is empty. Our churches are full. Hallelujahs are being proclaimed with trumpet, organ, handbell and voice. Behind our appropriately dressed bodies and smiling faces, many of us, I'm afraid, secretly agree with the sequestered disciples who thought that the women's words were ***“an idle tale.”*** Is there some way we could find the courage to believe on this Easter Day? Could 2010 be the year when

¹www.theharrispoll.com

²Brennan Manning, *The Importance of Being Foolish* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005), 14.

we proclaim—and really mean it—that “*Jesus Christ is risen today?*” What do you and I believe? How can we go home this side of Easter as Peter did truly amazed by all that has transpired over the last few days?

PETER GOT UP AND RAN

When the women returned from the tomb and told the disciples that it was empty, all of the disciples but one thought it was an idle tale. Scripture tells us, “*Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*”³ This same Peter only a few days earlier denied his Lord three times. The cockcrow was still ringing in his ears and yet he ran to the tomb and was amazed.

In order to be amazed and to believe, we have to make a step towards belief. Peter was a skeptic just like the other disciples but he at least ran to the tomb to see. If Peter could rise out of his denial, then I believe we can rise out of our doubt and unbelief. We might not run to the tomb. We may only walk with baby steps but we all have to start somewhere.

LIVE WITH THE QUESTIONS

I have no idea what went through Peter’s mind when he arrived at the tomb and found it empty. All I know is that this stubborn, complicated fisherman, who had previously refused to wash his fellow disciple’s feet, crawled around on his hands and knees looking for the resurrected Christ.

Peter didn’t get any direct answers at the tomb. There was no voice from heaven or heavenly appearance at this point. All he had to go on was a leftover linen cloth. Peter was learning to live with the questions and that was Ok. So, let me ask you, are you willing to live with the questions? There are thousands of churches and pastors over the last few weeks that have taken out ads and proclaimed from their pulpits and the airwaves that they will answer the hard questions about Jesus and the resurrection.

³Luke 24:12, NRSV.

I'm sure that works for some people and I respect what they are trying to do. After 27 years of ministry and a lifetime of being a Christian, I am finding more faith in living the questions than in pursuing the answers. I don't need things to be black and white nor do I need assurance that I have all the answers.

That's the reason I don't say to parents who have lost a child, "**God must have needed another angel.**" I would rather live without pat answers like that. I do not say to a spouse who has lost a mate, "**It was his/her time or God knows what he is doing.**" I can live without answers like that that push people away from God and turn God into some sort of cruel puppet master. Many of our assumptions don't help people in their faith journey. I would rather live with the questions. I am confident that God in Jesus Christ has the answers and some day after living with the questions, I might arrive at an answer. For now, I'm OK with the questions on this side of Easter.⁴

FOLLOW

Living this side of Easter is following Jesus. Peter ran from the tomb and immediately preached the first resurrection sermon. Again, I'm not sure what happened at the tomb but it was enough to convince Peter to follow Jesus for the rest of his life. Peter was so committed that he would eventually be one of the church's first martyrs.

We follow and are obsessed by so many things in the 21st century. We follow our wealth and the wealth of others. We obsess over our looks, what to wear, how we appear to others, and happiness through more and more activity. We seek professional guidance through workshops, books, periodicals and the web. All of this is done to the detriment of our spiritual lives and our very souls. To paraphrase 16th century Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, "**Would that I had served my God the way I have watched my waistline.**"

⁴J. Howard Olds, *An Invitation to Christian Discipleship: Follow me* (Brentwood Sermons, April 8, 2007), 3-4.

Like everyone else we Christians are prone to chemical dependency, affairs, self-serving friendships, and risky behavior all to the detriment of Jesus Christ in our hearts. As Brennan Manning reminded me this week, *“We seek and search for ways to fill up the gaping holes in our lives, yet come away from these experiences with little more than a temporary sense of completion.”*⁵

As I looked through all the books in my personal library and as I scanned the religious books available in Cokesbury a few weeks ago, I didn't see many books on following. There were books on preaching, leadership, spirituality, Methodism, and Bible study. That seems strange to me because the only thing I can remember Jesus really asking us to do is follow.

When Jesus set out on his three-year ministry, he immediately caught up with Peter who was in Galilee running a fishing business. Jesus didn't give Peter a long list of things to do. He didn't ask him to recite any creeds or portions of the Torah. He didn't ask Peter how many times he had been to church. Jesus made only one simple request, *“follow me.”* Amazingly, Peter did along with John, Andrew, James and others.

Jesus started calling me at a young age to be one of his ministers. He called me specifically to be a pastor in his church. I have to tell you that I didn't know what that meant at first and for a long time I just had to follow. I went off to seminary not knowing where it would lead and I join the Western North Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church not knowing where that might lead. What's most important is when Jesus comes along and says follow that we go with him and that we go with him all the way.

After all these years of following, I've learned a few things. First, everybody is following somebody or something. Some are following the latest superstar or sports team. Others are following a career path, their

⁵Manning, p. 71.

horoscope or the latest self-help guru. Unfortunately, some preachers today will tell you that following Jesus means health, wealth and the Lord's blessings on every detail of your life, including helping you to purchase the winning lottery ticket or the closest parking space at the mall. Such promotion is heresy. Jesus didn't come proclaiming a prosperity Gospel, he came announcing God's presence with kings, rulers, people of position and the least, last and lost. Jesus doesn't play favorites.

What I have discovered is that following Jesus means surrender, service and trusting every day of your life. Sometimes following is easy and sometimes it is hard. We follow when the path is clear and we follow when it is dark.

Let me close with a story. It's not my story but it's a good one.

In the winter of 1952, during some of the heaviest combat of the Korean War, two Marine corporals were crouched in the bunker of a forward observation post some one hundred yards inside enemy lines. Jack Robison and Tim Casey had been friends for almost a year. They met in ammunition-demolition school in Quantico, Virginia, went on furlough together, then traveled on to Camp Pendleton, California, for advanced infantry training. Their regiment had arrived in Pusan, Korea in the fall of 1951.

It was a little after midnight, and a light snow was falling. Huddled in the bunker, the two were passing a cigarette back and forth when a hand grenade, lobbed by an undetected North Korean twenty-five yards north of their position, landed squarely between them. Casey spotted it first. He nonchalantly flicked the butt aside and fell on the grenade. It detonated instantly, but Casey's stomach absorbed the explosion. He winked at Robison and rolled over dead.

Four years later Robison entered religious life. When he pronounced his solemn vows in 1960, he took a new name to symbolize his new life in

Christ Jesus. He changed his given name from Jack to Casey in the hope that the spirit of self-sacrifice that had animated Tim Casey's life would characterize his own. He also befriended Casey's widowed mother and began to divide his Christmas vacations between his own family in Rhode Island and Mrs. Casey in Chicago.

One summer Father Casey Robison dropped in at Mrs. Casey's on a surprise visit. He was feeling tired and depressed. They followed the usual procedure of watching the afternoon soap opera on Television together, holding hands all the while. After dinner they sat in the living room having a drink and reminiscing about the days when Tim was alive. The priest's depression lingered. Unexpectedly he asked, "*Ma, do you think Casey really loved me?*"

She laughed, "*Oh, Jack, ya sure got a way with ya.*" It was a faint Irish brogue. "*Ya can't ever be serious.*"

"*I am serious,*" Robison replied.

There was fear in her eyes. "*Now stop funnin' me, Jack.*"

"*I'm not funnin', Ma.*"

She looked at him in disbelief. Then fear turned to fury. Mrs. Casey never cussed or took the Lord's name casually. But that night she stood up and screamed, "*Jesus Christ, man, what more could he ha' done fer ya?*"

Then she sank back in the chair, buried her head in her bosom, and began to sob. Over and over again the same phrase was endlessly, unbearably repeated: "*What more could he ha' done fer ya?*" After a long time, she smiled her wan little smile and said softly, "*Ah, Jack, I guess we all need those reassurances from time to time.*"

Brennan Manning commenting on this story says, ***“That was the night Father Casey Robison gave up his insecurity and found the peace that comes with genuine trust.”***⁶

On this side of Easter as you kneel at the empty tomb, may you find enough in your questions and following to trust. Jesus Christ, what more could he have done for you?

⁶Manning, 62-64.