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“Trusting the Resurrection”

Acts 4:32-35

John 20:19-31

Amidst all the hand-wringing about young adults leaving the church, there’s a lot of guessing and a lot of speculation. So church scholar Diana Butler Bass set out to examine this idea we hear frequently of “spiritual but not religious,” and to actually break down what people mean by it, and what this phrase means for the church. So she started to explore the meaning and history of these two categories, ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious.’

One idea that goes together pretty closely with ‘religious’ is the concept of belief. Now we use the word ‘believe’ a lot. You’d think we’d at least agree on what it meant. And maybe we do, mostly, but it turns out that what we mean when we say “I believe this” has changed a whole lot since the time when Thomas talked about having trouble believing in Jesus’ resurrection.

She starts out telling a story of a young woman she met when guest preaching at a small Lutheran church, known mainly for its potlucks and its quilting bees. They sat down at lunch together, and at some point the young woman says to her:

“I love this congregation. The people have become my family. But I don’t know what to say to my classmates when they ask me what I believe. Whenever I say ‘I believe in Christianity,’ they look at me as if I’m crazy. Besides, I don’t even know if I believe ‘in’ Christianity or Lutheran doctrine or anything like that. I just experience how to love God and how God loves me through these people, by learning how to quilt and singing these hymns. I don’t know what to call it, but it is less about believing and more about living. Does that still count as being a Christian?”

This student had trouble articulating what it is she “believes” in part because our modern understanding of belief seems to be mostly about intellectual assent, as if God is a yes or no question: “yes, I believe *that* God exists,” or “no, I do not,” with very few options in between. But Diana Butler Bass argues that this is a fairly recent evolution in our language: that until the last few centuries, the word “belief” was not about evidence or intellectual choice, but it was “more like a marriage vow – ‘I do’ as a pledge of faithfulness and loving service to and with the other.”

She quotes historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith: “The affirmation ‘I believe in God’ used to mean: ‘Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to him my heart and soul. I committedly opt to live in loyalty to him.’ ... Today the statement may be taken by some as meaning: ‘Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is “yes.” I judge God to be existent.’”

That’s quite a shift, isn’t it?! She suggests that we might be better off translating “believe” as *trust*, to capture this idea of belief coming from the heart rather than from the brain. “I trust in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. I trust in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord. I trust in the Holy Ghost, I trust in the forgiveness of sins, I trust in the life everlasting. Amen.”

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Our gospel story today is known to many as the story of Doubting Thomas, as if he's the one disciple who just doesn't get it, the one stubborn guy, when really he just wants what everyone else already got: to see Jesus!

And it's not like everyone else was doing much better. They had all *heard* that Jesus had been raised, and yet there they are on Easter evening, hiding themselves away in a locked house, afraid. And then, amazingly, Jesus comes speaking peace, moving through even those locked doors and the fear that overcame them. But then a week later, even after Jesus sent them out with the Holy Spirit upon them, there they are again behind those same closed doors.

And Jesus comes to them again. We know Thomas needed to see him, and apparently the rest of the disciples needed to be reminded as well. They're certainly not acting like Christ is risen and they were sent out into the world to proclaim it.

Jesus came for Thomas, sure. But Jesus also came because it really didn't seem like the other disciples trusted this good news either.

Thomas got the scolding, perhaps; that line which usually gets translated "Do not doubt but believe." And yet in the Greek, those words really mean something more like, "Do not be unbelieving but believing." Or, maybe, "Do not be untrusting, but trusting."

And then John's summary sounds more like: "these are written so that you may come to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, and that through faith and trust you may have life in his name."

"Distrustful Thomas" isn't much better as far as Thomas' reputation is concerned, but I do think that Jesus' message to *us* can shift dramatically. We are not being asked to agree to the literal truth of the resurrection – even the first disciples and the gospel writers disagreed on exactly what happened and what Jesus looked or felt like after Easter! But we are told with Thomas to *trust* that Jesus is risen. To have faith. To profess our *love* for the resurrection of Christ.

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And it's a big deal to pledge allegiance to the risen Christ. This is much more about saying yes or no, or about checking a box on the to-do list for eternal life: yup, I've agreed that Jesus can be my Lord and savior if he wants to do that. *Trusting* that Christ is risen changes everything.

We get a little snapshot of what that might look like in our reading from the book of Acts. It's a bit of a simplified portrait, to be sure, but think about what that might mean! "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." And they did this *because* they gave testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and they cared for one another as any of them had need.

And then the writer goes on to tell stories of some people living up to this ideal and some people having trouble with it, just like any community in the world. But what is held up is the idea that the resurrection of Jesus *means* caring for one another. And it means completely redefining the way they understood property and wealth, because it means completely reorienting themselves in the world.

Living into the resurrection of Christ, for them, meant really trying to live up to all the stuff Jesus had taught them about loving one another, in the very practical sense of caring for one another's needs. "There was not a needy person among them," because they had come to understand that living out their faith and proclaiming Jesus' resurrection was not just about what words they said or what they did on Sunday mornings; it meant living their whole lives through the lens of Jesus' teachings.

Suddenly the astounding fact that their messiah had been brutally executed and then *came back* meant that all their assumptions about the way life was and how people were just supposed to live because that's the way the world worked – suddenly everything changes. Suddenly death might not even mean death anymore, and so why should they let the world tell them that they should really be saving some money for themselves when Jesus has just turned that world upside down?

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Well sure, we might say, that's all well and good for *them*. They were caught up in the excitement of the newness of the church, and they didn't have to worry about saving for retirement because they didn't live as long as we will. If they'd seen Jesus during his life it's no wonder they'd be excited! And didn't they think Christ would be coming back soon? We know better now.

Maybe so, but let me assure you that this picture of the early believers would have been just as counter-cultural then as it is today. People still had the same motivation to look out for their own futures, their own families, their own security in a world where the future was even less secure than our own. I'm sure they got the same eye rolls from their neighbors about those darn hippies.

And they did it anyway, because they had experienced something amazing in their contact with Jesus' teachings and followers. It wasn't a well-reasoned explanation of how salvation worked, it wasn't a logical exposition of the way that following Jesus' teachings would lead to increased happiness. They had experienced the love of God and the love of a community, and they trusted that.

In the words of the Lutheran student who talked with Diana Butler Bass, it's less about believing and more about living.

And in our belief-centric world, we've lost some of the passion that drove the early church to their radical change of life inspired by the resurrection. Sure, we might "believe" it. Yes, we can say with some historical certainty that there was a man named Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, and that his followers afterward experienced him as alive again. But can we *trust* it? Can we pledge our hearts and souls to the resurrection of Christ? What does that even mean?

Like Thomas we have been separated from the experience of those who first met the risen Christ. We have heard testimony, but we are skeptical. Okay, Jesus is back, if you say so. We've heard stories, but we haven't quite witnessed the power of the resurrection to *change* anything.

So what on earth does it have to do with me? That happened two thousand years ago, halfway around the world. I'm just going about my life, planning for things to happen the way I expect them to happen, saving for the future, because I certainly don't expect anything miraculous to happen. The world just doesn't work that way.

Until I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not trust this crazy story. I will not allow the risen Christ to change *my* life.

Friends, we have heard the testimony from believers through the ages: Christ is risen. The world has changed. Can we trust this amazing news?