

Just Live Out Your Faith

By: Penny Holste

April 3, 2016. In John 20:24-31, Jesus says to “doubting Thomas” blessed are they who do not see, and yet believe. For us, it doesn’t always feel very blessed not to be able to see Jesus and yet to believe, even as more and more skeptics pull away from the church or don’t believe in God at all. In her sermon today, Pastor Penny talks about how important trust is in believing — even more important than seeing. Maybe God puts people in our lives we can trust, people who believe that their faith is vital and life-giving, so that even when we don’t have Jesus to look at, we don’t have to be distracted by beliefs that serve only our own purposes and which may not be life-giving, but we can have the life that God wants for us and for the world. And by the power of the Holy Spirit we can become the people others trust, we can be witnesses, and by just living out our faith, someday others may see that Christ brings life to the world.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have to confess that there's a part of this gospel that always has bothered me and maybe, until lately, it's really made me angry. And it's where Jesus tells the disciples that "blessed are those who haven't seen me and still believe." Because that's where we are, isn't it? We didn't see Jesus after the resurrection in bodily form. And so we believe in a God we can't see. We believe in a resurrection that we haven't experienced. We believe in the power of sacraments that we can't explain. Meanwhile, all around us, there are more and more skeptics about the church. More people have pulled away from the church. And there's a vocal, if not growing, group of people that call themselves atheists, that don't believe in God at all. So, it doesn't feel very blessed to be here without the opportunity to see Jesus and yet to believe.

Well we say seeing is believing. But that's not really true, is it. You know, if we watch a magician do a card trick or pull a coin out from behind the ear, we see that. We don't believe that it's really happening. There is something more important than seeing that makes us believe, and that's being able to trust. And in fact when Jesus told Thomas, "Thomas, don't doubt me," that's the way we have the translation that we read. In the Greek it's, "Thomas, don't not trust me." — in other words: trust me Thomas. When we don't trust, even if we see, we won't believe. A case in point are the people that gave so much trouble to Jesus — the leaders, the religious leaders who saw him heal a blind man, who saw that Lazarus had been brought back to life, but who would not allow themselves to believe that Jesus' actions were from God. Because their trust was really not in God as much as in themselves. They trusted their own way of living that they believed would bring them closer to God. They trusted their own political savvy. They had determined that it was better for Jesus to die and prevent a riot by his followers that would bring the Roman troops down on them. And so Jesus stood right before them, God in the flesh, and they should have recognized his words and his actions as Godly. But they wouldn't let themselves trust, and so they didn't believe.

Now it's true that we have not been blessed with the ability to see Jesus walking around, though I'm sure some of you have had visions. And they count for a lot. But God has done something more important for our faith. The Holy Spirit has put people in our lives we can trust. And those people have shown us that they believe their faith is vital and life-giving. You know, we teach our children, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." But really (and you've heard this before) it should say

"but Mommy told me so" or "Grandpa taught me." Because we first learned the faith from people we care about, often people we love, and that's why we believe it. Some of you probably have hymnals or catechisms or Bibles written in a language that you don't speak or know very little of, that have been handed on to you from great-great-grandparents that came here with not very many things to this country. But they brought the symbols of their faith. They brought the word to delve into, because it was a life-giving source of strength. And it still is. I know Keith was helping clean out an apartment where some summer laborers from Mexico had lived, and they had gone back to Mexico for the season. And there's a poster with the Ten Commandments in Spanish, and some other Christian literature in their tongue, because they were coming to a country where (especially in our area) people didn't speak Spanish. It was their source and their rock.

So we have been given people that have found the faith to be life-giving and have found the community of faith to be life-giving. We know that when relatives or friends lose a loved one, we see them turning to the community of faith for a listening ear, for prayers, for support, to hear again the promise of the resurrection.

So we don't have Jesus to look at. But maybe this is the blessing. I'm still not sure about that passage, but maybe this is the blessing: we are not distracted by trying to understand "Oh did I see that, or didn't I see that?" It's not all on us. It's much easier, I think, to embrace the life of a person you love, and to watch through their lives how they find their faith to be life-giving, and to believe because of it. It is life-giving for us and for the world, and sometimes that means that we need to give up some of the beliefs that get in the way that are not life-giving.

I don't know if any of you have seen "Zootopia" but it's a really fun movie, Disney's latest animated movie. And of course, it's about animals, Zootopia. And so the main character is Judy Hopps. She's a rabbit, and she had a dream to do something no rabbit had ever done before, and that was to be part of the law enforcement, to be a police officer. But it would require her to leave the safe little town that all the rabbits lived in and go to Zootopia, which was a city full of different kinds of animals, including the animal her parents most feared, which was a fox. And so they begged her not to go. Finally they relented because she was so adamant, and sent her off with three different fox-fighting weapons in her arsenal. Well Judy gets to Zootopia, and sure enough the first character that she begins to have a relationship with is a fox. And at first she's a little shy, but she soon understands that underneath that street-savvy demeanor is somebody who has become a really loyal and good friend. But her prejudices that she learned as a child bubbled up again later on in the movie when Judy, now a police officer in high standing, is making an announcement to the public explaining why some predatory animals — including that would be foxes — have suddenly gone violent when they hadn't before, and she chalked it up to their evil nature. Of course when her friend the fox heard that, really he was cut to the heart.

Like the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day, we are so prone to having beliefs that serve our own purposes, and they're not serving God's. If they seem to make us feel safer, if they promote whatever ambitious idea we have, they're so easy to hang onto. But they can be so divisive, between our friends, between other people in the world. And we push God away. God wants life for us and for the world, and the two do go together.

I don't know if any of you read the story in the paper a couple days ago about a man named John Langerston. He moved here from California. He grew up in Oakland, in a tough neighborhood, got involved with drugs, went to prison, and when he got out of prison he made a change in his life. He got involved in business. He soon owned his own marketing business. And a few years ago he decided he wanted a new challenge. And this is a sad thing: he Googled worst places to live, and St. Louis came

up. And I did it, and we're on some of the lists. Anyway but he did that, and then he moved his family to the College Hill neighborhood — not an easy neighborhood to live in in St. Louis — and he bought an old UCC Church that wasn't being used. His family lives in the Sunday School area, and he refurbished the gym. And he has an after-school program to encourage the youth in the neighborhood to be serious about their studies. He wants them to make better choices than he did. He wants to see that their lives have life. And his program has a time limit, because a few years ago, before he moved here, he was told that he has an immune disorder and only a few years to live. He's outlived the estimate, but this is what he has chosen to do with the remaining few years of his life: showing us, I think, that to live in a way that gives life to the world is also life-giving to ourselves.

It is not an easy time to be a Christian, not with so many people believing so many different things. But at a workshop recently on the New Atheists, the professor said this. He said, "Don't argue with people who don't believe what you believe. Just live out your faith." And what I believe he was telling us is that as we live in ways that are life-giving to the world, we become those people that they can trust, we become those witnesses, through our lives, through the work of the Holy Spirit, that allow them someday to see that Christ brings life to the world.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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