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Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 32: 1-6
Psalm 118
John 20: 1-9
Acts 10: 34-43
Colossians 3: 1-4

Sermon Title: "What Do You Need to Believe?"

Sermon Topic: Easter

Sermon Purpose: To lead the congregation in determining how much they believe of what they hear about the Resurrection.

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Sermon Prayer: Lord, we come this Easter day to hear, to experience, and to believe. Guide our hearts, our minds, and our lives, we pray, in our witness and in our service to Christ's kingdom. Amen.

What does it take to believe? What does it take for you to believe in **electricity**, for example? When you walk into a darkened room and flip the light switch, and the light comes on, do you believe? You've seen the results of turning on that switch. Is **that** enough to convince you of the reality of electricity, or do you need to know about the electrons racing around the neutrons of the atoms?

What does it take for you to believe in **computers**? Do you need to know all about the circuitry and exactly **what's** happening within that unit? Or can you turn it on, see the results, and believe?

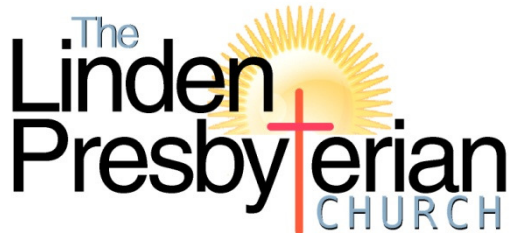
Are **results** enough to make you believe in something? Or does it all have to be **completely** explained in order to make any sense to you? Do you have to be able to **see**, and to **touch**, and to **understand**, and to **figure** the whole thing out before you believe?

What does it take for you to believe in **Easter**? Is it enough to **hear** about what happened at the resurrection? Is reading this account in the Gospel Lesson enough for you to be able to **believe** that Jesus rose on Easter day? Would you believe **better** – more **strongly** – if you had **been** there – if you had been able to see with your **own** eyes? Would you, like one of the disciples, need to **touch** Jesus' hands and His side, before you could **really** believe that He was raised from the dead?

One of the wonderful aspects of the Scripture that we read this morning are the different examples of how people came to faith in that Good News story. We read from John and from other accounts about how the earliest disciples came to their belief.

Let's look at the Apostle John, first. In our Gospel Lesson, he is referred to as "the other disciple," or "the one whom Jesus loved." When Mary came and told John and Simon Peter that Jesus' body was **missing** from the tomb, they both ran quickly to see what had happened! John outran Peter, but **hesitated** outside the tomb. Peter, being more impulsive, stooped down and went into the tomb. There, he saw the cloths lying together and the napkin that had been used on Jesus' head. It was **then**





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that John **also** stepped into the tomb. The Gospel says, “he saw and believed.” John saw the empty tomb, the cloths lying there where Jesus had been, and he believed.

It’s interesting to note that **nowhere** in this account do we discover at what point **Peter** believed. He saw the same thing **John** had seen, but it did not bring him to faith. That only came later.

The **other** person who is dealt with in this account is **Mary Magdalene**. She was the first to find the empty tomb. After seeing it, she ran to spread the word to the disciples. When Peter and John ran to the tomb, she followed. **They** saw the tomb empty, and left. Then, **she** looked in, **herself**. Mary saw something the other two had **not** seen. She saw two **angels** who asked her, “Women, why are you weeping?” When Mary Magdalene left the tomb, she even saw Jesus, Himself. But she didn’t recognize him.

So Mary saw the empty tomb with the cloths. She saw the two angels **in** the tomb. She even saw **Jesus**. And yet, there is no indication that she believed, as **yet!**

What **is** it that brought her to the point of belief? It was when Jesus **spoke her name**, and she turned and saw him, and believed.

This reminds us of words Jesus spoke, earlier in John’s Gospel, when he said that he was like the shepherd and they were like his sheep. They knew his voice and they followed him.¹ It took Jesus calling Mary’s **name** to help her believe. She knew his voice and answered.

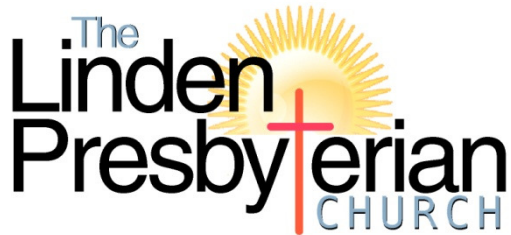
There’s one **other** important figure in this whole drama. That’s **Thomas**. He heard eyewitness accounts from the other disciples. But he could not bring himself to believe. He said that only if he saw Jesus for **himself** and touched the hands, and touched the side of Jesus, would he be able to believe.

Sometime later, that’s **exactly** what took place. Jesus appeared and showed Thomas the marks of the nails in his hands, and the mark of the spear in his side. And Thomas believed! Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet believed.”

John presents a number of **different** reactions to Jesus’ resurrection. All of them are reactions of faith, although some need more evidence than others. They range from John looking at the empty tomb and believing at once, to Thomas who must not only **see**, but he must also **touch** and **feel**.

None of those options available to the earliest disciples are available to us, now. We cannot see or touch. We cannot even observe the empty tomb. All we have is the word of the witnesses – who saw and were changed. We have the word of the first disciples, who were witnesses to Jesus’ resurrected body and whose lives were transformed. We also have the witness of the Apostle **Paul**. Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples, and he did not see the resurrection firsthand, but he **was** an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ. Remember on the road to Damascus how the great light appeared to Paul and changed his life from **persecuting** Christians to **developing new** Christian congregations? Paul saw the experience as a face-to-face confrontation with the resurrected Jesus. We have **his** word, too.

¹ John 10: 3-4.



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For me, the **fascinating** thing about this account is how God **stayed** with those people for **as long as they needed** in their search for faith. For John, all he needed to do was to see the empty tomb and he could believe. But Mary Magdalene saw, and saw again, and even saw Jesus. God stayed with her until she **had** what she needed to be able to believe; he called her name.

And look at Thomas, God stayed with him during **his** search for faith – defiant as he was, sometimes – until he had what **he** needed to believe.

I think it's reassuring for **all** of us as we move along in our faith journeys. God stays with us while we search for what we need. This passage indicated that as long as our search for faith is **honest** and **sincere**, God will offer us more and more until we are able to believe.

These disciples weren't involved in any **philosophical experiment** or a game of "Truth or Dare." These were people like **us** who were seeking answers to questions concerning the deepest commitment of their lives. When we sincerely search for faith in God, that **same** God comes to meet us at the point that helps us to believe, **wherever** it is. Maybe that involves calling our names – if only we will hear.

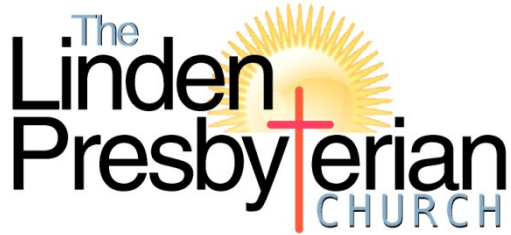
What **is** necessary for us to believe? Can we trust the witnesses who **saw** and who **spread** the word? They believed enough to risk their **lives** to tell that story. Can we believe those who **heard** the original witnesses? **They** believed that word, themselves, and passed along that good news to the **next** generation. **Some** will find it more difficult to believe than do others. Some will need **more** evidence, more **proof**, than others in order to come to faith. But **all** of us who are searching, who are **open** to believing and knowing, **can** find what we need – because God lays it all out for us like a holiday table. Everything we need is there: the meat of the issue, the trimmings of practice, the beverage of tradition, and the dessert of the stories of others. Everything is there. We only have to look, and to taste, and to know the fulfillment of his promise.

Possibly it's not so much a matter of **belief** as it is a matter of **trust**. How long do we need to **hear** and how long do we need to **know** before we can really trust?

A president of a company suspects that one of his managers is secretly embezzling funds from that office. He contacts the head of security and asks that the man be **investigated** (week after week) for a period of months. Each week, the security person has to report his findings. In the weekly meeting, the security chief reports that the department's personnel have gone over all the books, have observed the suspect almost every moment of the working day, and they can find **nothing** to indicate that he is stealing anything at all. Week after week, these reports come back with the same clear findings being given to the president.

How many of those meetings will that president have to hold before he **believes** in the man who works for him? Will it be one, or five, or fifty, or a hundred, or a thousand? I suggest that a **million** of those reports will **not** be enough to convince the president – until he can learn to **trust** that man. An investigation with preconceived ideas about what the answer will be, or prejudiced feelings about the outcome, will **never** be able to make a person hear or to believe. But, an **open** desire to





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know and to understand will eventually lead to the trust necessary to believe. That's what **faith** is all about.

To believe in Easter is to believe in the power of God. That demands our trust.

If we are searching for God – wanting to know and to understand what **God** is doing in our world and in our lives – this passage from John encourages us to continue that search. It also indicates that God will find us at the level of trust that is necessary for us. If we are seriously searching, God will help us find the way.

But belief is not enough. It is **trust** that **really** carries the weight. Are we open to see and to believe? Are we able to hear if, in subtle ways, God calls our name? Are our lives open enough to be able to trust in God?

Let us pray:

Holy Father, Who has given us life and love in Christ Jesus; enable us to know and to believe in the power of the resurrection and to trust your love as expressed through the sacrifice and the event we celebrate this day. Enable our hearts and our minds to be open, to hear, and to respond to that love with eagerness and with joy, in the precious name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

