

Seeing Is Believing

April 28, 2019

[Scripture Focus: John 20: 19 - 31]

INITIAL

When I've had a particularly long day, one of the things that I love to do is to go home, get in bed and watch a mindless TV show. These shows often take place in a particular geographic region (like the Alaskan Bush People); or have a focus on animals (Swamp People or My Cat From Hell); or feature some very high level of personal dysfunction (maybe Hoarders or Love After Lockup).

One show that sits on the border of being described as mindless for me is called "Fool Us." It's on the CW Network (a joint venture between CBS and AT&T). It stars magicians Penn & Teller. If you've never seen the show, it's described online as "a highly entertaining and thrilling one-hour competition series celebrating magic and featuring the legendary magician duo Penn and Teller. On each episode, aspiring magicians from all around the world are invited to perform their best trick to try and fool the two. To avoid spoiling the tricks, when Penn and Teller are able to guess how the contestants' magic works, they usually explain it in code. On the rare occasion when the contestants do manage to fool them, they are rewarded with a guest spot on Penn & Teller's famous magic show in Las Vegas. At the end of each episode, P&T also perform one of their own impressive tricks."

Honestly, I never know how the magicians do the trick! Maybe this is how the disciples felt when they tried to process the fact that Jesus was tried, crucified, dead, buried and then suddenly shows up inside a locked room.

This morning, we'll be talking about how difficult it was for at least one disciple to believe that Jesus was alive, after seeing him dead on the cross.

SCRIPTURE

We've all probably heard the phrase "seeing is believing." We think that in order to fully accept something to be true, we need to see it with our own eyes.

Let's face it; we live in a culture and a society of skepticism. When it comes to almost anything, we need to have physical proof. When we talk about "proof" we're usually talking about either photos, video or some form of evidence that we accept as scientific.

Often, those who don't believe in God support their lack of belief based on the fact that they've never seen God. And if you can't give them scientific proof of God's existence, they can't believe that God exist. *How do you know that God isn't just a character in a story?* My guess is that many of us have wondered the same thing at some point in our lives.

While it's been over 2,000 years since Christ's resurrection, the number of folks who struggle to believe that Jesus rose from his grave on Easter morning remains quite large. In fact, there are many folks who would check the "Christian" box, who don't really believe that Jesus actually rose from the grave. While they think it a nice story, they can't fully believe that Jesus died, was buried and then ascended into Heaven.

And while there were witnesses to Jesus appearing to his disciples in a locked room on a few occasions, some Christians still don't believe that this ever really happened.

For me, if you struggle to believe the resurrection, you likely don't really believe that Jesus provides us with victory over sin and death. I had someone describe their faith to me years ago by saying "I'm a Christian. I believe in God (and everything). I just don't see why believing in Jesus is such a big deal." My immediate thought was "If you don't see the relevance of Christ in the world maybe you're not a Christian."

Let's take a closer look at the text from John 20 that Ashley read earlier. This morning, I'll be reading from The Message...

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you." Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master." But he (Thomas) said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, his (Jesus') disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe." Thomas said, "My Master! My God!" Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing." Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book.

These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.

SO WHAT?

I mentioned earlier that we live in a world where “seeing is believing.” We need evidence to believe that anything really happened. If you listen to our politicians discuss any issue, you get the feeling that the democrats and the republicans aren’t even examining the same evidence. If you watch only CNN or only Fox News, it’s impossible to determine what’s real; what’s true.

Think about the sports replays that are used these days to resolve disputed calls... There are multiple cameras filming every play, from every conceivable angle - at every professional game and most often, if there’s a disputed call on a controversial play, it’s still difficult to find clear evidence to either support or deny the call.

While there were first-hand accounts, ultimately - we can’t ask for a replay of Jesus showing up in that upper room. To believe that Christ died yet still appeared in the upper room on a few different occasions requires us to possess something that seems a bit alien to us today: FAITH & TRUST.

I get it; an empty tomb doesn’t really prove anything. Maybe the body was stolen (which is a rumor that the religious authorities of the day started - to cast doubt on the validity of the resurrection.)

NOW WHAT?

Most of you have heard me mention this little book (*What Did Jesus Do?* by Michael Lindvall). If you’re ever seeking a really basic look at the nature of Jesus, this is the book for you. The book’s final chapters are titled Ministry; Message; Miracles; Encounters; Crisis; Passion; Death and Life.

In the “Life” chapter that’s focused on Christ’s resurrection, Lindvall writes “If the story of Jesus of Nazareth ended with his crucifixion and death, the man and his life would have been long forgotten.

The power that the story of Jesus has held over billions of people in diverse cultures for the last two thousand years is not rooted simply in the profundity of his teaching, in extraordinary miracles or in his tragic death come too soon.”

Lindvall further comments that “The sequence of events in Jesus’ life as told in the four Gospels may vary somewhat. Each Gospel writer tells the story from a distinctive theological vantage point. One may include an episode like the story of Jesus’ birth that another omits. But the four draw together and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with each other and with the other books of the New Testament... All agree that on the third day after his death, Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.”

My sense is that the vast majority of us would acknowledge that Jesus isn’t a fictional character. Mostly, we’d even agree that Christ is God’s son. However, things can get dicey when we honestly consider what this means to us.

It’s so easy to fall into the category of the person who told me that they were Christian (and everything). They just didn’t get the Jesus part of Christianity...

In my mind, to be a Christian one has to believe that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried (just like the Apostle's Creed says) and that (on the third day) He rose from the dead. These things had to happen so that we could receive the gift of eternal life. This isn't optional... This is the definitive example of how much God loves this world (Remember in the Gospel of John we hear: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son").

The suffering and death of the Christ demonstrate the depth of God's divine love for humanity. The passion and the cross declare that God is with us not only in the joys of life, but in the agony and loss that life can bring. That's the reason that historic Christianity calls Jesus not just "Lord" but "Savior."

Lindvall says that Good Friday isn't the greatest day of the Christian calendar. The greatest day on the Christian calendar is Easter with its uncompromising declaration that God, more than anything, is the God of Life. Lindvall says that "Jesus is not simply the founder of the Christian faith but is a continuing, living presence in the world and in individual lives. The story isn't complete! Jesus is with us as we struggle to live as he lived, to love as he loved and to give of ourselves as Christ gave of himself."

If you don't believe that Christ is who He said He is and is no longer present, consider what life was like before he initially appeared. Much of human life was meaningless. If you were born with an illness or any kind of physical defect; you'd be lucky to survive. If you were born female, you were a second class citizen. It was only when Jesus began teaching that compassion appeared. The world would look totally different today were it not for Jesus initially and continually showing us the way.

Nonetheless, we struggle to fully believe. Sometimes, we lack the faith that Christ is who he said he is. We don't trust him enough to follow him. I mean, we're good with placing a 911 call to him when we're in trouble but (honestly) we think that we have most of life under control. We don't actually need any additional help...

I was telling someone recently that when I'm in over my head (which I often am) and honestly ask for God's help, the situation comes to a good conclusion. When I'm driving the bus and think that I've got it all under control; that's when I end up off the road, stuck in a ditch.

Several years ago, I attended a conference where I took some classes on brain development. I learned that the male transition to formal consequential thinking happens much more slowly than females. News flash! That's the reason that when a female asks for directions, you can give her twenty steps to reach her destination and she'll remember them all. Men, on the other hand, lose it after about five or six steps.

Research is now showing that we don't really become consequential thinkers until we're in our mid-twenties to our thirties. When we're often considered to be legal adults (at age 18), we are actually only about 50% of the way through the brain development process.

The facilitator gave us an example of how we could tell whether someone has made the transition to consequential thinking: On Saturday morning, teens can bury their best friend who drank too much, wrecked and died and they'll still go out and drink and drive on the same evening. The brains of these people have not yet matured...

You see consequential thinking is all about taking experiences and using these experiences to make a wise decision. When I'm in over my head, surrender the situation to God and see a good outcome (every time); consequential thinking is telling me that relying on God is a smart decision. Yet, I rely on myself, fall down, get back up and try relying on myself again. That's the definition of insanity!

So many of us think that we've got it all under control. We make whatever decision makes us happy, then go about the process of developing evidence to support our decision. This is never more apparent than when it comes to issues of faith. We don't have photos or video to support the reality that following Jesus is not only a good thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. We're also really good at pretending that we don't understand what the Bible means when it's telling us to do something that we don't want to do.

I recently read a news story about an actor, Joaquin Phoenix, who is playing Jesus in a new movie called "Mary Magdalene." Early in filming, Phoenix refused to do a scene where (in scripture) Jesus performed a miracle, healing a blind man by rubbing mud and saliva on his eyes. Phoenix refused to do the scene because he didn't think it believable.

By the way, folks who get their Biblical education via modern media, may not know that apparently actors have the power to change the real story (because Phoenix changed the scene) and movie producers also changed the nature of reality by changing the gender (in this case) of the blind person (who was a man in the Bible and a woman in the movie). This film was released this year on Good Friday rather than in late 2017 (as scheduled) when the movie's producer, Harvey Weinstein, was in a bit of hot water.

Here's the bottom line of all of this: We're not God; we're not going to understand everything that happens (especially in the Bible); sometimes we just have to trust; we have to have faith; we have to admit that we don't know everything and (in reality) we don't always know what's best. If you're like Thomas and you need evidence that there's a God who created the world and everything in it; and if you plan on waiting until you can touch Christ's hands and side, you're in for a tough journey.

Remember that a week after Christ first appeared to his disciples in the locked upper room, he appeared again and this time Thomas was there. Jesus 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."

It is great advice to trust; to believe; to have faith that Jesus is who he says he is and to remember that "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing in him, you may have life in his name. Happy Easter, Friends.