

Witnesses of Witnesses

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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This past Wednesday in Bible Study, Clayton, per usual, offered a persuasive observation, that “Just because you doubt, doesn’t mean that you can’t believe.”

And though I didn’t give him much credit at the time, Harry rightly identified that verse 27 of our Gospel text is problematic in its translation. In that while most of our English versions render Jesus’ words as “Do not doubt, but believe;” the original Greek more accurately commands: “Do not unbelieve, but believe.” Small potatoes, maybe, but by changing the force of the Greek verb *apistis* (unbelieve), the English editors have not only confused Jesus’ meaning, but have also unwittingly equated the two: doubt and unbelief. But by the looks of it, Jesus wasn’t admonishing Thomas for his uncertainty, rather, it seems he was critiquing his more ominous regression towards unbelief – his descent into lethargy and apathy – that was ultimately blinding him, and indeed the rest of the disciples from recognizing the resurrected Christ right there in their midst. Big potatoes, indeed.

You see, it’s been my life-long stance, and one championed by the great yet quiet-spoken professor Daniel Migliore (you could barely hear him when he preached here some years ago), that faith does not claim understanding, but rather seeks it. That faith requires some healthy dose of critical thinking, questioning, and yes, even some doubting. For it is only by first and repeatedly putting the question to scripture and the creeds, God and religion, that one can begin and continue to grow on their spiritual quest; and, that this process should only terminate at one’s death. Because truly, a breathing yet stagnant and uninterested faith that merely parrots what it’s always been told is really no faith or witness at all. Just an echo upon an echo that ultimately fades into increasing silence and eventual meaninglessness.

I think this is one of the reasons why the gospel writers were virtually unanimous in not editing out the disciples’ perpetual confusion and general ignorance. If they wanted to make a declarative statement that faith should be entirely assured in and of itself, then the disciples, indeed the closest confidants of Christ, would have immediately understood and trusted all that they were told and all that was going on. However, that is often the exact opposite of what gospels write and what we read! And rather than seeing Jesus rebuke them for their incomprehension he instead opens their eyes to the most profound revelation of all: that life is ultimately victorious over death. Ergo, my friends: doubt, uncertainty, questioning... these should be considered not as the adversaries of a healthy faith, but instead the prerequisites.

“If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” -- René Descartes.

He is risen!

He is risen, indeed!

Now, let's just say, for the sake of continued argument, that for some or even the entirety of this past week you have been struggling to sing that refrain aloud with gusto and certainty. Well, the good news is that you're in good company. Like, really good company.

For as we've already discussed, the disciples themselves – and not just Thomas, let it ever be known – but the whole lot of them, struggled and struggled mightily when confronted with the choice to believe or unbelieve. And these were Christ's handpicked disciples. His friends, no less!

And truth be told, in their hour of uncertainty, they were rather lucky. Blessed even. For Jesus made it kind of easy for them, for he 1) called them by name, 2) showed them his wounds, 3) broke bread and poured wine, and 4) made himself visibly known to them in the flesh. Right there before them.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure we will ever be so lucky. For who here has seen Christ, in the flesh, this past week? Or any of your past weeks for that matter? Out in the garden? Out on the sand by the shore? On your morning walks, or sitting in your dining rooms? In the absence of Jesus himself appearing before us so that we might see to believe, we so often, if not always, need to rely on other revelations and versions of them. Witnesses of witnesses to persuade us, directly or indirectly, that the light is with us still.

Now, you might be thinking, *well, what of scripture?* Is this not the direct and authoritative Word of God and thus the perfect witness for us? Can't we just trust in its account and be done with it? Sure, and certainly that is more or less the point. For as John himself says, "These words are written so that you may come to believe (20:31)." And yet, this requires of your faith a certain lens that decrees that scripture is the infallible Word of God, as opposed to say, the mere witness of man, inspired by God but open to interpretation, elaboration, error, and even, perhaps fabrication. And if, as I suspect, we are sympathetic to this latter argument, then we are often left with the difficult task of defending some books of scripture over others, affirming certain passages as an accurate witness to the faith, while demoting those we deem to be erroneous or antiquated, or just not as interesting or pretty. And quite frankly, this has consequences, both good and bad.

For instance, we are told in 1 John chapter 4:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. And we are from God. So, beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

By this we will know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And so, given our task at hand, if we were to affirm this passage as an accurate testimony of our faith, then new sources of revelation suddenly open up to us. In that, if taken literally, it seems that there are witnesses all around us. Beyond the page. Alive, right now. In our neighbors. In each other. In ourselves. In all who love, have love, and wish to model love for all of God's creation.

And to me, this is the critical moment. The leap where believing or doubting the historicity of Christ's resurrection is trumped by a present and a future where the question doesn't even matter, because God lives on, tangibly, all around us.

For where our bodies are marked by the wounds of sacrifice, there Christ lives again. When our anger yields to forgiveness and reconciliation, there the Spirit yet abides. And when we seek to create a society where each and every one of us have a voice, and an equal part to play in mutual likeness and respect, there God always reigns.

And, my friends, when we are all active participants in these things, we not only commemorate the passion of Christ but we also help to resurrect him every day, in every life, and in every generation, so that his light may flicker still, and continue to burn visible in this fallen, sinful world.

But, ugh...on that note, if God is indeed all around us, and within us, and everything seems like it can be so inspired and good, then why, why God, is there so much evil? So much sin and pain? Why another news cycle, surrounding Easter no less, that has been dominated by bombings, by shootings, by children as young as five tortured, thrown off mall balconies, and killed by their own parents?

Could God somehow really be behind, or impotent against, these forces of suffering, judging or condemning us for our collective sin, such that we are left to wade through our own destruction as we see in say, the books of the Prophets, Lamentations, and Revelation? Would we really be better off then affirming these witnesses and passages as true (instead of say 1 John and all of its rather hunky-dory notions of a love that abides within us), since these latter passages are, after all, a more accurate witness of the chaos and darkness of this world as we see and know it today?

No. I sincerely doubt we'd be better off affirming that. For even though both accounts may be simultaneously true, if we were to only amplify those darker passages and conclusions, then we would be witnesses not of the light but to the abyss, and we would be as stuck in as hopeless an existence as the disciples were when they first thought the light of the world had been extinguished at Jesus' death.

But my friends, it has not been extinguished. No, the stone is still rolled away. And the tomb is truly empty. And the light is still spilling out all around us.

And do you know why I believe this?

Because I see it. Each and every day. While the world wants me, and beckons you, to see only the muck and the crap and the horror and the sin, I try instead to witness the light. And, there is light. Light that is witnessed to by countless others whose stories aren't perhaps provocative enough to make that 5pm news cycle, but that are powerful enough to tremble even the heart of God and inspire our souls into action.

Earlier this month, a principal at a high school in New Jersey died. His name was Dr. Derrick Nelson. He was 44 years old. He had a daughter who was six and he was just recently engaged. He died after complications suffered during a procedure at a local hospital. He was in a coma for several weeks before his body gave out.

And if these details, brute, accurate, and true, were all that we paid attention to, then surely we would have good reason to only wallow in despair. To unbelieve the gospel message.

But, look again.

Dr. Derrick Nelson died, yes, and it is truly horrible and just so sad...but, he died for a stranger literally thousands of miles away. For a 14-year old boy in France, who he never met, and who he was likely to never meet, who was in desperate need of a life-saving bone marrow transplant. Nelson found out he was a match and without question, he signed the paperwork and scheduled the surgery. Because that is how he sought to live life.

He is quoted as saying: "We have an obligation to our fellow human beings that if we are in a position to help, you do it. You lift as you climb. If you can do that, you have contributed more to society than anything your bank account can produce, and ultimately contribute more to your own well-being."

Shortly after his death, Nelson's friend Salim Sivaad succinctly observed that because of Derick's sacrifice someone else can now live. And then he tweeted a single sentence in honor of his life: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends." John 15:13.

He laid down his life, not just for his friends, but for a mere stranger. For a child he would never know. And he did so without any consideration of the struggle, or the risk against his own life. Nor with any guarantee that his decision would ever be known to the boy, or successful at all.

My friends, this to me is the essence of our faith. The truest witness.

For in the end it isn't about certainty, nor about knowing if it is built on a truth, a doubt, or even a lie. But it is instead about ascribing to something greater, something beyond reason, something that you can't always see or touch, or find easy to understand and believe in... something like a world and a kingdom where love and life is yet, and forever, triumphant over hate and death.

Amen.