

FINDING THE COURAGE TO BELIEVE

John 20:19-31

Dr. J. Howard Olds

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As I surfed the Internet preparing this sermon, I ran across a web site entitled Belief-o-matic. It enticed me to answer twenty questions about my concept of God, the afterlife, and human nature and they in turn would tell me what religion, if any, I ought to practice. I took the challenge. Within a few minutes it was clearly determined that I was meant to be an Orthodox Quaker. Since Quakers have neither pastors nor sermons, I decided to wait until after Easter to make the switch.

Beliefs—In some form or another we all have them.

I go to doctors believing they will give me the right medicine to make me well.

We get on jets believing pilots know how to fly the plane.

Even though I was stuck on an elevator for over two hours once, I still board elevators believing they will take me up or down to my desired destination.

Beliefs—you can't leave home without them.

When it comes to belief in God as revealed to us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I ask you on this Easter Sunday, where are you?

According to a 2003 Harris poll:

90% of American adults believe in God

84% of American adults believe in the afterlife

82% of American adults call themselves Christians 26% of non-Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On paper at least we are a nation of believers. Researcher George Barna however discovered that most American beliefs are loosely held. They are guesses more than convictions, which explains why such beliefs do not seem to have much impact on peoples' choices. "There is not much that Americans believe with unshakable confidence," concludes Barna.

It's Easter. The tomb is empty. The churches are full. Hallelujahs are ringing. People are singing. But behind our Easter bonnets and smiling faces, many of us find kinship with the disciple Thomas who is saying "*I will believe it only when I see it.*" Could you find on this Easter day the courage to believe?

THE COURAGE TO BELIEVE COMES FROM THE TESTIMONY OF OTHERS.

However skeptical Thomas might be of his fellow disciples, they are the ones who

announce to him *“We have seen the Lord.”*

Paul says in Romans 10:14 *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on the one in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone explaining it to them?*

Do you remember who first told you the stories of Jesus? Was it a parent, a grandparent, a Sunday School teacher, a pastor, a friend? Have you thanked God for them lately?

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Do you remember how easy it was back then? God was big enough to hold you tight. When we went to bed we didn't lack fear. Monsters were under the bed and even bigger ones lurked in the closet. But we had been told that God would hold us close. And we believed it.

Let me say a word to parents and grandparents, Sunday School teachers and youth workers. You have an awesome responsibility and wonderful opportunity to communicate the faith.

The research is in: Adults essentially carry out the beliefs they embraced when they were young.

Moral foundations are in place by the time a child is 9.

Most make a lasting determination about the personal significance of Christ's death and resurrection by age 12.

What you believe by the time you are 13 is probably what you will die believing.

Parents, don't let the spiritual formation of your children be a haphazard, hit or miss, take it or leave it proposition. We are talking about things of eternal significance here.

Of course, some of us have found the testimony in other places.

George Lucas says *“I put the Force in Star Wars to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people. I wanted them to ask the question about mystery. Not to ask about God is the worst thing that can happen. At least I need to be saying I'm looking, I'm very curious, and I will continue looking until I find an answer or die trying.”*

If you want to believe, hang around believers. If you want to grow roses, you don't buy an acre of land at the North Pole. You go where roses will grow. If you want to believe, associate with believers. Watch their actions. Observe their attitudes. Notice how they handle the difficulties of life. They won't be perfect. In fact the devil will point out their imperfections to you. But notice how their beliefs form the foundations of their being. Then go and do likewise.

THE COURAGE TO BELIEVE COMES FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

John 20:26-28 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you." And then he said to Thomas. "Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him "My Lord and My God." An affirmation of faith.

Standing somewhere in the shadows, you'll find Jesus
He's the one who always cares and understands
Standing somewhere in the shadows, you'll find Jesus
And you'll know him by the nail prints in his hands.

Did you notice how Jesus makes himself known to these scared disciples. He comes to us even though the doors are locked. We call ours the shameless society. Nothing could be further from the truth. Behind the walls of our being all kinds of things are lying around. Old failures, hurts, guilt, shame. We lock up more and more rooms to the heart to prevent our true selves from being discovered. We think we are keeping the world out, but in fact we are keeping ourselves locked in. But the resurrected Christ comes looking for us behind locked doors to make himself known.

We recognize him by the nail prints in his hands. To live is to live with scars. They are tangible reminders of the times we could have died and didn't. The wounds of life have left their scars. So it is with the resurrected Christ. He makes himself known to us through the signs of his woundedness and reaches for us where it hurts and invites us to believe.

Journalist Lee Strobel says "On November 8, 1981 I talked with God in a heartfelt and unedited prayer, admitting and turning from all my wrong doing, and receiving the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. I told him that with his help I wanted to follow him and his ways as best I could. Some people feel a rush of emotion. For me it was a rush of reason. My character, values, attitude, priorities, world view, philosophy and relationships began to change. So much so that my five-year old daughter Alison said to her mother, "Mommy I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy."

Sometimes the experiences are more subtle and hidden but no less real. John Michael Montgomery has a hit song entitle The Little Girl. It's the story about a

little girl born to a daddy that drank all day and a mommy that did drugs. They never took the young girl to church, never spoke of his name, never read her his words. As the drinking and the fighting gets worse, the little girl hides behind the couch until one night her daddy uses a gun on her mom then takes his own life.

And some people from the city took the girl far away
To a new mom and dad, kisses and hugs every day.
Her first day of Sunday School, her teacher walked in
And a small little girl looked at a picture of Him.
She said I know that man up there on that cross.
I don't know his name, but I know he got off
Cause he was there in my old house
And he held me close to his side
As I hid there behind our couch
The night that my parents died.

He comes to us in our woundedness, he comes and asks us to believe. Have you the courage to believe today?

THE COURAGE TO BELIEVE COMES FROM HOPE IN TOMORROW

John 20:29 Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

We live by the motto of seeing is believing. "I'll believe it when I see it." When it comes to Christianity, all the world is from Missouri. Faith however belongs to those who can believe it before they see it. For them believing is seeing. "I'll see it when I believe it." If you can believe it you can begin to see it.

In 1876 a Western Union memo said the telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.

In 1943 the chairman of IBM said there could not be more than five people in the world who would want a computer.

In 1899 Charles H. Duell, the Commissioner of the U. S. Patent Office, said, "Everything that can be invented has already been invented."

In 1962 Decca recording company rejected a new music group from England called the Beatles saying "We don't like their sound and besides that guitar music is on the way out."

We get in trouble when we roll life out too flat, close our minds to great possibilities and refuse to believe beyond our limitations.

We must not close our minds, we must let our hearts be free. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

In the basement of an abandoned house with its crumbling walls, a victim of the Holocaust scratched out these words:

I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine.

I believe in love, even when it is not shown.

I believe in God even when he does not speak.

Have you the courage of belief?

The elder George Bush tells about attending the funeral of Soviet Leader Brezhnev. The service contained marching soldiers, steel helmets, Marxist rhetoric and not a single prayer, hymn, nor mention of God. But said Bush, "I happened to be seated where I could see Mrs. Brezhnev as she walked up to give her final respects to her husband. There in that cold grey center of atheism, I watched as she traced the sign of the cross over her husband's chest. I was stunned." In that simple act of faith, God had broken through the core of disbelief. Have you the courage to believe?

The formula is simple: Believe + Receive = Become

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Receive him as your Lord and Savior.

Become what he has created you to be.

Believe, receive, become. Is that too much to ask? Isn't it about time you found the courage to believe?

Would you pray this prayer with me?

Dear Jesus, I want to believe in you and in the power of your resurrection. I long to experience your healing presence in the wounded places of my life. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Now take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee. Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise. Amen.

