

WGUMC October 27, 2013 "I believe..." John 20:24-29

I have to say "thank you" to Jim Love and the Thursday morning men's group. They always have an interesting study going, but up until now, I haven't been willing to give up my precious early morning house cleaning hours. But when I heard that they were going to listen to some lectures on the history of the relationship between science and religion, I couldn't resist. I am fascinated by the philosophical questions that are at the heart of that relationship. You see, I wrote my dissertation on an 18th-century theologian, John Wesley, and a 19th-century scientist/philosopher by the name of Charles Sanders Peirce. But I haven't had time to do any serious reading in that subject since I graduated, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to dip my toe back in academia and discuss these matters with such a sharp group of guys. So, I want to dedicate this sermon to them.

The professor in this DVD series argues that we seriously misread history when we think that there has always been some kind of war going on between science and religion. In fact, for most of our history, a true knowledge of God and a true understanding of the natural world were pursued by the same people. Well into the nineteenth century, the world's greatest minds considered science and religion to be not enemies but companions in the search for truth.

Our modern minds think, "All well and good for the 19th century. But what could science and religion possibly have in common in the 21st century?" For one thing, both are based upon belief. Sounds strange, I know, but hear me out. The word *belief* means "trust" or "confidence." And trust is as much a part of the foundation of science as it is of religious faith.

That's another way of saying that even science starts with assumptions. For instance, science assumes that the physical world really exists. Now science can't prove that the

world is real, but everything in science is based on the assumption that material things have actual existence. We can observe them and make predictions about them.

What's important to understand here is that not even science starts from zero. We couldn't even have science if we didn't make some assumptions, in other words, hold some beliefs, about the world we live in. The same is true of faith. We can't have religious faith without making some assumptions about the world we live in. When it comes to faith, we don't start from zero, either.

Unfortunately, I had to learn that the hard way. My junior year in high school was a very tumultuous year. I was working hard in my honors classes. I was diagnosed with epilepsy. But my biggest challenge that year was that I was suffering from a great deal of spiritual anxiety. You see, I was so sure that I could find all the answers to my God questions that I wasn't

willing to believe anything until I understood everything. And that's a very impossible, empty, lonely place to be.

Towards the end of the year, I wrote an essay for English class about my spiritual struggles. I said, "Not long ago, I could accept no belief unless I understood it thoroughly and absolutely. I finally have come to the conclusion that I must simply accept some things, even though I may have questions or doubts. I must start somewhere, or I am trapped in a vacuum and will never have the chance to grow and understand those very questions and doubts that trouble me." I was all of 16. And I remember wishing that I were better able to live the truth that I was able to write.

Somehow I knew that when it comes to faith, we have to accept some things, even when we have doubts, so that we can test them and learn and grow. Just like a scientist accepts a hypothesis in order to test it, in order to find out what there is to know. Now you know why I'm so taken by the story of

doubting Thomas. For me, old Thomas is Christianity's very first scientist. Remember, he wasn't around when the other disciples saw the risen Lord, and so he said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Here is the origin of the phrase, "Seeing is believing." Like a good scientist, unless Thomas could test the hypothesis on his own and see the evidence for himself, he wasn't ready to believe.

Thomas may not have been ready to accept the resurrection, but he accepted other things about Jesus. After all, he'd known Jesus for a long time. He was there when Jesus fed the multitudes. He saw Jesus heal the sick and still the storm. That Jesus was the Son of God may have been just a hypothesis for Thomas, nevertheless he trusted Jesus enough to follow him. Then along came Jesus' crucifixion, and that horrific event really tested Thomas' faith in him.

But he wasn't the only one. The other disciples had doubts, too. When Jesus was arrested and it looked like he would be killed, all the disciples forsook him and fled. Even Peter—the one who had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God—ended up denying him three times. [Matthew 16:16; 26:69f] And when the women brought news of the empty tomb on Easter morning, none of the disciples believed them. [Luke 24:11]

So Thomas was no more a doubter than any of them. He simply had the misfortune of not being in the room when the rest of them saw the risen Christ. Understandably, Thomas felt left out. He wanted the same experience for himself. He was looking for the same evidence.

Thomas was only being a good scientist. He demanded evidence to support the hypothesis that Jesus had risen from the dead. Lucky for him, Jesus provided it. He appeared to Thomas and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands.

Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." At this point, Thomas cried out, "My Lord and my God!" which we can take as an affirmation of faith.

But the crux of the story is contained in Jesus' response. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen but have come to believe." Now, I used to fear that this was Jesus telling us all not to ask questions, not to look for evidence, but to believe blindly, so to speak, without seeing, without understanding. But listen again to what Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen but have *come to believe*." What I now hear in those words is Jesus telling Thomas, "Though you didn't see, that doesn't mean that you can't believe. If only you had a little more patience with the questions, Thomas, you would have been able to *come to believe* even without seeing."

You see, faith is a process, not unlike the slow, laborious process of proving a hypothesis. We have to go through many

trials and many tests and we have to gather lots of different kinds of evidence, and it's not all visual. Just ask a theoretical physicist. They believe in all kinds of things they can't see. Of course, in the process of coming to believe, we will encounter many questions and doubts. So we are like the father in the Gospel of Luke whose son needed healing and cried out to Jesus: "I believe. Help my unbelief!" [Mark 9:24] Scientists, along with the rest of us, don't we all live in this tension between belief and unbelief?

By now, you're probably wondering why I am talking about belief in this way. Why am I trying to get you to think of faith as a hypothesis? Doesn't that weaken it? On the contrary, I believe it strengthens it, because scientists develop hypotheses and then have to prove them in the real world. Faith needs to work in the real world, too, or it isn't of much use to us. Faith can't be just an idea in our heads or a warm fuzzy feeling we carry around in our hearts. It also has to make

a real, measurable difference in our lives and in the lives of others.

In the Methodist Church, historically, we've put a lot of emphasis on the warm fuzzy feeling part. That's fine. But there's often been an expectation that we will all have some kind of cataclysmic conversion experience. And some do. But lasting belief is almost never something that we acquire in an instant. Yes, we can have sudden flashes of insight. We can and do experience brief moments of unusual clarity or certainty. We can climb a mountain or stand on a beach or hold a newborn baby or watch our loved one take their last breath and we may grasp an eternal truth in the twinkling of an eye. But believing is a process that goes beyond this mystical moment of truth, because it involves conforming our real everyday lives to that truth. For most of us that takes time, even a lifetime.

The philosopher I wrote my dissertation about said that belief is a habit. If we truly believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of

the Living God, we will develop certain habits of life that conform to that belief. In the Bible, they're called fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. [Galatians 5:22-23a] These fruits are observable. They are measurable. Jesus says, "By their fruits ye shall know them." [Matthew 7:20]

But if we say we believe and none of our habits change, then what we have is just a hypothesis that we never bothered to test. It is an idea but it is not yet a belief. Faith is a life-long commitment to testing the hypothesis of Jesus Christ and proving it in your life.

So someone tells me that they are Christian. And I want to say, prove it. Make it real. Make the resurrected Christ appear in your life, so that others may see you and see him, touch you and touch him, trust you and believe in him. That's the only kind of proof of the resurrection that we can offer to anyone. It's the only kind of proof they need.

I've tried to convince you that faith is not a bunch of intellectual arguments that I'm asking you to accept. Rather, Faith is an experiment that I'm hoping you are willing to conduct. That's the spirit in which I am going to invite you to recite the Apostles' Creed. If you weren't raised in the church saying it, as I was, I don't expect you to know it or to understand it. I don't expect that you will feel comfortable with it or that you'll agree with all or any of it. But I do hope that you wrestle with it. For those of you who are unsure about this, I suggest that you consider the Creed as a doubt that you are willing to be patient with for a while, a question you are willing to ask, and a hypothesis that you are willing to test.

The same philosopher said that all scientific inquiry begins with the irritation of doubt. I'd say the same about faith. Faith is a process of inquiry that keeps moving forward because life keeps giving us more and more reasons to doubt. And that only gives us more and more opportunities to believe. But we

can't doubt everything at once. We all have to start somewhere, by accepting some things.

I concluded my English paper in high school with this: "For now, at least, I have reached a plateau of understanding. I have found some faith, some acceptance, and even a little patience. I will never be completely satisfied with my understanding; that is stagnation. I will continue to struggle. But in the meantime, I can live, and I think I love living, considering the alternatives. Fortunately, I have discovered, as I open my mind and spirit to new experiences, that growing and learning is inevitable. And for that I would like to thank God personally."

Where I ended back then is a pretty good place to begin, with an open mind and spirit. So let's start here. And as we recite the Creed, we'll ask God to bless those who do not yet see, but in God's good time, will come to believe. Amen.