

We live in a world filled with people searching for something to believe in, people looking for answers to questions involving our very existence. Why are we here? Who created us? Was it a random act that the earth came into being, or is there an intelligent designer behind it all?

Throughout history humanity has been struggling with trying to come with answers to these questions in a variety of different ways. Philosophers find themselves investigating principles involving our knowledge, our way of living, and our conduct in life. Scientists generally provide us with a systematic understanding of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation. Most religions focus on a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, and attribute them to a higher power. Even atheists who claim to believe in nothing, or who say that they have no faith in God, must still believe in something.

Regardless of the different ways in which we try to come up with explanations for it all, I'm sure we can all agree that a majority of people in this world have sought out, or are seeking to fill a deep spiritual void in their lives. In the very least, they are looking for a way to better themselves, or to find greater meaning and purpose for their lives. Perhaps this is why more and more self-help books and videos are being published! Why there seems to be a surge of interest in different types of meditation and yoga classes. Why materialism has continued to skyrocket as people seek to fill their emptiness with possessions!

So with all of the different choices that are available to us, when it comes to spirituality, how does one come to have faith in Jesus? Some of you watching this video might reply that we were baptized into the Christian faith as infants, and grow up going to church with our families. Others of us may reply that we became followers of Jesus after encountering

Christians who made a big impact on our lives in one way or another. Perhaps there are even some who have explored other religions, but found what they were looking for after reading the Bible.

In his small catechism, Martin Luther wrote about faith while explaining the third part of the Apostles creed. He declares: “I believe that I cannot come to my Lord Jesus Christ by my own intelligence or power. But the Holy Spirit called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith.” To put this another way, it is through God’s Spirit and God’s Word that we are able to believe.

As we explore our Gospel story for today we will discover that faith doesn’t necessarily come from seeing, or from physical proof, but rather it is to be based on the hearing of God’s Word. This is particularly important for all of us, because as followers of Christ we are called to share his Gospel message of love, grace, and forgiveness with others.

In our story this morning Thomas should have believed the words of the other disciples when they said, “We have seen the Lord!” Similarly the other disciples should have believed Mary when she told them about her encounter with the risen Christ in the Garden. So what was keeping them from believing each other? Was it because they were afraid? Was it because they were uncertain about what to do next? Was it because their emotions were running high and they were still experiencing shock and great sorrow?

As our narrative begins, it is important to remember that the disciples were cowering behind locked doors because they feared the Jews. We don’t know exactly where they are, but we do know that it is night and that they are in hiding. Their cowering actions clearly indicate that if they had truly believed the Word, without the Spirit, it had yet to make a difference in their lives.

Can we really blame Jesus' followers for being scared? Close your eyes for a moment and imagine what it must have been like! Their teacher had been arrested, put on trial, tortured, and some of them had actually seen him die on the cross. In their minds they were probably terrified that a similar fate was in store for them as well. Judas, one of their own, had betrayed Jesus and they did not know if he had also betrayed them. Peter, their second in command, although claiming that he would follow Christ even unto death, had ended up denying him. Everything the disciples had been taught, and practically everything that they held dear to their hearts, was being taken away from them.

When one's world is turned upside down, it can be quite difficult to listen to another person, even when that person has good news to share! Thankfully it is in these times that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus can come to us, and share his peace with us, as he does with the disciples. Even our fears, like the doors in our story for today, cannot lock him out! His Spirit comes to us in grace and reassures us through his Word. Notice that as terrifying as it must have been for the disciples to see the body of Jesus come through those doors his words, "Peace be with you," and his presence instantly transforms their fears and sorrows into happiness and joy!

In his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, the author, Pinchas Lapide a non-Christian Jewish scholar writes about why he believes that God raised Jesus from the dead. For him, the proof of the physical resurrection lies in the changed lives of the disciples. He writes, "When this scared, frightened band of the apostles which were just about to throw away everything in order to flee in despair to Galilee: when these peasants, shepherds, and fishermen, who betrayed and denied their master, and then failed him miserably, suddenly could be changed overnight into a confident mission society, convinced of salvation and able to work with much more

success after Easter then before Easter, then no vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary transformation.”

Have you ever encountered someone who was truly transformed by their faith in Jesus? Several years ago I had the opportunity to attend a special event in Las Vegas and heard the former lead guitarist from the band Korn share the story of his conversion from a non-believing Rockstar in to a follower of Christ. He ended up leaving the band to get away from all of the negative influences that came with fame, and eventually formed his own Christian rock group. His book, *Save me From Myself*, is excellent and very inspiring!

If we were to take the time to read every chapter of John’s Gospel we would mostly likely come to the conclusion that it is all about being confronted with God’s Word. So what is or who is God’s Word? The answer to this question is Jesus. He is the actual Word of God, whose presence is salvation for those who believe in him. It is also his Word that reveals God’s judgment on to those who are blind to his revelation. Salvation then is determined by the way one responds to the Spirit and to the Word; not by what one may or may not see. Salvation comes through our ears and perhaps our hearts more than through our eyes.

There are many different levels or stages of faith, and as you can imagine not all of us are at the same place. John Westerhoff provides us with three different stages in his book, *Will our Children Have faith?* The first stage he calls Received Faith and it has two parts. The First part is Experienced Faith, which typically involves imitating the actions of others, such as a child praying the Lord’s Prayer without understanding the meaning of all the words. It is what they do and how they act. The second part of this is Affiliative Faith, which means belonging to a group or an affiliation, which still centers on imitating what the group does.

The second stage of faith is Searching Faith which involves asking questions, “Is that what I believe?” Thomas is our example of this. He will not blindly accept what others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself. This stage of faith is adding the “head” to the “heart” of the first stages. We must remember that people with searching faith still need to have all the needs of experienced and dependant faith met, even though they may appear to have cast them aside. And surely they need to be encouraged to remain within the faith community during their intellectual struggle, experimentation, and first endeavors at commitment. In spite of his questions, Thomas remained with the disciples. There he discovered the answers to his questions.

The final stage of faith comes only through the searching stage. After exploring the question, “Is this what I believe?” one, hopefully, discovers a Christian answer that declares, “This is what I believe.” The Thomas scene ends with such a personal confession; “My Lord and my God” –a confession we don’t hear from any of the other disciples who did not go through the same questioning as Thomas.

Keep in mind that it is possible for all of these stages to be present all the time. Young children will ask questions, and so should mature believers. Believers of all ages have times of certainty and questioning, of “going along with the crowd” and “standing against the crowd.” However, as general descriptions of the maturing process of faith, I have found them true in my own life –and many with whom I have shared these stages have resonated with them in their own lives as well.

Now, I have no doubt that when our entire world feels like it is falling apart, when we are overwhelmed by the tragedies and tribulations happening in our lives, it is during those times that we ache for a God that we can touch. A God who will wrap his arms around us and embrace

us with a deep and abiding love that makes the pain go away. A God who will lift us up and carry us through all of the heartache, sadness, stress, and hurt that we often encounter in life. Unfortunately.... we are not able to see the resurrected Jesus or touch him as those first disciples did. But there are ways in which he is physically present with us as he was with his earliest followers.

We have the Word and Spirit of God, which we encounter in scripture as we listen to the Gospel being proclaimed each Sunday. We have the sacrament of baptism in which we can feel the water and grace of God washing away our sins. We have the sacrament of communion, in which through bread and wine we can taste God's forgiveness as we remember what Christ did for us out of love on the cross. And last but not least, we all belong to a family of fellow believers who can provide us with the love and caring support that we need when we begin to have doubts, or when we feel like we might not be able to make it through the next few minutes, hours, days, or weeks that follow.

It's ok to have questions! It's ok to have doubts! Because not only is God's Spirit always with us, we also have God's word to guide us and we have one another to lean on for assurance and support. Thanks be to God. Amen