

Martin Luther once said, “A god means that from which we expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe in Him from the heart . . . that upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”

Here Luther provides a classic description of faith as trust. For Luther faith is more than simply believing that something is true. It is being prepared to act on that belief and relying upon it. It is about setting our hearts upon something, about putting our trust in someone. It is about that something or someone from which, when we are really honest, we expect all goodness to come and to which we would turn when times get really tough. To make his point Luther contrasts faith with historical knowledge. Luther says to believe in the historical reliability of the Gospels is not saving faith. In his provocative way, Luther says demons are perfectly capable of believing that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died on the cross and that he rose again on the third day. Rather, true faith or saving faith, for Luther, is the trust or the faith that Christ died for me and that Christ rose again for me, that Christ has accomplished his work for us and for our salvation. There is a difference between believing that certain things about God and Christ are true, and having faith that those things about God and Christ are true for me, true for us. One type is abstract and general; knowing it barely affects our lives. The other is specific and personal; knowing it changes everything.

To get at what Luther means, we might think of the first type of belief as being like our beliefs that it is currently 29 degrees in Port Douglas, that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, and that the Helmeted Honeyeater is the Victorian state bird. All these things may very well be true. But our belief in their truth will hardly affect our lives. Faith in God, according to Luther, is different, or at least, should be. If our response to belief in God is roughly similar to our response to belief that the Helmeted Honeyeater is the Victorian state bird, then either our belief in God lacks genuine trust or our belief in Honeyeaters is quite extraordinary. Faith is not merely believing that certain things are true, but rather trusting that certain things about God are true for us personally and being willing to respond to those things with our whole hearts, with our whole lives.

To use another example, when we say something like “I have faith in my brother,” we are not saying that we believe our brother is five foot ten inches (and shorter than me), has wavy light brown hair, and blue eyes – all of which may be true. Rather, what we mean when we say, “I have faith in my brother,” is that we can count on him when we need him, that we can pick up the phone and he will be there, that if times get tough, we know he will be there for us. For Luther, faith in God is not primarily about believing that certain things about God are true in some general or abstract sense, but rather trusting that God is faithful, loyal, and trustworthy, that God has acted to save us, that Christ is Christ for us.

Our Gospel for today is the story of Doubting Thomas. Many of us are familiar with the story. We hear it every year on Low Sunday a week after Easter Day. In the evening of that first Easter Day, the risen Lord appeared to his disciples, but Thomas was not with them. When the other disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord, Thomas says, “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.” A week later the risen Lord appears to his disciples again, but this time Thomas is with them. Jesus tells him to see his hands and to touch his side. And Thomas responds by saying, “My Lord and my God.”

Now there is a lot to be said about this passage, more than we can possibly say in a single sermon. We have probably heard many sermons on Doubting Thomas, on the relationship between faith and doubt, and evidence and belief. And these are important topics, and they were, no doubt, very good sermons. But today let's focus not simply on the belief of Thomas, but rather on the trust and confidence we find in his statement "My Lord and my God."

Part of the reason for this focus is because the Greek word translated as "to believe" in this passage, *pisteuo*, actually means "trust" and "confidence" much more than our English word "believe" conveys. But it is also striking that Thomas' confession of faith is notably formulated not in a general statement like "It is the Lord," but rather in personal language, in the declaration "My Lord and my God." There is no doubt an element of belief in this statement, but it also seems to be much more than that. It is also about personal trust and faith in the risen Christ as "my Lord and my God." It seems like Luther's notion of faith as trust, as that upon which we set our heart, is more to the point here. This is not just an abstract statement about the crucified and risen Christ, but about Thomas' faith that the crucified and risen Lord is there for him and for his salvation.

This type of faith makes all the difference, because it is basically the good news of Easter becoming real in the heart of Thomas. That Thomas believes means that he has confidence and trust that the promises of God are true, are trustworthy, and not just in some general and abstract way, but personally, for him. His Lord and his God has been raised from the dead, and that means everything has changed. Cruelty is not the last word. Death does not get the final laugh. Sin and death and evil are not the ultimate powers of the universe. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Forgiveness and love and life are the final realities of the universe. We need no longer be afraid. The power of God is stronger than any tomb. God has conquered the future and promised us a share in the eternal life of Christ. We can lead our lives with courage and with confidence because the Lord of all life is on our side.

When Thomas sees the risen Christ he says, "My Lord and my God." It is more than simply a matter of historical knowledge. Rather, it is about the transformation of Thomas' whole life, because in the risen Christ, in his wounds, he sees his Lord and his God, who is there for him and for his salvation. The most important part of the story may not be that Thomas was invited to put his hands in the nail marks or in the side of Christ, but rather that he put his trust in his Lord and God.

This wonderful picture of Jesus breathing on the disciples is reminiscent of the Genesis creation story where God breathes life into Adam and Eve. Then there is that amazing vision in the book of Ezekiel, where the valley of dry bones all of a sudden comes alive. Breath animates the bones — they rattle, clang, dance, and rise up — coming together, covered with flesh, sinew, and muscle becoming a resurrected community of God's hopeful people. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says to the disciples locked in the upper room. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says to us, locked here in our doubt, fear, and faintheartedness. "Receive the power of life, the gift of grace, the spirit of partnership and discipleship," Jesus says, "so that you can become co-creators with me in God's world."

What a gift and what a responsibility! The book of Acts makes it clear that resurrection is experienced most powerfully in community, and it describes for us what one of the early communities looked like and felt like. It was a community of celebration, thanksgiving, awe — the poor, the widow, the immigrant, the alienated and excluded joined together with the privileged of society who had allowed themselves to be changed. They lived together, engaging in teaching,

fellowship, worship, and acts of caring. With mutual love and affection, they intertwined their lives willingly and enthusiastically to embody resurrection and the scriptures attest that “day by day the Lord added to their number.” Is this how the Christian church out there, the Christian church right here, is reacting to the astounding, amazing grace of Easter?

The Dutch word for resurrection is *opstanding*, which literally means to stand up, to take a stand. To be “religious,” to be pious, to be holy — at least within the Christian context — does not mean to withdraw into a private world of feel good faith. It means to stand up to the powers and principalities that bring death to the world. It means to take a stand for the poor and the powerless. It means to stand up against pain, controlling possessiveness, and pride. Yes, to be a part of the resurrected community means to be for life, not just against death.

As Easter people we have a choice. We can go from this place, standing up to the powers and principalities that bring death to this church, this community and this world. We can go from this place, using the resurrection power that has been breathed into this community. We can go from this place, thankfully and passionately bringing new life to God’s fragile world. Or we can do nothing. What will our choice be? May it be life giving, for you and for me and for others?

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