

My Lord and My God!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-part series

April 22, 2012

©2012 Scott L. Engle

1 Corinthians 15:1–11 (NIV)

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

John 20:19–31 (NIV)

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

²²And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A 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!” ²⁷Then 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.”

²⁸Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

*Doubts. We don't talk much about them. But nearly all of us have them.
Just like Thomas.*

So Thomas had doubts. Big deal. We all have doubts. We are doubt-producing machines. And like Thomas, our doubts are reasonable. The story of Jesus, indeed the entire Christian story, makes extraordinary truth-claims, seemingly unbelievable claims. It is natural and understandable that we doubt. Think about it. We claim that 2,000 years ago a Galilean Jew died and was then resurrected to a newly embodied life. Not a ghost. Not resuscitated. But living anew, bodily, on the other side of death, never to look back. And we even claim that the same will be true for us all one day!

As hard as it might seem to believe such claims, when it comes to spiritual and religious matters, it is really not so much that America is a nation of unbelievers; rather, we are a nation of half-believers, carrying around vague notions of our deeply felt spiritual hunger. Sometimes we believe more than we would like to admit. At other times, we prefer to deny

any beliefs at all. One need only turn on the television or pick up the daily newspaper to find Americans awash in attempts to make sense of their spiritual desires. We are a nation in which most still self-identify as Christian, though many are really more “Christianish” than anything else.

In part, I think this is because we live in a world that values scientific knowledge as the only “real” knowledge, rather than embracing science as a way of knowing. People expect “proof” if they are to overcome their doubts.

The Breath of Jesus

The Holy Spirit is confusing to many Christians. For starters, they think of the Spirit as *something* akin to electricity or the force. But the Spirit is not a *thing* at all, not a “what,” but a “who.” The Holy Spirit is a person, whom Jesus had promised out come to the disciples after Jesus left.

Surely one of the reasons that Christians so often imagine the Holy Spirit to be a force like electricity, is that the Spirit lacks a proper name or even a personal designation, such as “Jesus” or “Father.” In the old days, we used to refer to the Spirit as the “Holy Ghost.” At least, that name captures something of the personal.

A second problem is that the biblical images of God-present-with-us, the Spirit, are impersonal – a dove, breath, wind, fire, even the “sound of sheer silence.” Yet, how else could the writers try to capture the immediacy, power, and intimacy of God’s presence? All words fall short of the reality of God; our God-talk necessarily is built on analogy and image.

Thus, we come to John’s big “Pentecost” moment in 20:22 ill-prepared. We have trouble hearing clearly Jesus’ announcement that the time had come for the disciples to head out, empowered by the Holy Spirit. As God breathed life into the man in the garden of Eden, Jesus now gives new life to these gathered disciples. This life-giving, life-sustaining breath of God is an image of the power of God’s presence – the Spirit, God-present-with us.

I remember the story told a decade ago by a young woman in the singles Sunday school class I was teaching at the time. She had recently been confronted by a Hindu gentleman who wanted her to “prove” the truth of Christianity. I don’t know whether he really wanted her to attempt a proof or whether he wanted to provoke a discussion of the nature of truth.

But the notion that we make decisions based on what we can *prove* is naïve. We “know/can prove” very little. Outside of mathematics, I can’t really think of much that we can prove. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything, only disproving. One of the things drummed into me in my Ph.D. work was the notion that a scientific hypothesis is never proven, only that many hypotheses have yet to be disproved, or as one of the principal scientific texts puts it, “. . . hypotheses can be tested and be shown to be probably true or probably false.”¹ Scientific hypotheses are always predictions, never proofs. Modern science works because the visible universe is orderly and predictable, not because science proves things.

So, let’s consider our beliefs and what we can actually prove.

First, our lives are built on what we believe to be true, not what we know to be true. This business about truth and proof can be tricky, but just stop to think about all the things you “know.” I think you’ll soon come to realize that nearly everything in your “knowledge” category is really in a “belief” category. It is just that there are many beliefs for which the evidence is so strong that we take the beliefs to be proven -- and we use the word “knowledge” when

speaking of such beliefs. We then go on to organize our world-view around those beliefs until such time that we learn something that causes us to modify our beliefs and, subsequently, our world-view.

1. This is from a classic textbook on scientific research, Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1986), 20.

To illustrate, perhaps you've seen the movie, *The Truman Show*. In this movie, the hero, Truman, was born and raised in a completely controlled "artificial" world that was really nothing more than a large movie set. Truman had no reason to believe that there was anything artificial or contrived about his world, even though his wife and all his friends were actors hired to play the roles. Truman was the only person not in on the secret. In *The Matrix*, the world is an artificial mental "reality" induced in the minds of humans so that they can be kept alive in large farms and used as batteries. The hero was one of a small group of rebels who discovered the secret, even though they could never be sure what was truly real and what was the computer-created artificial reality.

There are substantial theological issues embedded in both of these films because we cannot transcend our senses, thereby throwing into doubt all that we hold to be true. To put it simply, we are stuck with our five senses and we can't get around them! Now, I don't think I'm living in an elaborate movie set or in a Matrix, I just don't think I can prove it beyond any doubt. Because everything we know must be mediated by our senses and our senses can be deceived, we have to admit the possibility of being wrong about everything.

Of course . . . no one lives that way. I "know" that I married Patti fourteen years ago and that Chris, Matt, and Robby are my sons. For me to hold otherwise would get me committed - and rightly so! We just need to lose the notion that life can be reduced to Euclidean proofs such as we learned in tenth-grade geometry.

Second, something can be true whether we can prove it or not. For example, a couple of hundred years ago, a mathematician named Cronbach conjectured that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers. This conjecture has never been proved or disproved; perhaps it never will. But it still could be true and it might be very reasonable to believe it is true until you can find an even number that is not the sum of two primes. *Truth is independent of the evidence for the truth.*

Third, it may be reasonable to believe something that is not true or to disbelieve something that is true. When you were five, it was reasonable to believe in the material existence of Santa Claus. Your parents told you it was so and you had no reason to doubt your parents. Santa Claus was a reasonably held belief. By the time you were eight and had gathered some contradictory evidence, belief in Santa was no longer so reasonable. Indeed, had you held on to your childhood beliefs in the material existence of Santa, the Easter bunny, and the tooth fairy, your beliefs would have been most unreasonable and, indeed, foolish. At the same time, if you call to check on the arrival of a flight from New York and the airline tells you that the flight will arrive on time, it may be reasonable to disbelieve them based on your experience with the airline, even though it is true that the flight will arrive on time.

In sum, our lives are built on a foundation of countless beliefs about ourselves, others, the world, even the very nature of reality. Most of our beliefs do correspond to reality - to what is true - which is a good thing, because we have to make decisions every day on the basis of our beliefs. I did marry Patti in 1998; I was present at my marriage. (Of course, I have to believe that the Justice of the Peace was legit.) Bill Clinton was elected President in 1996. (At least the media has told me so.) The American colonies won their independence in 1781. (Or so my books have told me.) My point is that our beliefs are like a pyramid. When we are children, we begin building our pyramid of beliefs, adding blocks to it, taking blocks away. This pyramid constitutes our world-view. If we are fortunate, our pyramid is built on a wide foundation of many reasonably held beliefs that enable us to build an ever-higher pyramid of understanding. Sometimes our most fundamental beliefs are challenged and replaced with beliefs that we believe are closer to the truth - or, to put it another way, our world-view is modified. This is an unending, life-long process - and an inescapable one.

Now we come to the really hard part -- living with our belief pyramid. First, we are stuck with it, and each belief in the pyramid is only more or less likely to be true. Second,

we have to use these beliefs to make decisions every day. Am I really married? If I work hard will I get the promotion? Is there a God? It is pretty easy to see how deciding on your level of work effort will influence your life. It is perhaps not so easy to see how your decision about God will affect your life, especially for pragmatic Americans. It is not even obvious why a decision has to be made. But decisions are inescapable. It is true in life, just as it is true in business, that a decision delayed is a decision made.

Christians hold that you will make no more important decision than your decision about God. Further, we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was born 2000 years ago, that we know little of his life until his public ministry in the last three or so years of his life, that he proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom, that he was crucified by the Romans, died, and was buried, and that three days later he was bodily resurrected, subsequently appearing to hundreds of people. We believe, with Paul, that Jesus' resurrection validates his claims that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, indeed, God himself. Perhaps most importantly, Christians hold that God challenges us to make a decision - do we wish to be part of his kingdom or not? Further, we hold that this decision is bound up with our eternal destiny.

Even in the face of inevitable uncertainty and doubts, we must make a decision. Do we believe that the Christian story is true or do we believe that the Christians have got things wrong, despite their sincerely held beliefs? We may not want to confront this decision but it cannot be avoided -- a decision delayed is a decision made.

Back to Doubting Thomas

And so Thomas stands there before Jesus. He has a decision to make. Believe or not? A week before he had scoffed at the idea of a resurrected Jesus, saying he'd have to touch the wounds for himself in order to believe (John 20:25). Now, he can touch the wounds for himself. Now he *knows* as well as he can ever know. And his response is all it could ever be: "My Lord and my God!" This is the first time in John's gospel that Jesus is called God by anyone. And so doubting Thomas places a brick titled "resurrected Jesus" as the cornerstone in his pyramid of beliefs.

Twenty or so years later, Paul is writing to a Christian fellowship that he started in Corinth, Greece. They have given up their belief in Jesus' resurrection and, hence, their own. Paul can't bring them before the risen Christ to touch his wounds, but he can offer his own testimony and that of others. Paul tells them that he, the other apostles, and more than five hundred men and women can personally attest to the resurrection of Jesus, for they saw Jesus with their own eyes. Indeed, many are still alive and could still testify to the truth of the resurrection claim.

For more than twenty years, the apostles had preached an Easter message: Jesus died on the cross and was raised to new life. Thomas had to see for himself in order to embrace this claim as true. You and I are, as Jesus puts it, those who have not seen and yet are called to believe that Jesus lives. Indeed, the entire Christian faith stands or falls on the veracity of these claims. Richard Hays helps us to grasp the implications of our claim and our belief in his reflections on Paul's writing:

First, it means above all else that the gospel is a word of radical grace, for resurrection is one thing that we can neither produce nor control nor manipulate: our hope is exclusively in God's hands.

Second, it means that the faith is based on a particular event in human history, to which a definite circle of people gave testimony; the resurrection is not simply a symbol for the flowers coming up every spring or for the hope that springs eternal in the human heart. The Christian faith is grounded in the rising from the grave of Jesus Christ, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

Third, the foundational character of the resurrection means that eschatology is at the heart of the gospel. Because Christ is the first fruits, his resurrection points to the resurrection of all those who belong to him. That remains inescapably a future event. Thus, the effect of the resurrection of Christ is to turn our eyes to God's coming future.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When Jesus comes to the disciples on the evening of the resurrection, he breathes on them and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. Thus, John brings resurrection and Pentecost into the same day.
 - a. Discuss your understanding of the Holy Spirit. It is vital to see that the Spirit is a “who,” not a “what.”
 - b. How do you experience the Spirit of God in your own life.

2. Thomas, one of the twelve has missed Jesus’ visit and directly expresses his doubts about the claim of resurrection. When he meets the risen Christ, Thomas makes the first direct declaration of Jesus’ divinity in John’s gospel by anyone other than Jesus.
 - a. This story is a great occasion to talk about our own doubts. We all have them – sometimes more and sometimes less. Talk about the doubts that most often trouble you.
 - b. Discuss how you deal with doubt in matters of faith. How do you differentiate between day-to-day doubts and those that could threaten the foundations of your faith in Jesus?

3. The accompanying resurrection text for this week is 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Paul offers up evidence to the Corinthians Christians that Jesus was actually resurrected. What sort of evidence do you find is most persuasive?

4. Most of us work in places that have mission statements. John had a mission when he set out to write his story of Jesus. He wrote so that we would believe in Jesus and have “life in his name.”
 - a. What do you think John means by “life”? What might it have to do with our lives today. Too often, people conclude that faith in Jesus is only about getting our ticket-to-eternity punched. What do you think we gain today by believing that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.”

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Luke 24:1-12 Mary Magdalene and the other women give the first testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Acts 2:14-21 Peter’s first preaching of the Good News and resurrection</p>
<p>Wednesday, Acts 4:1-12 Peter rises to defend himself before the Jewish Sanhedrin and, again, testifies to the resurrection of Jesus, and, hence, the resurrection of the dead.</p>	<p>Thursday, Hebrew 4:1-13 The Sabbath rest that awaits those who believe.</p>
<p>Friday, Hebrews 11:1-12:3 Faith in the unseen; faith in action</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

