

‘Why should I believe that?’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, April 11th 2010

I tend to use the word ‘should’ an awful lot, especially when saying what other people should do. Stephen urges me to drop the word ‘should’ and, do you know, I should do that. Seriously, my using the word ‘should’ betrays an outlook on life which is not terribly helpful. I was a bit surprised then that my sermon title for today got past Stephen and into the bulletin: ‘Why should I believe that?’ Perhaps the title would be better simply: ‘Why believe that?’ or even just ‘Why believe?’

In whatever form you prefer this question, I’d like you to ask it for yourself this morning: why believe – and, in particular, why believe in the resurrection. You know, the first Sunday after Easter is for many Christians a bit of a low point. Church congregations are often dramatically reduced. All the effort and all the excitement of the Easter celebration are gone and here we are – perhaps even feeling a bit of anti-climax. Personally, I love not only Easter but also Holy Week. I much prefer it to Christmas. Nonetheless, like many of you, I suspect, it can be very difficult to sustain living the sort of resurrection faith that Stephen described in his sermon last week. Maybe you didn’t even manage it on Easter Day itself. Perhaps for some sad reason or another, you sang: ‘Christ the Lord Is Risen Today’ without it really impinging on you. Maybe you even felt like Thomas, in our gospel reading this morning. He hasn’t even caught up with the fact that the crucified Jesus is the risen Christ. He wasn’t there when the other disciples saw Jesus after he was raised. Not surprisingly, when they announce: ‘We have seen the Lord’, Thomas replies: ‘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.’ Thomas represents each one of us in our skepticism, in our cynicism, in our sheer inability to believe or to believe enough.

Aren’t we more like Thomas than we like to admit? We’ve heard that Jesus was raised but we need good reason to believe it. We’re prepared to celebrate Easter, with choir, handbells, and even Easter bonnets if we’re that way inclined. But are we prepared to sign up to resurrection-life? Before we do, we ask, like Thomas, for evidence, for a reason to believe. Thomas has a very interesting suggestion for what would make him believe. We sometimes insult Thomas for wanting to see the scars, but, in fact, he is onto something very profound. It is a form of identification with the sufferings

of Jesus. Notice that Jesus does not deny Thomas' demand but allows it. After all, Thomas has not requested seeing Jesus on some glittering throne or as some of the disciples got to see at the transfiguration Jesus clearly in heavenly glory. What Thomas needs to see is precisely what the other disciples needed to see in order to recognize Jesus, his scars.

But the account in John's gospel that we've just heard asks the question with which we began this sermon: 'Why believe?' with a different focus. Why believe, not in the sense of on what ground, on what evidence, but why in the sense of what for, for what purpose, to what end. And the answer comes in our passage. These last verses of John chapter 20 which we've just heard were originally the closing verses of John's entire gospel. As such, they look back over the whole gospel. The writer says how he made a selection from the many narratives he could have offered about the signs of Jesus' supernatural power, the power of God. John says that the ones he has recorded here have the purpose of making faith possible. As he puts it: 'these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' The purpose of believing is not just to believe facts about Jesus, namely that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, but that through believing we may have life in his name.

Those addressed by John's gospel may not be unbelievers but believers who need their faith deepening. Isn't that all of us? We may believe with our minds that Jesus is the Son of God, but do we with our hearts, out wills, act as believers that God has revealed himself supremely in Jesus. Do we believe that we see the nature of God in Jesus, not only in the resurrection, but also in the crucifixion? Jesus can only perform the divine function of giving life if we believe, that is, live with faith in him.

Remember the words of our first scripture this morning. We heard in Acts 5: 30 'The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.' You might have expected Peter in this sermon reported in Acts concentrate on the resurrection and forget about the crucifixion, to tell the story of success not the story of defeat. But no, the two must go together. Jesus is only the risen savior because he was first crucified. On Palm Sunday 2010, our chancel choir sang a cantata entitled: 'Come, touch the Robe'. On Palm Sunday 2009, we sang a cantata entitled: 'Known by the scars'. Both Thomas and the writer of our Palm Sunday Cantata last year were absolutely right. Jesus is known by his scars, the

scars inflicted on God's love. The Risen Christ has scars. Being raised from the dead did not erase these scars. The Christ of Easter bears the scars made on Good Friday. Jesus' disciples, like, Thomas recognized him as risen only by touching his scars and so with us. We may see Easter as God's stunning victory over death and defeat, but it does not erase the scars. I think we do people a disservice if we suggest that somehow true believers always feel joy and peace in their hearts. It can make people feel that there is something wrong with them as Christians if their faith does not put them permanently and perpetually on cloud nine. If this is what Christian faith is about, then Jesus would have appeared after his resurrection with all reminders of human suffering and pain nicely massaged away.

Allow me to read for you an extract from a book. The book, which became important to me at a very difficult time, is entitled: *Friday Afternoon*.¹ Neville Ward writes: 'Religious meaning is independent of the apparent goodness or evil of experience. Indeed it is found exactly among people who have been through much of the outrageousness of existence rather than those who have not been put to major tests. Faith is a matter of living through situations in as much love, joy and peace as we can receive from God because God wishes life to be so lived and his presence enables it to be so lived. If the situation is an agony and is so lived it becomes a particularly vivid occasion of the glory of God. It is in this sense that suffering can be seen as a special offering to God for his use, because suffering is so widely seen as marking the absence of God.'

The writer continues: 'The Christian in trouble is a person particularly involved in working through, in proving in his life, this faith that painful situations, when interpreted a particularly important opportunities of serving God and receiving from God, are more manageable than when understood in other ways, more manageable and more productive of personal good.'

This is the essential Christian idea. It is not goodness or unselfishness or even love as so many people seem to think. Many people get around to managing some of that. The essential Christian idea is that pain lived through for God and with God leads to a resurrection, to a new kind of existence altogether in this world and the next.' Isn't this what John is saying in answer to our question: why believe? He says that we believe to that we 'may have life in his name.'

¹ J Neville Ward, (1976) *Friday Afternoon*, Epworth Press, p 42

Our opening hymn this Sunday morning was very different from our opening hymn last Sunday morning, but they are both equally hymns of resurrection. 'Jesus Christ is risen today' is very exuberant, but 'Now the Green Blade Riseth' is rather meditative. Let me remind you of the fourth verse we sang:

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

I remember singing this one particular Easter. I remember it from decades ago, not because of how good I was feeling, but because of how bad I was feeling. I was living in the northeast of England and I was worshipping that Easter in Guisborough Anglican Church. For reasons I need not go into, my heart was feeling very wintry indeed. Easter came and went and my heart was still wintry, grieving, and in pain, as the hymn puts it. It was to be another few months before I came out of this two-year long depression. But come out of it, I did. For that Easter, however, I just had to believe, had to have faith, had to trust that God had raised Jesus from the dead. I just had to trust, to have faith, to believe that though I couldn't seem to experience the reality of this for the moment (or even the foreseeable future) this didn't make it any less true.

I just had to keep on believing, even when I couldn't see straight. It's a good job I didn't know how long that depression would last. There's a sense in which, because the darkness was so deep, I just had to hang on to the faith of others whom I respected, admired, and trusted – including some who, I knew, had themselves been in deep darkness and yet come through.

It is worth remembering that the words of the 23rd Psalm do not refer only to physical death but also to emotional or spiritual death. The phrase: 'When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death' often resonates with people not only suffering bereavement but also people suffering any form of deep darkness, whatever its cause. After all the Hebrew of Psalm 23 never even mentions death. It speaks simply of 'a valley of deepest darkness'.

Those of you who read the Upper Room devotional may have been struck by the entry printed for last Sunday, Easter Day. Whether or not you read this, may I share a little of it with you? Its heading, in the Spanish version of the

Upper Room, is *Fe a la media noche*, 'Middle-of the night faith'. The thought is that the Resurrection is a faith begun not in bright sunlight but in the dark. According to John 20:1, the opening of the gospel Stephen recited last week, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb 'while it was still dark' and found it already empty. In other words, Mary didn't experience the Resurrection at daybreak, at sunrise, but in the middle of the night. The writer of this Upper Room devotional observes that it is in the middle of the night when Christians most need faith in the resurrection. She records a thin time in her life and says: 'That was the hour when I needed to be reassured that Jesus Christ lives and reigns. That was when I needed to be certain that he knew exactly what we were going through and was going through it with us. That was when I needed to know that no matter how bad things get, the risen Christ is Lord!' She goes on: 'Easter Sunrise services are lovely, but we might do well to hold middle-of-the-night celebrations of the Resurrection instead. We most need to be reminded of the power of God not when things are looking rosy but when our lives seem most frightening.'

Writing of opportunities to grow in faith, Thomas Keating says that God 'can only give us what we are capable of receiving at the present moment. The events that he allows or causes to happen, if we respond with faith, give him the chance to increase our faith. ... Each of us is more or less a problem to Jesus. He responds to us according to the degree of faith which we have right now.'² It is so easy to pontificate on how, what, and why others should believe. Why don't we concentrate on how, what, and why we should believe? We are asked not to whistle in the dark or grin inanely as if life is always wonderful and resurrection obvious. Rather, we are asked to put our hands into the shocking scars of Jesus, including the scars of our own lives. This is where we will find the presence of the divinely risen Christ. The Jesus whom the disciples knew did not hover above the heartache of the world; he embraced the pain, touched the care and the sorrow, lived and died where they lived and died, all on the common earth of humankind. Many of us in this sanctuary will have physical scars, from surgery or from accidents. Probably all of us will also have less tangible scars. If, like Thomas, you aren't sure that you believe, or believe enough, the risen Christ will show you the scars of his love. The Lord who encouraged Thomas to believe shows us his now intangible scars so that, even with all our doubts and pains, we may believe and have life in his name. Alleluia, Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed.

² Thomas Keating, (1995), *Crisis of Faith, Crisis of Love*, Continuum, pp 15-16