

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO BELIEVE

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

According to John's gospel, Mary Magdalene was the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection. She saw him outside his empty tomb early in the morning. She was distraught, not just over his death, but over the further indignity of his stolen body. At first, when Jesus spoke to her, she thought he was the gardener. It wasn't until he spoke her name that she recognized him.

I've been intrigued by this detail for a long time. When Mary, who'd been a close friend and follower of Jesus', likely for as long as any of the disciples... When Mary saw Jesus she did not recognize him. She thought he was the gardener. How is that possible? We might have trouble recognizing someone we haven't seen for a long time. That makes sense. But it had only been days since Mary had seen Jesus. Then again, Jesus was dead. And who among us wouldn't have difficulty comprehending that a person standing in front of us, clearly fully alive, was the same person we knew to be dead?

I think we've probably all had that experience where we see someone we know, but in a place that's different from where we know them, and that difference is enough to make us not recognize the person. But Mary's relationship with Jesus wasn't limited to one or two places. She'd lived and traveled with him for months – probably at least a couple years. And yet, when she met him outside the tomb, she didn't recognize him. When he spoke to her, she didn't recognize him. And I think it likely that none of us would have either. It was an impossibility that the man in the garden could be Jesus – who she'd seen die.

But then Jesus spoke her name. And suddenly the impossibility of it didn't matter any more. He spoke her name and immediately she knew him.

Later, in the evening of that same day, Jesus showed up unannounced in the room where the disciples were gathered behind locked doors, because they were afraid that they might also be arrested and killed. They'd heard from Mary that Jesus was alive. John doesn't tell us if they believed her or not. As Luke tells the story, they did not believe until they saw Jesus for themselves.

Regardless, what we know is that Jesus showed up in that locked room, greeted the disciples, and showed them the nail marks in his hands and the hole in his side from where the spear had pierced him. It was upon seeing these marks that they recognized Jesus.

Thomas wasn't with them when Jesus showed up. And he found it hard to believe what they told him after the fact, until a week later, when he and the other disciples were together again in the same place, and Jesus showed up, much like he had the first time, and spoke directly to Thomas, and showed him his hands and his side. It was then, finally, that Thomas also believed.

Can you imagine what it was like for Thomas? For a full week, he was grieving the loss of Jesus alone. His closest friends – those with whom he'd followed Jesus for 3 years, those with whom he'd shared the most extraordinary of experiences while following Jesus – these friends were convinced that Jesus was alive. Thomas was alone in his grief. Can you imagine how hard that must have been? That week must have felt like an eternity.

People often make a big deal about Thomas' unbelief. He's been known through the centuries as *Doubting Thomas*. But would any of us have believed differently? As much as we love a good zombie movie or hold onto countless tales of ghosts and spirits who wander among us, would any of us have believed it if we were in Thomas' shoes? If our closest friends were telling us they'd seen our dead friend alive, wouldn't we be more likely to believe they'd all succumbed to some kind of mass hallucination brought on by grief than that a man we *knew* to be dead was alive?

There are things in this world that we *know* to be true. The sun is hot. Snow is cold. Water is wet. The earth rotates once every 24 hours and orbits the sun once every 365 days. We need food and water to survive. People arrive as babies and, assuming no tragedies, grow into adulthood, passing through various physical stages of development on the way. There are things in this world that we know to be true. And one of those things we know is that once a body has died, and been dead for some time, it stays dead; it cannot be alive again.

Would any of us have believed differently than Thomas believed?

I find it incredible that Thomas was with the other disciples a week later. How could he stand it? How could he stand being in their presence, alone in his grief and sorrow? How could he stand listening to them talk about their extraordinary experience? I wonder if he found himself imagining that Jesus really was alive; I wonder what that felt like – that he'd showed himself to everyone but him? Did Jesus not love him as much as he loved them? How could Thomas have not felt rejected? Even if Thomas started to believe the other disciples' story, maybe he needed it to not be true because the alternative, that for some reason Jesus wasn't showing up for him, was even harder to live with than Jesus' death.

But then Jesus did show up. Just like he had the week prior, the disciples were together behind locked doors. Jesus suddenly appeared, greeted them, and spoke directly to Thomas: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

And just like the other disciples a week earlier, Thomas knew this was Jesus. Finally, he could join the others in their joy. Finally, he was no longer alone. And Jesus said to him, and, I think, to the other disciples: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."ⁱ

"Blessed are those who have not seen me."

That's us. We're the ones who haven't seen him. We're the ones for whom it's impossible to see and talk to Jesus *in the flesh*. It doesn't mean we can't know him. It doesn't mean we can't speak to him or hear from him. But all our encounters are mediated through the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus is no longer here *in the flesh*. Weeks after these Easter encounters, Jesus ascended – he returned to his home with the Father, taking up once again the fullness of his identity as the Word – the Son – the second person of the Trinity.

"Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed."

This is what John writes next in his gospel:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But 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.ⁱⁱ

“Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have *believed*.”

The things in this book “are written that you may *believe*...and that by *believing* you may have life in his name.”

What do we mean by the word, *believe*?

The dictionary defines it this way: “...to have confidence in the truth, the existence, or the reliability of something, although without absolute proof.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I think we’d probably all agree with that definition. When we say we believe *someone*, we’re saying we are confident they are telling us the truth. When we say we believe *something*, we’re saying we are confident that thing is true.

In English, to believe is to know something. We might not be able to prove it, but we know it is true. And so, we read Jesus’ words and we hear him saying: “Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet *know* that I am alive.” We hear John declaring that the purpose of his gospel is that we who read it might *know* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in that *knowing*, we might have life in his name.

Because we understand the word *believe* in this way – as knowing something to be true – whenever we talk to people about Jesus, our tendency has been to convince them of the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; our tendency has been to convince them that the accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as recorded in our Bible, are true. And we have expended inordinate amounts of time and energy working to prove that truth. And those who believe, we believe, are blessed, while those who do not believe, either because they cannot believe or they choose not to believe, are not blessed. In fact, we believe they are condemned. And so, we berate ourselves for our failure to be convincing. Or we berate them their stubbornness.

But here’s the thing: our English definition of the English word *believe*, is smaller than that of the Greek used by Jesus and John. As in so many cases translating from an ancient language to our modern English, our understanding is affected by the fact that our vocabulary – the number of words we have – is much bigger than that of the ancient language. What this means is that words in ancient Greek hold bigger meanings than our words hold.

In Greek, the word we translate as *believe*, here in John 20, isn’t just about knowing something to be true. It’s also about trusting something to be true.

While *trust* and *belief* aren’t exactly different in meaning in English – they both carry a sense of confidence as part of their definition – they also aren’t exactly the same in meaning in English. Where belief is about knowing something to be true, trust is about relying on something or someone. Because we trust that the Bible accurately testifies to the truth, we believe what it says. Because we trust that the gospel writers told the truth, we believe their stories of Jesus, and we

believe that he really was the Son of God / the Word of God made flesh. *Belief* and *trust* aren't completely different in meaning, they absolutely overlap, but they also aren't exactly the same in meaning.

Consider this: Listen to Jesus' words again, this time substituting *trust* for *belief*.

To Thomas he said, "Stop doubting and trust."

To all the disciples he said, "Because you have seen me, you have trusted; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have trusted."

When I hear Jesus say that those who have not seen, but have believed are blessed, I feel a whole lot of pressure to make myself believe or to make others believe. Because you either believe or you don't. And the ramifications of that belief or unbelief are massive. And yet even with all that pressure, it's clear that I can't make anyone believe, even myself. If we could make people believe, the whole world would believe. After all, we Christians have tried everything to make people believe. People have been tortured for not believing. People have died for not believing. If it were possible to make people believe, everyone would believe.

When I hear Jesus say that those who have not seen, but have trusted are blessed, the pressure is off. I can breathe again. Because where belief seems like something out of my control, trust is a choice. I can choose to trust. And that trust, though it might be as small as a mustard seed, can also grow as big as a mountain.

Listen to how this same substitution of *trust* for *belief* works when we read John's words at the end of chapter 20:

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

Do you hear the difference?

It is by trusting that we have life in his name. If this life requires that I believe, then what do I do if I doubt? What hope do I have if I simply can't believe? But if it's about trust – something I can choose – then I have hope. Because I can choose to trust even if I don't believe. I can choose to trust the Bible as an accurate reflection of God's will and work in our world. I can choose to trust the gospel writers as accurate and truthful storytellers. I can choose to trust my own experience of the Holy Spirit – of God's presence – as genuine and reliable and real. I can choose to trust you as you tell me of your experiences of God's presence in your life.

Now, all that being said, trusting doesn't mean we don't also believe. It also doesn't mean there aren't good, logical, scientifically reliable reasons to believe. But I think we don't start with belief. I think we start with trust. I think we start by making a choice. I think that might have been part of what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

For the disciples, belief was possible because Jesus was standing right in front of them, in the flesh, bearing the marks of his crucifixion and death. The truth of things could not be denied. But

things are different for us. Even if we have some kind of vision of Jesus in the flesh before us, it is a vision – he’s not really there, in the flesh. We must choose whether or not to trust our vision before we can believe. Are we imagining things that aren’t real? Are we high or drunk or is it all wishful thinking? There are all sorts of explanations in our world for why people have visions of things. In some places and among some people, visions are trusted as an accurate representation of the truth, or at least as a metaphorical representation of the truth. In other places and among other people, visions are regarded as more of a psychological phenomenon that speaks to our own desires and hopes and dreams than they do of anything outside ourselves, or they are evidence of mental illness and nothing else.

If belief isn’t so much something we choose, as something that simply is or isn’t, then there’s nothing we can do. But if belief encompasses trust, which is a choice we make, then maybe there is something we can do.

Many years ago, I chose to trust that Jesus is alive; I chose to trust that God wants me as his child, as Jesus’ follower, and as Jesus’ sister; I chose to trust that as God’s child – as Jesus’ follower and sister – this life would not be my only life, but that a day will come when I will be perfected and live eternally with God; I chose to trust that the things Jesus taught and the way God wants us to live are accurately represented in the Bible; and among those things Jesus taught, I chose to trust that God knows me and wants to be known by me.

And because I chose to trust all those things, I also made choices about how I will live my life. One of the biggest choices I made in that regard, is the choice to get to know God and to continue to get to know God more and more. I believe (and I use that word intentionally, to mean that I have confidence in the truth that) this is what it means to be a Christian. It means making all these choices to trust. And ultimately, it means making the choice to get to know God and to continue to get to know God more and more.

This *getting to know God* is the intended life of a Christian because everything else flows from that. As we get to know God, our trust shifts to belief. As we get to know God, we experience what it is to be loved by God. As we get to know God, our desire to be more and more like Jesus grows.

For too long we’ve reduced Christianity to a question of belief. We made it all about believing or not believing that, in John’s words, “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.” We’ve made it all about blessing for those who believe and condemnation for those who don’t. And if it’s just about believing or not believing, then everything else is optional. We can become more like Jesus, or not. We can grow to know God, or not.

But what happens when we attend to the bigger meaning of Jesus’ and John’s words at the end of John 20? How does it impact our lives when we read:

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have trusted,” and

that all these things in John’s gospel “are written that you may trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by trusting you may have life in his name.”

I think, trusting has ramifications for our lives – for the way we live our lives, for the way we follow Jesus... I think, where belief either is or isn’t, trust is something we live out. It’s not just a

thing, it's something we do. And as something we do, it requires more of us than belief requires. In making the choice to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, we are also making the choice to live out that truth. And we live out that truth by getting to know God more and more. And we get to know God more and more, in part by (you guessed it) practicing the Spiritual Disciplines.

The first person who met the resurrected Jesus was Mary Magdalene. At first, she didn't recognize him – she didn't know him. But when he spoke her name, her eyes were opened, and she knew him. I think this is what God wants for all of us – that we would know him like Mary knew Jesus. God knows our name just like Jesus knew Mary's name. It's not just a word to God, it's everything about who we are. We are known completely by God – nothing is hidden. And knowing us completely, God loves us completely. I believe it was that love that Mary responded to in Jesus both before and after his resurrection. I believe that when he spoke her name, Mary heard all that love as a word, and it was that love she recognized and knew.

When we practice the Spiritual Disciplines, we are using tried and true tools to put ourselves in a position to know God because they put us in a position to meet his Holy Spirit, who is God's presence among us. As we get to know God, we discover that we are loved by God. And as we discover and experience that love, we learn to recognize it so that we, like Mary, recognize God / Jesus / the Holy Spirit with us, among us, and even in us.

Over the coming week, I'd like to encourage you to return to something we did back in January when we started talking about Spiritual Disciplines. At that time, I invited you to read over and over again the opening words from Psalm 42, turning them into your prayer. These are the words:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

As you recite and pray those words, may they inspire you to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; may they inspire you to trust that God knows you and loves you; may they inspire you to know God.

ⁱ John 20:29.

ⁱⁱ John 20:30-31.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/believe>