Christianity 101: Faith
John 20:19-25

- Why do banks charge a fee on “insufficient funds” when they know there is not enough money?
- Why do we press harder on a remote control when we know the batteries are going dead?
- Is there ever a day when mattresses are not on sale?
- How do those dead bugs get into an enclosed light fixture?
- Why is there a moon? What if there wasn’t?

We all enjoy engaging in the *whys* and *hows* and *what ifs*. The idea of what if there wasn’t a moon was to me an intriguing thought. Neil Comins, a science professor at the University of Maine, wondered about this. The results are interesting.

If there were no sun the ocean tides would be smaller. There would be an eight hour day instead of a twenty-four hour day. This would mean that each of us would be three times as old; work from one to four instead of nine to five; sleep one third as long; and live in caves because the one hundred mile-per-hour winds would be too great to endure.

When we think about it, we all play this game in one area of our lives or another. We speculate about what if aliens invaded earth (*E.T.*, *Alien*, *War of the Worlds*); what if these two movie stars got together; what if Kim Jones married Kim Kixmiller; what if Jesus fathered a child (*Da Vinci Code*); What if Jesus really hadn’t risen from the dead?

The scripture this morning is a familiar one. It generally comes to our attention in the immediacy of the resurrection story. It is an incident involving Thomas and Jesus that addresses the what if about Jesus’ resurrection. Its commonality has led to the phrase ascribed to one who has to have empirical proof before believing anything as a *doubting Thomas*.

We shouldn’t be so harsh on Thomas since he represents many of us who too frequently lack the faith to follow until we see for ourselves. The African impala can jump to a height of over ten feet and cover a distance of greater than thirty feet. Yet these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a three foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall. Perhaps Thomas and we are hesitant to jump where we cannot see or feel the place we might land and this is a part of our DNA.

We address the challenge of faith so basic to who we are as human beings and particularly as Christians. Certainly the writer of Hebrews defined faith best as *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (11:1). Some of the other disciples had seen the empty tomb. Thomas had not. Some had seen where their feet would land. Thomas had not.

It is true about anything in life whether it be a project we are undertaking, a relationship we are nurturing, or a journey to follow the master of Nazareth—faith makes them work. Faith enables us to take the risks so necessary to a project’s fruition, marital success, and spiritual growth. Without faith it is mere belief without trust, it is hope without risk, and it is talk without action. As James wrote, *faith without works is dead* (2:17).
There is a parable about a wild goose that was shot down by a hunter. The goose was only wounded in one wing and landed safely in a barnyard. The other animals were startled at first by this visitor from the sky, but they busied themselves helping the goose with his wound. While the goose was healing he would entertain the other animals with the joys of flight and far-off places. The chickens and turkeys loved to hear him tell of the stories, but they never tried to fly themselves. The wild goose, even though his wing had completely healed, continued to talk about flying but never flew again.

Without faith and the action that is commensurate with it, we remain locked in our own cages of big talk and little action waiting to see the nail prints. We call committees to meet and task forces to be launched, but take no action because, frankly, we’re afraid our feet will land in the wrong place. Again, hope without risk is the absence of faith.

Faith must not rest on the outcome we envision, but the outcome God knows will be right and good for us. A wonderful story involving three men with colorful names is found in the book of Daniel. It is about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (chapter 3). They refused to worship the golden statue erected by King Nebuchadnezzar, choosing only to worship the God of the Israelites. When the king challenged them on this saying he would throw them into the firing furnace if they did, their response was interesting.

*If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O King, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up* (3:17-18)

Their faith was not contingent upon deliverance in the way they envisioned it, but the way God envisioned it.

Faith is that way. Too many of us pray believing that it must happen a certain way or our prayers have not been answered. Faith is letting God know the desires of our heart while believing and trusting that God will know the right and best thing. We may pray that our loved ones are healed by returning to health and moving among us again. However, God may see that the best healing for them is through death where they throw off the shackles of physical imprisonment and step foot in a room where there are no longer such shackles.

Faith is bold enough to tackle the what if, embrace the what is, and moves forward to the what will be. Thomas Wolfe in his book *The Right Stuff* writes about jet pilots who tested the early supersonic aircraft. Is was only when these pilots pressed the limits of what is the sound barrier by challenging the what if to the point of aircraft failure and blacking out themselves that they were able to cross the threshold of the speed of sound and move on. They would not remain trapped in a cage with a three foot wall. They were willing to step over into what they had never seen because they had faith it was possible.

Philip Yancy in his book *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church* writes of the work of Drs. Paul and Margaret Brand who directed the Karigiri Leprosarium in India.
All this elaborate medical care went to ‘nobodies,’ victims of leprosy who had mostly made their living from begging. Many who arrived at the hospital barely looked human. Their shoulders slumped, they cringed when other people approached, and the light had faded from their eyes. Months of compassionate treatment from the staff at Karigiri could return that light to their eyes. For years people had shrunk away from them in terror; at the clinic nurses and doctors would hold their hands and talk to them. Un-revolted, unafraid, the staff listened to the new patients’ stories, and used the magic of human touch. A year or so later these patients, Lazarus-like, would walk out of the hospital and proudly head off to learn a new trade.

Thomas must have seemed as a leper to the other disciples who were excited over the resurrection. Yet in a final stretch of faith, Jesus extended his hand, Thomas took it and walked into history as the one who may have made it to India where was founded the Mar Thoma Church.

Faith is basic in moving beyond the what if to the what is. Faith enables us to move out of these cages where doubt and separation are really no higher than three foot walls that caged the African impala and trust that what is on the other side is greater than we would imagine. Most important of all is whose hand we take to leap this wall and walk this life of faith. With whom will we walk?

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