BELIEVE WHAT YOU SEE

During the years I lived in Minot we would sing an Easter Cantata and the joy-filled song at the culmination of the story was called Behold the Empty Tomb. The lyrics weren’t eloquent and the melody was nothing complicated, but the message of the words we sang was so powerful I could never get through the song without tears. Here’s the chorus: The tomb is empty, praise be to God! The tomb is empty, praise be to God! The tomb is empty, praise be to God! Jesus lives again!

Why would that particular verse affect my emotions more than any other? Because it’s such a beautiful message and someday I know that will be true of me, as well. Some day my tomb will be empty and I will live again. That is the end result of this life spent seeking, finding, and serving God. I will be with Christ, singing around His throne with those who are alive again.

Imagine the discovery of an empty tomb. Surely we would have a variety of reactions similar to those expressed in the gospel story of the resurrection of Jesus. In Luke’s account the women come to the tomb in a group; each gospel writer sets the scene differently, but don’t let it concern you. Think of it as an eyewitness account versus a third hand retelling of an event. The point is that they were all in agreement as to what happened that day.

The women went early, they had plans, they were surprised by the stone moved and the empty tomb. They were perplexed or puzzled, left wondering. They had no idea what was going on or where He was. We often stop short at this point and think, He’s risen, He told you He would be, remember? We have that great advantage of knowing the rest of the story.

Like anyone approaching a tomb expecting to find the deceased they were right to be surprised. Maybe that’s why grief is so hard for us sometimes; if we had the opportunity to see our loved ones in the grave as these women expected to, maybe we could deal with death better. Instead we hide the reality of death by putting the dead to rest and saying goodbye before we’ve even seen them placed in the ground. Well, we would still be shocked if we knew they were gone, but then we say that anyway, don’t we? “They’ve gone to a better place,” because that’s our dearest hope for them, to share in the kingdom of God.

So how would we react in front of that empty tomb? “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” It is our custom to visit the grave and speak to those long dead when in reality their spirit is far from that place of grief. “He isn’t here, He has been raised, and don’t you remember what He told you?” The angel was acting as the first evangelist, the telling of the good news of the gospel. Even those who know it best are hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

To have faith is to remember and wait, and to wait in hope is to have what we hope for already begin to come true in us through our hoping. The women did remember and it renewed their faith to tell the others. Even with the testimony of the women the disciples were not at that place yet, either physically or spiritually.
Peter at least went to look; he had a lot riding on the promise of the resurrection. He had a guilty conscience, he had left things with Jesus at an uncomfortable place, or so he thought. And so he wondered, pondered over his past mistakes and over the truth that Jesus really was alive again. In the Garden of Gethsemane the disciples went to sleep when they should have stayed awake, and once they realized what they had done it produced despair. The sense of having done something irreversible tends to make us despair. Never let the sense of past failure defeat your next step.

The thought of a second chance must have strengthened Peter’s hope, not only for redemption, but also for resurrection. Still, he was left wondering or marveling, which are not exactly the same thing. Wonder is not a synonym for faith. It may be a prelude to faith; it may pave the way for opening eyes and spirits. But to wonder at Jesus is not the same as following Jesus.

For Peter, after hearing the women and seeing the empty tomb, wonder becomes a “teetering” between two worlds. On one side is the world as everyone has always known it, where death closes the final door. On the other side is the world testified to by the women, a world opened to unprecedented transformation. Peter wonders, but will Peter follow?

The British comedy troupe known as Monty Python used the classic line, “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” For whatever reason it would seem no one expected the resurrection either. We don’t have a gospel account where everyone stands around yelling, “I knew it!,” or excitedly fist bumping or high fiving and cheering like they’d all just won the resurrection lottery, even though they all had.

Unbelief does not mean that people believe nothing. Rather, it means that they believe something else. People say, “I don’t believe it” because there is something that they believe more strongly. Yet here is where the Easter message begins its work, by challenging our certainties. Death is real, but it is not final. In Jesus, life gets the last word.

What would the apostle Paul have said to these people at the tomb, some of whom he would later meet? Why, he would say the very thing he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, “If Christ hasn’t been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless. If we hope in Christ for this life only, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else.”

There is a new world order of life and immortality, doing away with the old world order of sin and death. This is not merely a future promise, it is a current reality initiated by the resurrection of Christ. He is a risen Savior, He is in the world today, not at His empty tomb but everywhere and within us. Resurrection is the ultimate good news for humankind. We are

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1 Chambers, Oswald, My Utmost for His Highest, February 18 entry
2 Indermark, John, Immersion Bible Studies: Luke, pg. 82
not left with the mistakes and failures of our past, carrying them with us into the next life. We need not carry them in this life!

The wise Henri Nouwen wrote, “The great temptation is to use our many obvious failures and disappointments in our lives to convince ourselves that we are not really worth being loved. Because what do we have to show for ourselves? But for a person of faith the opposite is true. The many failures may open that place in us where we have nothing to brag about but everything to be loved for. It is becoming a child again, a child who is loved simply for being, simply for smiling, simply for reaching out.”

What happened on Good Friday was not a failure. What happened on Easter was something nobody expected. Paul talked about God being able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by the His power at work within us. Our freedom and new creation start now. For all that has been, thanks. For all that shall be, yes!

Despite the references to tombs and grief on this unique day of the Christian year, we’re not here today to talk about death. It may be the final enemy, but the victory is won. “Where is your sting, Death?” People all over the world need to hear those words. People in Belgium need to hear it. People in Syria need to hear it. People in Paris need to hear it. People in Pennsylvania and Kansas and Michigan and the other six states whose citizens have died in mass shootings this month alone need to hear those words. They need a resurrection to believe in because the pain in the world is very real.

Wouldn’t we be deserving of pity if we thought that all our faith could do is comfort us in times of sorrow? We belong to the one who overcame death and offers us new life. This is not something to be taken lightly. This is the greatest event the world has ever known, but unfortunately a great deal of the world’s people have never heard it or have chosen not to believe it.

In his very frank way the author Frederick Buechner said, “What is both good and new about the good news is the mad insistence that Jesus lives on among us not just as another haunting memory but as the outlandish, holy, and invisible power of God working not just through the sacraments, but in countless hidden ways to make even slobs like us loving and whole beyond anything we could conceivably pull off by ourselves.”

We did not see the empty tomb, and yet we believe. We have never seen Jesus with physical sight, and yet we believe. He declared those of us who came to faith without sight more blessed than those who came to faith through sight. How can we believe what we can’t see? Frankly, I would rather believe in the one who died and rose than to believe that what I can see in the world today is the end of the story.

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I would hate to believe in a life that truly ends in death, that my time here with those I love has been damaged or marred or splintered by sin I could not overcome by myself. I would risk doing it all over if I thought this life was the only chance I would ever have. I can believe what I can’t see because ultimately I will see it. I want everyone to see it because I know it will be greater than anything I’ve ever experienced, stronger than any love I’ve ever known, and more satisfying than anything I’ve ever longed for.

I believe there is more to God than what we know right now, and more to life than we have already lived. I am happy that this world, as beautiful as God created it to be, has nothing on my final home. In the words of Victor Hugo, “I am a soul. I know well that what I shall render up to the grave is not myself. That which is myself will go elsewhere. Earth, thou art not my abyss!”