

## Belief Without Proof

**Jesus said to (Thomas), “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” (John 20:29)**

*An old convent was at last being renovated, including installation of modern in-door plumbing. This meant that there was suddenly a large supply of surplus chamber pots. The resourceful Mother Superior decided that perhaps she could raise a little extra cash by selling them to help the work of the convent. So she called one of the nuns and told her to take the chamber pots into town to see what money she could get for them.*

*The sister, dressed in traditional, pre-Vatican II, black habit with head covering, set off in the old convent station wagon, which ran out of gas on the way to town. Being a practical woman without any other suitable container, the sister got out, picked up a chamber pot and carried it down the road to the nearest filling station, where it was filled with gas.*

*She returned to the station wagon and began to pour the contents of the chamber pot into the gas tank. Just then a truck rounded the bend and squealed to a stop. The male driver looked out of the cab and shouted, “Hey Sister, that’s what I call faith!”*

What do you call faith? How do you define it? Paul defined it as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Martin Luther defined it as a “living and unshakable confidence.” William Wordsworth... as a “passionate intuition.” Rabindranath Tagore described it poetically this way: “Faith is a bird that feels the dawn breaking and sings while it is still dark.”

The bible tells us that faith can move a mountain; set us free; make us whole; purify our hearts; justify and save us. We are encouraged to fight the good fight of faith, but warned that

alone without good works, faith dead. At Jesus' coaxing, Peter was able to walk on water, but sank when his faith wavered.

Faith is willingness to believe what can't be proven; what can't be verified by our physical senses. Nurtured by the spirit, faith is centered in the heart, not the intellect. Metaphorically, it's a leap into the unknown based on trust. Faith in God, whose love is absolute, differs from faith in the *institutional* church, which, as we know to well, especially lately, is made up of imperfect human beings.

Not everyone, however, has the gift of faith. Modern day *atheists* like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, for example, view faith in God as wishful thinking and delusion, while *agnostics* deny that any knowledge of God is possible at all. Skeptics claim that God is created in man's image, not vice versa. American satirist, H.L. Mencken, described religious faith as "an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable."

Faith in God is easier for young children who have no trouble believing what they don't understand. It's tougher, however, for older children and mature adults who have developed their faculty of reason. Experiencing mystery and wonder, unfortunately, become more difficult as we get older and encounter *doubt*.

Like most of you, I learned about God initially at my mother's knee. Hers was a simple child-like faith she learned at her mother's knee in the small Italian town of *Peschici*, near *Foggia*, overlooking the Adriatic Sea where she was born on April 12, 1904. Having had little formal education as a child, she had no trouble believing in God. As an adult in Rochester, she prayed the rosary regularly, made novenas to her favorite saints, dutifully attended monthly meetings of the women's sodality dedicated to the Blessed Mother of Miracles, *La Madonna dei*

*Miracoli*, and went on yearly pilgrimages to area holy sites like Our Lady of Victory basilica in Lackawanna, outside of Buffalo.

One of her favorite saints was St. Anthony of Padua after whom, as I've mentioned before, yours truly is named. She kept a special shrine in his honor in our home with a vigil candle, flowers from the garden, and assorted holy pictures. When she misplaced something, a prayer to St. Anthony, patron saint of lost objects, would generally lead to its finding. When it didn't happen soon enough, however, I could always tell because his statue would be turned around to face the wall!

*A man hiking alone on a mountaintop slipped and fell off a high cliff. Luckily he was able to grab a branch to break his fall on the way down. Holding on for dear life, he looked down only to see a valley filled with rocks some fifteen hundred feet below. When he looked up, it was twenty feet to the cliff from where he had fallen.*

*Panicked, he yelled, "Help! Help! Is anybody up there? Help!"*

*A booming voice spoke up, "I am here, and I will save you if you believe in me."*

*"I believe! I believe!" yelled back the man.*

*If you believe, let go of the branch."*

*The man, hearing what the voice said, looked down again. Seeing the jagged rocks below, he quickly looked back up and shouted. "Is there anybody else up there?"*

Like Thomas in today's gospel from **John**, the lone hiker had a crisis of faith. Both wanted to believe, but doubt interfered. All of us, after all, at one time or another have doubts about the existence of God, especially when big things don't go right in our lives or when natural catastrophes happen like the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile where thousands of innocent people suffered and died.

Thomas believed only when his senses proved to him the presence of the Risen Lord, who in turn responds: “*Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed,*” words addressed to those of us down through the ages who would not have sensory evidence of the resurrected Jesus, but who would nonetheless believe in him.

The gospel writer uses this dialogue to state the obvious -- the faith of later generations would be more challenging than for the first disciples who witnessed the historical Jesus. Tradition tells us that following Jesus’ second apparition in the locked room a week later, Thomas became a powerful evangelist, spreading the Good News as far away as India, converting many people to the Lord, dying a martyr’s death, as did so many of the early disciples who experienced Jesus alive again.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, particularly after Pentecost, the original small core of Jesus followers, who had scattered frightened and confused after his Crucifixion, becomes a powerful spiritual force that changes the course of human history. Within a relatively short period of time, especially after the Roman Emperor Constantine converts to Christianity in 312, Jesus’ gospel of love spreads across the ancient world. And today, 2000 plus years later more than 1.5 billion people worldwide worship the Risen Lord and billions more who do not, at least acknowledge Jesus, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, as a great prophet. Such is the power of faith infused with the Holy Spirit!

When all is said and done, however, the faith that Jesus asks of us is not that we *understand* him, but that we *follow* him. That’s the message of next Sunday’s gospel. Far more than passive belief which can be self-centered or static, Christian faith is selfless, active and oriented toward others. What we *really* believe, you see, is not so much what we profess to believe, but what our actions *demonstrate* we believe. Faith, in a nutshell, is love for God

*expressed* as love for neighbor. That's why Jesus washes the disciples' feet on the night before he dies and says: "*As I have done for you, so you must do for others.*" And why, in today's gospel, he tells them and us: "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"

Every time we behave toward one another with integrity, generosity and kindness, Jesus lives again. That core tenet of our faith is beautifully expressed in the lyrics of the ancient Latin hymn, "Ubi Caritas," which we sing here at Transfiguration generally during Lenten penance services --- "*Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas, Deus ibi est.*" "Where love and charity are found, God is there."

Faith *can*, indeed, move mountains, but don't be surprised if God hands you and me a shovel.

Anthony J. Sciolino

Acts 5:12-16; Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19; John 20:19-31.

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter. April 11, 2010. (Cycle C)