

“Believing Without Understanding”

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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18)

To say that the Resurrection is a mystery is obviously an understatement. The suggestion that a human being could experience death and later return to life seems to defy the dictates of both reason and human experience. It is something that violates the rules of logic and science, something beyond that which we have seen and learned to be true. In short, it doesn’t make sense, at least to us.

I actually find it comforting that the Bible does not hide or deny the difficulty we have in comprehending what actually happened in the Resurrection. All four gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) say that followers of Jesus went to his tomb on Sunday morning. All four also describe, in various ways, the total confusion that ensued when they got there. In the version from John that we read this morning, the story literally begins with Mary Magdalene in the dark. Unfortunately, things don’t get much clearer for her even when the sun comes up. When she realizes that the stone is rolled away and the body of Jesus is gone, she runs back to tell the others. Peter and John, dubious about Mary’s story but clearly concerned that something bad had indeed happened, take off running to see for



themselves. Like detectives inspecting a crime scene, they take stock of the facts: a very heavy stone door rolled away; linen wrappings crumpled up in a heap; the cloth that had covered Jesus' head, not crumpled up, but rolled up neatly; and, of course, the absence of a dead body. The minimal clues were scattered and confusing, and only one thing was clear: what the disciples had on their hands was a mystery. According to John, those early Easter moments could be summed up as follows: they came... they saw... they believed... but "*as yet they did not understand.*"

There is an important theological question behind that statement, and it is this: ***Does a person have to understand something in order to believe it?*** If I do not understand an idea, can I truly say that I believe it?

In order to unpack that question, let's take the two verbs (to believe and to understand) and consider them in turn. We'll start with understanding. As we have already said, the men and women who ran to the tomb on Easter morning were completely stumped and confused by what they discovered. They didn't understand ***what*** had happened, ***when*** it happened, ***how*** it happened, or ***who*** had made it happen, let alone the biggest question of all -- ***why*** it happened. In a way, it was to be expected, because from the moment they were called, up to and including Easter morning, the disciples seemed to understand very little. Jesus would tell them parables, they would get that spacey look again, and Jesus would ask "Do you seriously still not understand?" It was so bad that one of my New Testament professors in seminary would sometimes refer to them as the "***duh***"-sciples – always in a reverent way, mind you.

But in their defense, shouldn't we admit at this point that the very same thing can be said about us? On this Easter morning, all of us have come here this morning for a wide variety of reasons, with a wide variety of beliefs, and a wide variety of things we think we understand – or, more accurately, that we hope we understand. But I am confident that not one of us here – and, really, nobody else anywhere on this side of heaven – actually understands the Resurrection.

Legend has it that, when he was a new cadet at West Point, Douglas MacArthur was given some dense and difficult homework in his civil engineering class. The reading dealt with the relationship between time and space, science that Einstein would later formulate into his Theory of Relativity. Knowing that his professor, Colonel Fieberger, was fond of calling on students to recite, and knowing that he really didn't understand the stuff he was reading at all, MacArthur went to a strategy that had worked for him before. He basically committed the reading to memory. He may not understand it, but at least he would be able to recite it. He hoped it would be enough.

Sure enough, the next day, Colonel Fieberger looked right at him. "Mr. MacArthur," can you share with the class the primary points of last night's reading?" Young Douglas did the best he could, reciting pretty much verbatim a key section of the text. When he finished, Colonel Fieberger paused for a long moment and then asked, "Cadet, do you understand this theory?"

Without hesitation, MacArthur answered "No, sir, I do not." Without breaking his stern academic stare on his student, the Colonel replied, "Neither do I, Mr. MacArthur. Class dismissed."¹ MacArthur went on to graduate from West Point at the top of his class.

¹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/u/understanding.htm>

My point is this. There are some things about our world that only a very few people on earth have ever really understood. And there are many things about God that no one on earth has ever remotely understood. The Resurrection was, is, and always will be one of those divine mysteries. This was admitted very early on in the history of Christianity, when the early fathers of the church began calling the miracle of Easter a ***“paschal mystery.”*** “Paschal,” which derives from the Greek word for “Passover,” recognizes that our Christian celebration of Easter is closely linked to the Jewish celebration of Passover, when God spared Hebrew families from a terrible plague by “passing over” houses marked by blood on door posts and lintels. The “mystery” part needs no explanation, because the central miracle of Easter raises so many confounding questions, questions that are completely beyond our human pay grade to answer. As the psalmist says, these answers, *“such knowledge, is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”*² The Book of Job makes the same point, even if it feels a little more confrontational: *“[Who are you to] fathom the mysteries of God? [How] can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above... They are deeper than the depths below—what can you know?”*³

So, getting back to our central question -- ***Does a person have to understand something in order to believe it?*** – we have established that neither the original disciples, nor any of us here, are able to understand or explain the Resurrection. But here is the rub. That did not stop the disciples from believing. The gospel freely admits that they did not understand, but it clearly says they believed, even though they did not understand.

This brings us to the medieval monk Anselm of Canterbury, who wrote a Latin meditation known as the *Proslogion*. In it, he gave this explanation of his approach to faith. “I do not seek to understand so that I may believe,” Anselm wrote. “Rather, I believe in order that I may understand.”

There is the answer to our question... at least that is how Anselm would answer it. It is also how the disciples themselves would answer it, because this was always the way. The ***“duh-sciples”*** were always in the dark... they were always missing the point, getting it wrong. They rarely if ever really understood what Jesus was talking about. But they still followed him. Sometimes I bet they didn’t even know why they followed him. But they did, because they saw something in him... they recognized authority in him... they saw the power at work in him. And if you read John’s gospel closely, they didn’t just believe Jesus the way we would believe a trusted teacher. They believed IN him. They believed in his name. They believed he was the One sent by God. And they invested themselves in that belief, even when they didn’t fully understand him.

The well-known book “A River Runs Through It” tells the story of a Presbyterian preacher in Montana by the name of John Maclean, who had two sons, Norman and Paul. To those who knew and loved him, the youngest boy Paul had always been a mystery. He had a brilliant mind, but he often made poor decisions that got him into trouble. As a fly fisherman, he was skillful, even beautiful. But as a son and brother, he was unreliable and often infuriating. Paul died as a young adult, a tragic victim of his own sins and weaknesses. The family rarely spoke of his passing, but in one of his final sermons, given only weeks before his own death, the Rev. John Maclean broke his long silence. “Each one of us here

² Psalm 139:6.

³ Job 11:7-9.

today," he told his small Montana congregation, "will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need."

"Unfortunately," he continued, "we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them – we can love completely without complete understanding."⁴

This, I believe, is an Easter truth for every would-be disciple. There was much about his son Paul that the grieving father John Maclean could never understand, but that never changed the fact that he loved his son with a love too deep for words. Through it all, right to the end, he believed in his son... and he chose to see the good in his son... despite the confounding mysteries and heartbreak of their story.

If this is true for a human parent's love, how much more must it be true with respect to God's love for us? The disciples never really understood how it worked – how an immortal God could take on mortal flesh... or how the last and greatest enemy of death could somehow be overcome – but that did not stop them from believing in Christ completely, even without complete understanding. Nor did it stop them from trusting that Christ meant what he said when he explained that the love of heaven was not about what they had earned or deserved, but about the simple fact that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*⁵

That, Easter disciples, is what Easter faith is all about. Easter faith is not something that we will receive once we have seen everything, studied everything, tested everything, and found all the answers. It is not an assurance of things seen, an assurance of things that we hope to someday see.⁶ It is not certainty in things we can prove beyond a reasonable doubt; it is trust in the most eternal things that are also the things that are often hardest to see -- things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness. Easter faith is a trust that God really is with us, really does love us, and really will be with us forever no matter what.

So, Easter people, if anyone ever asks you – or if you ever ask yourself – whether you understand the Resurrection, you can reply without shame or hesitation, "No, I do not."

Truth is, neither do I. But I will say this. If God would go to such mysterious lengths and something that amazing for us, then that is someone we can believe in. That is someone we can love that completely, even without complete understanding.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

⁴ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*,

⁵ John 3:16-17.

⁶ Hebrews 11:1.