

“A Faith To Live By”

Easter celebrates the truth that Jesus has risen from the dead! One of the noticeable things in the New Testament about the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection is that the news is greeted with skepticism and unbelief! Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the story of the resurrection in slightly different ways – yet in each gospel, people *doubt* that Jesus really *has risen*.

In *John’s* gospel, Thomas is not there when the risen Christ appears to His disciples. Thomas says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). Thomas even gets labeled, “Doubting Thomas”.

In *Luke 24*, the women who had come to the empty tomb rush back to tell the 11 disciples, “But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed like nonsense” (Luke 24:11).

In *Mark’s* gospel, Jesus’ followers didn’t believe Mary Magdalene when she told them Jesus was alive, nor did they believe two others who saw the Risen Lord walking in the countryside. And when Jesus later appeared to the 11 disciples, it says, “He rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen” (Mark 16:14). Notice how Jesus is chastising these *disciples* for their lack of faith.

Matthew’s gospel relates how Jesus appeared to the 11 disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and even as they stood *looking* at Him, “they worshiped him, but some *doubted*” (Matthew 28:17).

This struggle between faith in Christ, and unbelief, is still part of life. Some of us *worship* Him. Some of us *doubt*. *And maybe at times, we are a mix of both!* We have faith in Christ – but we have doubts too!

For some, our doubts may be intellectual doubts. “It’s hard for me to believe Jesus really did come back to life again...how can I be sure the people who wrote the Bible didn’t just make it up?” “If somebody could prove it to me, maybe I’d believe...”. Then, there are others who accept the fact that Jesus rose again, but it makes little difference in how they we live day by day. This too is a form of unbelief!

But I believe every one of us can have a faith in Christ to live by. I want to talk today about how we can have a workable, meaningful faith.

Here’s a question: Is it really that important – this matter of faith? A lot of people think it’s no big deal. After all, many “get by” with no relationship to Christ or active faith in Him. But I think whether or not our generation has faith in Christ is *very crucial*.

A noted Episcopalian pastor and author, Sam Shoemaker, had a sermon, “How To Find Faith”. In this sermon he said this, “I know there are hundreds who forsake faith and seem to do all right – for a time. A man will not starve because he misses a few meals. People live on what they had. They live on what other people have, and what society has. This parasitic existence can go on for a long time. But how often does restlessness, or (weariness), or nervousness, or a

breakdown lie at the end of the trail...we who believe may not always be as good as some conscientious people who disbelieve, but we are in touch with more Power.” I agree. Individuals, societies, nations can survive for a while without faith. But sooner or later life tends to come apart without a viable faith in God. (By the way, I believe we are seeing some of this in the United States right now).

Whether or not we have meaningful faith helps answer some of the important life questions: Is there a God? And if so, does this God know about me and care about me? Can I be forgiven when I fail and mess up? Is there a Power beyond myself to rescue me from the evil and ugly habits and attitudes that spoil my life and relationships? Can I find an inward joy and peace that transcends life’s sorrows and tragedies? Do I have a faith that enables me to love and forgive those who hurt me? Do I have a belief that gives meaning to life, and hope as I face my own death?

Whether or not our nation lives by faith in Christ is critical to our future. Will we adhere to Judeo-Christian values, where life is held sacred and unselfish love for others is the moral standard? Or will we forget God and succumb to materialism and a do-as-you-think-best morality that has no absolute standards?

*It **does** matter whether or not we have a faith in Christ to live by!* Perhaps we envy those who have a triumphant kind of faith...but it’s possible for *any* of us to have a faith to live by!

Before I suggest some steps we can take to a workable faith, I’d like to comment on several things that get in the way of our having a viable faith. One is this: ***We look at people claiming to be Christians, and are turned off.*** Christianity has a pretty bad image right now. TV evangelists raking in millions and keeping much of it for their extravagant lifestyle. Clergy who are sexual predators (and the church covering it up). The negative view of Christians presented in movies, and on TV. Plus, people we know who say they are Christians, and looking at the way they live prompts us to say, “If that’s what being a Christian is, I want no part of it.”

Well, there *are* people who say they’re Christians, but they are phonies, hypocrites. But there are others who, while not being sterling examples of Christlike character and behavior, *are sincerely trying to follow Jesus.* Christians aren’t perfect. We’re always “under construction” – a project being worked on in this life. Billy Graham’s wife Ruth had this inscription placed on her grave stone: “End of construction. Thank you for your patience.” (She had seen this at a highway construction site and wanted that on her tombstone).

But here’s something to think about: Why should I let someone else’s faults and failures keep me from having a relationship to Christ and faith in Him? There are lousy examples of Christians? So what? There are terrible examples of husbands and wives, but that doesn’t keep people from getting married! There are terrible drivers on the road, but that doesn’t keep people from getting a driver’s license and driving a car! Why should I let *someone else* prevent *me* from having a vital faith to live by?

Another thing that keeps some from faith: “I can’t believe in a loving God when there is so much suffering and unanswered questions in life.” I had a friend who was in the hospital, dying of cancer. On one of my visits I sat with her husband in the lunch room at Lancaster General. He said he didn’t understand why she had to suffer and die so young. I told him that I believe God cares, and that Christ can give him strength for this.” His abrupt reply was: “I don’t believe in Jesus Christ.”

Well, we all struggle with the unanswered questions and enigmas of life, things that don’t make sense. *But if we wait until we understand everything, we will never get anywhere in this venture of faith.* There are things in this life that we will *never* be able to explain – but we can still come to the point where we trust God even when we don’t understand why.

Let me suggest some steps any of us can take to *get going* and *keep going* in the ***faith adventure.***

Larry Walters was a 33 year old man who decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. He went down to the local army surplus store and bought 45 used weather balloons. Then he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied balloons (now filled with helium). He took a six-pack of beer, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land. Larry figured the balloons would lift him about 100 feet and give him a wonderful view of his neighborhood. But he was caught off guard when he soared **11,000** feet into the sky – smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern of Los Angeles International Airport. Too scared to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for 2 hours, forcing the airport to shut down its runways for much of the afternoon, causing long delays from across the country!

Soon after he finally came to the ground and was arrested by police, reporters asked him: “Were you scared?” “Yes.” “Would you do it again?” “No.” “Why did you do it?” “Because you just can’t sit there!”

Now I don’t recommend any of us try that! But I pray that *all of us* will want to *rise up* and view life from a different perspective – see life through the eyes of a genuine, victorious faith! We need to tie some balloons to our chairs to get going!

The first step towards a vital faith (one balloon) is simply to understand that you – yes, you – can have a workable faith. This is not reserved for a select few. God really wants to be part of our lives and will help us find faith. In fact, the Bible says that faith itself is a gift of God. So ask Him for it!

Step 2 (another balloon): The quest for faith has to be the most important thing in our life. This is where some of us fall short. We’d like to be a Christian; we would love to have faith and enjoy its benefits. But we don’t devote ourselves to it because there are so many distractions.

Jesus told 2 short stories to demonstrate this: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that

field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:44-45). According to Jesus, the desire for God must be like a man who found a treasure in a field, and went and sold all he had just to get that field with the treasure. And the desire for God is like a person who discovered a pearl of great value, and sold all she had to buy that pearl. Having a vital relationship with God must become a priority.

When it is, everything else tends to fall into place. I talked once with a young man who was discovering this. He said, “When you put God first, everything else seems to fall into place. If not first, then nothing comes together.”

A third step to vital faith (a third balloon) is this: You’ve got to make a beginning. Faith must have a starting point – that moment when we decide to begin the faith adventure. I like what Sam Shoemaker says about this: “Faith is not so much like coming to accept a philosophy; it is much more like falling in love. The total personality is involved – something more than reason – a kind of overwhelming response with many factors called into play.” It is possible to “believe in Jesus” in a vague sort of way...to even pray, read the Bible, go to church, but not really have God in our life in a way that *changes* and *influences* our everyday thoughts and actions. Real faith isn’t just “believing the right stuff”. It is giving our entire self over to Christ and His will. The faith adventure begins (and can begin right now) when I make a conscious decision to turn my life and will over to Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord!

A fourth step (balloon) towards a faith to live by: Go where faith is! If you want a sun tan, you don’t sit in a closet for 3 hours. If you are dumb enough to want to catch the flu, find someone who has it and say, “Breathe on me; sneeze in my face, please.” I’ll never forget one year a few days before Christmas I was visiting shutin members of our church. I visited a lady in a nursing facility one afternoon. As I was getting up to leave, she informed me that she was not feeling well and that she thought she had the flu. Well...the day before Christmas was a Sunday. I woke up about 5 a.m. that morning sick in my stomach, throwing up. I managed to miss our 3 services that morning, plus 3 or 4 Christmas Eve services that evening at the church.

If you want faith, go where there are people with faith! *This is where the Church comes in.* I am painfully aware of the Church’s shortcomings, because the Church is people. But in spite of that, every congregation includes at least some people who are trying to live out the adventure of faith, and are trying to grow in their faith. I know of no better place in the world to go than the Church if want to be around people who are on journey of faith. *Go where faith is!*

A fifth step towards a meaningful faith: Develop a daily quiet time with God. Talk to God – in your own words, in simple language. Be quiet, and listen for God to speak to you. Think. Let God seep into your thoughts. Take time to read the Bible...slowly, thoughtfully. Read good books, written by Christian authors. Do this at least once a day. There is no substitute for this Quiet Time with God, to keep faith fresh and alive!

A sixth step (balloon) to get going and keep going in the faith venture: Do what God says.

Make the effort to learn more and more about what God expects of us and what God's will is – through the Bible, prayer, interaction with other Christians – then *do it!* If we know what is right, and then don't do it, this has a way of eroding our faith and our relationship with God. I saw this cartoon that shows 2 boys walking to school, talking about their parents. One kid says to the other, "I've figured out a system for getting along with my mom. She tells me what to do, and I do it." Our faith grows and matures when God tells us something to do and we do it!

Then, finally, another step (balloon) towards meaningful faith: Try at least one thing every week that you cannot do without God's help! It is easy to get into a rut and lose any sense of the adventure of being a follower of Christ. Trying something that we simply can't do without God's special help is like exercising our faith muscles! It stretches and strengthens our faith! Try at least one thing every week that throws you back on God – something you simply can't do in your own strength or wisdom. And your faith will grow!

"They worshiped him, but some doubted" (Matthew 28:17). We don't have to live dominated by doubts! Jesus is alive! And He wants us to have a joyful faith that gives meaning to our life, and enables us to live a life that counts for Christ!

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