

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“GOOD NEWS ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS”

5. Faith & Doubt

(Mark 9:14-27)

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July 12, 2020

If you have a child under the age of 35, you probably know about “ropes courses.” A “ropes course” is a series of wire cables strung between some tall trees, a good 30 feet off the ground. A ropes course will have anywhere from four to eight sections, each section about 20 feet long, each section configured differently—sometimes it’s simply a cable with guidelines at arm’s height, sometimes it’s two cables with board “steps” spaced three feet apart, sometimes it’s an overhead cable with a dolly to which you attach yourself and slide from tree to tree.

Well, as you can imagine, even if you don’t suffer from acrophobia, traversing a ropes course demands all kinds of faith. When you’re standing 30 feet above very hard ground, balancing on a 3/4” diameter cable, questions of faith and doubt are at the very front of your mind:

- I don’t believe I’m strong enough to do this next section.
- I don’t believe this safety harness is particularly secure.
- I believe I was manipulated by peer pressure into getting up here in the first place.
- I don’t believe a fall will hurt me. But when the ground stops my fall, I believe that will hurt a lot!
- I don’t believe I can do this.

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Questions of faith and doubt—that’s what our “Good News Encounter with Jesus” is about this morning. Listen to the word of God from the ninth chapter of *The Gospel of Mark*:

When Jesus, Peter, James & John returned to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them, and some teachers of religious law were arguing with them. When the crowd saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with awe, and they ran to greet him.

“What is all this arguing about?” Jesus asked.

One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, “Teacher, I brought my son so you could heal him. He is possessed by an evil spirit that won’t let him talk. And whenever this spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground. Then he foams at the mouth

and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn't do it."

Jesus said to them, "You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

"How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father. He replied, "Since he was a little boy. The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can."

"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."

The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that the crowd of onlookers was growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. "Listen, you spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak," he said. "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!"

Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd as people said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up.

Right before this passage, Jesus had taken three of his disciples—Peter, James & John—off with him for some time alone. And when they rejoin the other nine disciples, they find them surrounded by a crowd. It turns out that a man had brought his epileptic son to see if Jesus could cure him. And when the father found the nine disciples but no Jesus, the disciples kind of hitch up their pants and say, "No sweat—we can do that kind of thing, too."

- And so Bartholomew looks the boy in the eyes and commands the demon inside of him, "Come out!" And nothing happens. And there's a moment of awkward silence.
- Then Levi elbows Bartholomew aside, saying, "No, no, you forgot the hand thing", and he thrusts his right hand at the boy and says, "Demon, come out!" Again, nothing happens.

Well, at this point, the crowd starts making suggestions:

- "You've got to lay your hands on the boy."
- "Waive a stick over his head."
- Some said: "This just proves this Jesus is a quack."
- And the disciples are still trying to figure it out: "What *is it* he always says — is it 'Come out' or 'Come forth' or 'Be Gone'?"

And into this scene walks Jesus. And when he finds out what's going on, he has the boy brought to him, and he heals him.

Now, there are lots of things going on in this passage, but this morning I want us to focus on the question of faith and doubt. Because the question of faith and doubt is so marvelously articulated by the father of the sick boy. In his desperation, he says to Jesus, “Have mercy on us and help us, if you can.” To which Jesus replies, “What do you mean, ‘If I can’? Anything is possible if a person believes.” And then the confused father—as confused a believer as there ever was—replies, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

* * *

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” My guess is that these words pretty well capture what many of us feel about the question of faith and doubt.

I think it’s fair to say that all of us—from life-long Christians to brand-new religious seekers—all of us are always on a continuum between faith and doubt. In our experience, faith and doubt aren’t mutually exclusive realities—to have faith is to have some doubt; to have doubt is to have some faith. On any given day, we find ourselves somewhere on the faith-doubt continuum. Some days

- *we are absolutely convinced that there is a God who created this world,*
- *we are confident this God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life”,*
- *we are certain God the Holy Spirit is working in our lives.*

And other days we wake up and look around and all we see is what we see—a two-dimensional world, a world with no spiritual aspect to it at all. All of us, day to day, travel up and down and back and forth on this continuum of faith and doubt.

Why is that? First and most obviously, the very nature of faith makes it always vulnerable to doubt, because faith is unprovable, and faith is focused on an invisible, intangible reality.

Also, it’s hard for us to separate our faith from our moods, and our moods take us all over the place.

- Sometimes I’m up, and sometimes I’m down.
- Sometimes I’m stressed and self-absorbed; sometimes I’m reflective and open.
- Sometimes I feel alienated from everyone, and sometimes I feel connected to everything.

And our faith follows the roller coaster of our moods. Some days we believe, but our belief doesn’t always feel believable.

* * *

Well, if doubt is never far from our faith, what is doubt all about? I want us to look at three different kinds of doubt and how each one affects our faith.

One kind of doubt many of us experience is what I'll call "intellectual doubt." Intellectual doubt. Sometimes we have trouble believing certain affirmations of Christianity.

- "Yes, I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but I have real trouble with the whole Trinity thing."
- "Yes, I believe that God worked through Jesus, but I have trouble believing that Jesus performed miracles."
- "Yes, I believe that God speaks to me through the Bible, but I also have trouble believing some of those Bible stories."

These are intellectual doubts. And all of us have doubts about certain parts of the Christian message.

And you know what? It's OK. Because of the various kinds of doubt, intellectual doubt is the least destructive to our faith. Not that the affirmations of our faith aren't important. But Christian faith is less "I believe that" than it is "I trust in". In fact, the only one in our Scripture passage who had absolutely no intellectual doubts about who Jesus was and what He was able to do was the demon who possessed the boy!

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There's intellectual doubt and, secondly, there is also "ethical doubt". Ethical doubt is more serious than intellectual doubt. Ethical doubt goes like this: "I know that what God says about this is right, but I'm not willing to do it." Or even more dangerous: "I know what God says about this, but I know better."

Ethical doubt:

- We know we're not supposed to lie, and yet we always find ourselves rationalizing our lies—"I didn't want her to get hurt."
- We know that money exercises enormous power in our lives, but we always try to make a "both/and" out of Jesus' either/or saying, "You can't serve God and money."
- We know our economic system and our educational system and our health-care system produce a significant amount of injustice, but why should I get all worked up when all these systems work fine for me?

Ethical doubt is why Christian prayer involves confession and forgiveness—confessing that this past week we have lost faith, not because of intellectual matters that we can't get our minds around, but because of moral issues that we don't have the strength and conviction and faith to measure up to.

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Intellectual doubt. Ethical doubt. Finally, and most profoundly, some of us struggle with personal doubt. Personal doubt says, “It’s hard for me to still trust God.”

- We are the victim of a series of harmful events, and it’s hard to trust that God holds us in His hands.
- We pray long and hard for a sick loved one who nonetheless dies, and it’s hard to trust that God cares about our lives.
- We take some bold steps of faith and yet things don’t work out, and it’s hard to trust that God is really there.

Personal doubt is the most threatening kind of doubt. I don’t know any Christian who doesn’t have intellectual doubts, who fully believes the entire content of Christianity. I don’t know any Christian who doesn’t have ethical doubts, who fully lives out all the mandates of faith in his daily life. But I do know Christians who have fallen out of faith for good because of personal doubt.

- I know a woman whose 24-year-old daughter was killed, along with her fiancé, in a horrible car crash—Ellen can no longer trust God.
- I know a young man who was a leader in his church from the time he was 12 who chucked it all when he got to college—Paul didn’t trust that God would let him fit in.
- I know a woman whose whole life, for generations past, had been wrapped up in the church, but when her husband died of cancer—Anne could never trust God again.

And yet—for every person I know who lost their faith due to personal doubt, I know two other people whose faith has pulled them through tragedy.

- I think of Marie, who in six short weeks lost her 17-year-old son to a rare form of cancer, whose trust in God was a burning fire through that terrible darkness.
- I think of Charles, whose wife one morning packed up and left him with their three kids, whose trust in God provided the only secure place in a life that had gone into free fall.
- I think of Barbie who, throughout her four-year struggle with Lou Gehrig’s disease, never understood why God was letting this happen to her, but who, even when medicine and prayer failed to help, never lost her love for Jesus.

Why is that? What is it about Marie and Charles and Barbie that enabled them to continue to trust God even when things were so bleak? It’s because faith—even less-than-perfect, doubting faith—always has the character of “nevertheless”: “Nevertheless, I can still trust God.” In the face of staggering challenges, genuine faith can hold on. Theologian Emil Brunner puts it this way:

“‘Nevertheless’ certainly describes the character of faith, but this is neither the faith of naivety—which doesn’t understand reality—nor is it the obstinate faith of the fanatic—who refuses to face reality. Rather, it is the realistic ‘nevertheless’ of the person who recognizes in the Cross of Christ the love of God, who sees on the Cross the Lord of the world and His victory over the powers of darkness and death.”¹

* * *

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” Friends, to live the life of faith also means to live a life of doubt. All of us, for our whole lives, will always have doubts.

But in the end, what we need to remember is that the Bible is not all that interested in the quality or the quantity of our faith. Rather, what concerns the Bible is the object of our faith. Because the strongest, biggest, most vibrant faith in the world won’t get you safely across a pond in winter if the ice isn’t frozen thoroughly. But if the ice is strong, the most timid faith will get the job done.

And that’s the good news: our faith—and our doubt—rest on the solid faithfulness of our God. AMEN

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¹ *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, translated by David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 267.