

Community Church of Issaquah
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Believing the Unbelievable

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Recently someone sent me a picture of a man who is the Executive Director of the Kansas-Nebraska Southern Baptist Conference. The comment along with the photo said, “He’s come a long way from the chubby youth days.” Though the name sounded familiar, I would have never recognized the face without someone telling me who he was. Come to find out, he was in the youth group in the church I served fresh out of seminary as their Youth Minister. That was almost 50 years ago. I’m not sure how anyone would have believed I would recognize him after so many years. We tend to change with age, and I doubt that any of us look now like we looked we were a teenager. He certainly was not at all what I would have imagined.

If that were the only time that I’ve needed to recognize someone from my past, that would be unusual. But that happens more and more frequently it seems. Not long ago I was walking into the lobby of the UW Hospital when someone loudly called my name. I turned to see who it was and there stood a woman smiling and waving. “Hi, Pastor Vincent! Do you remember me?” Sadly, I didn’t, so I replied, “You’ll have to remind me. My memory isn’t that sharp anymore.” When she told me who she was and how she knew me, I did recall our past and the reunion was quite nice. Have you ever had an experience when you didn’t recognize someone right away and had to be

reminded of them and how you knew them? I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one travelling down that road.

If we had read all the verses in the 24th chapter of Luke today, we would have read a story about an experience of failure to recognize someone. Luke tells the story this way: After the women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James had encountered the empty tomb and rushed to tell the disciples, Peter jumped up and ran to see for himself. Having found nothing but the linen cloth the body was wrapped in, he went home in amazement. Right after that, two of the men who were with the disciples began their journey to the village of Emmaus, a town about 7 miles from Jerusalem.

While they were walking and talking about what had happened, an individual approached and began walking with them. They didn't recognize that it was Jesus. So, he began asking them what they were talking about. One of the men named Cleopas asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who is unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" And Jesus said, "What things?" Answering him, they talked about their hopes that Jesus would have redeemed Israel and how the women had found the tomb empty and encountered the angels who told them that Jesus was alive.

Reminding them of what the prophets had said would happen, he explained things about himself. As they got closer to the village, Jesus acted as if he would go further but they asked him to stay for the night, and he did. When they reclined at the table for their meal, Jesus took bread,

blessed it and then broke it into pieces before he gave some to them. As they took the bread, their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, but the very moment they knew who he was, he vanished. The two men rose and rushed back to Jerusalem to find the eleven disciples and those who were gathered with them. They began to tell about their experiences on the road and how they recognized Jesus when he broke the bread and gave it to them.

The Scripture Passages we read today picks up the story and tells how as these two men were relating their encounter, Jesus himself stood in the midst of the crowd. It made me laugh when the verse said that they thought they had seen a ghost. I think the concept of ghosts wasn't a thing in the time of Jesus but was added in a translation centuries later. But there was Jesus standing in front of them and they were having a difficult time believing in what seemed completely unbelievable. Jesus was supposed to be dead, but they had already heard he was not in the tomb, and they did not know where the body went. They had not grasped that Jesus had been raised to life. Their assumption was likely that Jesus had left earth to dwell with God. So, who was this man?

In order to assure them that He was indeed the Jesus they had known and followed, he did two unusual things. First, he showed them his hands and feet and the wounds from his crucifixion, and the second was that he asked for food. The Scripture says they gave him broiled fish. I guess that's how Peter, James and John prepared the fish that they had caught before they became disciples. It was then that his dearest and closest followers believed that He was

indeed the Christ they knew and served. They recognized him. What seemed unbelievable at first had become real and they did believe.

You and I have not been privileged to stand in a room and see the physical, human body of Jesus Christ. I wonder at times if I would even recognize him if he did return in his second coming as human being. We are asked to believe in what we cannot see. At times that seems difficult in our spiritual journey, to accept Jesus Christ as Savior, to believe all that we are taught about him, and to assume that we can have a personal relationship with the unseen. How do we answer when someone says, "How can you believe in someone or something who you can't even see?" How do you answer that when you are asked that question?

There is much in our lives that we cannot see, but that we believe. Have you had an headache or some pain? You don't see that; we just feel it and believe that it's real. When our minds become active and thoughts race around our heads, we don't see that, but we experience it. When our hearts are filled with affection and emotions of love, we cannot see that feeling, but isn't it real? Isn't it believable? Does it mean that it's not believable if we cannot see air (unless it's cloudy or smoggy) so it must not be real? Why then was it essential for the disciples to see and touch the body of Christ to believe that He had truly risen from the dead and returned to them? Perhaps the reason was simple. They had experienced the unbelievable fulfillment of the prophecy about the resurrection and by witnessing it with their own eyes and hands, they were empowered to be

the beginning bearers of the true Gospel. Their belief is the foundation of our own belief in Christ.

If I were to ask you how you came to accept and believe all you were told about Jesus and salvation, what would be your answer? Would you say that the person who witnessed to you and shared about Jesus was believable, and you trusted everything that person said? Would you say that the preacher who gave the sermon that caused you to seek forgiveness and to come to acceptance of Christ as your Savior was sharing a message from God? Would you say that you read the Bible and you knew it was true, so you believed what you read? Whatever your answer, the fact is that at some point you had to transition from seeing or hearing or experiencing the unbelievable to trusting and believing the unseen.

The disciples were entrusted with a beautiful experience that has become the basis for our own faith. They were privileged to see Jesus when he had returned from the dead and when he left this earth to join his heavenly father. You and I haven't had that experience, but it is the account of this miraculous event that led the disciples to believe in what seemed to be unbelievable. This man named Jesus who proclaimed to be the Messiah as prophesied for centuries, who was executed by those in power, but who had victory over death showed them how to believe.

Believing is at the very center of each of our Christian life. Hear these words from the Gospel of John, chapter 16 when Jesus is talking to his followers.

He said, "The Father Himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father. Then Jesus' disciples said, 'Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.' "You believe at last!" Jesus answered."

Just as the disciples came to believe in the unbelievable, we as his disciples today have built our faith on the fact that we do indeed believe that Jesus was the Messiah, that he is the son of God, that he gave his life for us, and even more joyfully, he conquered death and promises that we can do that same. Aren't you glad you came to believe? I certainly am!