

So, I'm walking through the Museum of Biblical Archeology in Jerusalem, and I'm walking through an area with various kinds of pottery on display, and there in front of me is this absolutely perfectly preserved water jug. It stopped me cold.

Now understand, as far as ancient pottery goes, it is quite unusual to find any kind of pottery in good shape. Usually, the pottery is chipped and has several pieces missing. But, this water jug was perfect so it caught my eye. It was a simple clay water jug that looked like it could hold about three gallons of water and etched in Hebrew near the mouth of the jar was the name "Joel."

The little placard next to the water jar said simply, "The water jug of the prophet Joel."

Wow.

I guess I had stepped a little too close to the pottery because a security guard appeared out of nowhere and was now standing next to me. So I asked him. "Is this really, THE water jug of THE prophet Joel from the Bible?"

"Yes", He said, "Without a doubt, this is THE actual water jug from THE prophet Joel. It has been verified as authentic....Please don't touch it."

I don't know, but for some reason I was taken back. I had seen thousands of various objects: Jewelry, weapons, royal seals, and so on, but for me, this simple water jug brought it all home. Maybe it was the fact that Joel had etched his name on the jug or maybe it was the fact that it was an everyday item. Whatever the reason, from that day onward the prophet Joel was no longer just a name to me - he was now a real person. I had seen many places and artifacts in Israel, but for me, for me, it was the water jug of the prophet Joel that brought me once again that these people we read about are very real.

Look, I had read about the prophet Joel, I had studied in Seminary about the prophet Joel even had seen copies of ancient manuscripts from the book of Joel, intellectually I knew the prophet Joel was historically real, I knew that the what the prophet Joel wrote in the Scriptures was authentic - but what made Joel real to me was a simple clay water jug that the prophet had etched his name on. Joel.

Isn't that human nature?

Sometimes it is surprising what will make us really believe.

I can't force myself to believe; I can't will myself to believe; I can't trick myself into believe; My parents can't compel me to believe, my spouse can't insist I believe. Either I believe or I don't believe. There is no middle ground.

Sort of believing...that's not real.

You may be here this morning and are not sure if you believe; You may be here today and hope that someday you will believe; You may be here today, and have the secret knowledge that you used to believe; You may even be here this morning and do believe - but honestly, privately, you are not sure how real your belief is...And you may have walked in here this morning with the knowledge that your family and your friends think you believe - but you know you don't genuinely believe.

You're not alone, you're in good company, for even the disciples of Jesus struggled with their faith.

Why is it that many times children who grow up in a Christian family, fail to believe in Jesus Christ? Why is it a person can grow up in the church and not believe or why is it that a person can attend a church for years, and never be confident in their belief of Jesus Christ?

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

This is the question the Angel asks the women, who CLEARLY do not believe. Obviously the women believe Jesus is real, I mean they are looking for Jesus aren't they? These women, they have been friends with Jesus for years. They know his disciples, they know his family, they have had many meals with Jesus, they have gone on many walks with Jesus, they have cried and been comforted by Jesus - these women, they know Jesus. But, here's the deal, they know Jesus, but still, they misunderstand.

It is clear that these women at some level believe in Jesus.

Yet, I wonder....what exactly do these women believe? I mean, how is this even possible? How could have they spent so much time with Jesus, and not believe?

Well, we have to say that compared to the rest of the gang that we see in our Scripture this morning, they are the ones who have a strong faith. Compared to everyone else, they are the true believers.

Everyone else has run away. Everyone else has gone into hiding. Those who were the leaders, like Peter, even outright denied Jesus. No one stepped into help Jesus. No one defended Jesus. Everyone abandoned Jesus - Except these women, who are seen at every turn at the death of Jesus Christ. Granted, they are in the background, granted they mostly remain in at a distance - but, but they are there, when everyone else has fled.

They might not have been able to help Jesus, but the fact is, they were there. So, I ask you, "Who are the ones who believe in Jesus of all the people who knew Jesus Christ?" Without a doubt, it is these women. Compared to everyone else these women are the faithful.....

All that is great, except for one thing: When it comes to faith, when it comes to belief, what we believe compared to what others believe, matters little. When it comes to faith, when it comes to belief, it matters little what I believe in comparison to what you believe. When it comes to my faith, when it comes to belief my faith, my belief is between me and God; Your faith, your belief, is between you alone and God alone. Faith is not an exercise in comparison.

Be very, VERY, careful of comparisons of faith - such things are meaningless, and very dangerous. Such thing will fool you, such a thing will condemn you to an ineffective Christian life.

I have my flaws, my major imperfections, things we don't want to discuss this morning - BUT compared to Adolph Hitler, I'm a saint.

On that day, that inevitable day, when you stand before God, there will be no comparison of your faith to someone else's faith. God will not be comparing your faith to those in your family or to those in your church, or to some famous historical scoundrel, for when

you stand before God, you stand before God - alone. You, and you alone will stand before God - How will your faith be judged, it will be judged alone.

We go before God alone.

There we stood bracing ourselves against the cold wind. It was cloudy, it was icy, the wind was blowing hard, it was not a pleasant day. The director said to me, "Peter, I think we should get started now."

There were three of us there, myself, the funeral director and the man we were placing in the grave. I did not know who the man in the casket was, the funeral director did not know who the man was either - I mean we had a first name, and we had a body, but that is all we had. We weren't even sure the name we had was the man's real name.

I don't know the whole story, but I do know that he was found alone in a field just outside of town. There didn't appear to be any foul play, he was one of those people who drifted in and out of town. The police called the funeral director and the funeral director called me, "Peter, can you help me with another one."

No one came forward to claim this man, no one made last arraignments with the mortuary, no one came to say their last good byes, no one.

I have to say, I really respected this particular funeral director. He was only one in town willing to put together a funeral for the very poor and pay for it himself. He did this so often, sometimes I wondered how he stayed afloat. And so together we would conspire to do one final act - even if no one else cared.

So, there we were, our backs to the icy wind, standing over an open grave, looking at the casket of a man we didn't know. What in the world do you say at a time like this? What is it that can be said to do this man justice? Who was this man? Where was his family? Who did he love? Did he have faith? Why are we all alone?

I did my best to say what needed to be said and we did what we could to give this man a decent burial. But, I tell you, the walk back through the cemetery icy that day was a very lonely walk.

The truth is, we all will go before God alone.

When we say, "I believe in Jesus", what do we really mean?

We can grow up in a Christian family or we can grow up in a good church and still have no idea what we really mean when we say, "I believe in Jesus." I can spend my whole life knowing about Jesus and still misunderstand who Jesus is.

The truth is the question that the angel asked the women over 2000 years ago still applies to us today, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

I'll tell you a secret.

I grew up in the church. In fact, my family attended church sometimes seven days a week. I knew every inch of that church building, I knew every church member and everyone knew me. I knew all the words to all the songs and all the right things to say, at the right times. By all appearances I was as true a believer as there ever was....but you know what? It was all a lie.

I looked like the real thing, but deep down I knew something wasn't right. I knew exactly what to say at church and, and I knew exactly what to say about Jesus; I knew the right answers about who Jesus was if anyone quizzed me - I wasn't trying to be deceptive, I was just living life, imitating those around me, honestly, it never even occurred to me that I lacked faith, it never occurred to me that there was something I was missing.

What did I need? I needed to understand that Jesus was not a concept or an ideal, I needed to understand that Jesus was more than a historical religious figure. Jesus is more than a good man who is a good example for us to follow.

These women in our passage today, they saw, with their own eyes Jesus beaten and flogged to the brink of death; These women, they saw with their own eyes, Jesus hung on

a cross until Jesus cried out to the Father and died; They saw the Roman soldier spear Jesus in the side, and these were the woman who saw Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus Christ and lay it in a borrowed tomb. These women, they saw the massive stone rolled and these women saw the tomb sealed tight.

These women, they were with Jesus in his life, and they were with Jesus in his death, these woman surely knew Jesus well - still they have the wrong idea.

Do you know how we know they have the wrong idea about Jesus? - When the women see the empty tomb - it doesn't occur to them that Jesus is alive. Now to be fair to these women, we need to understand that the kind of execution that Jesus suffered would have rendered Jesus' body almost unrecognizable. Jesus' body would have been so torn up, so disfigured that the last thing one would believe is that Jesus could be brought back to life.

So the women, they believe in Jesus - but they misunderstand Jesus, they have the wrong idea of who Jesus is.

Do you see that?

They know all about Jesus - But they have no idea who He really is.

Then there are the disciples.

They are told by the women that Jesus is alive - and what do they think? Look at verse 11 - Nonsense. This is nonsense! Do you know why they think this is nonsense? They are men! Men have to see, men have to touch, it has to fit into the laws of physics, it needs to all add up - or it is not real to men. No man can be raised from the dead - that's superstition.....

Peter even runs to look into the tomb. Did he want to believe? You bet your bottom dollar he wanted to believe. But, does Peter believe? No, he does not. We see there in verse 12 that he just doesn't get it. You see, things don't add up for the mind of Peter. Peter has all the evidence at his finger tips, and, you know, like the women earlier, something is missing....

Does Peter know Jesus? Yes.

Is Peter a friend of Jesus? One of the closest.

Could Peter tell you and I about Jesus? Every intimate detail.

I believe. Help me in my unbelief.

How frustrating! I seem to know, but it doesn't make sense.

So, then we jump to verse 36. The disciples are gathered together and - Boom - Jesus appears among them. Let me be clear. What it is saying there is that Jesus doesn't walk up to them, Jesus doesn't enter any door way, Jesus does not approach the disciples, Jesus suddenly appears in the middle of all of them.

Now do the disciples believe? Amazingly, no they don't believe.

The disciples are startled, they are frightened, they think Jesus is a ghost. Jesus is no ghost. Notice, He takes broiled fish and eats it just like he's done many times before. Jesus he is real, he is alive, and he is resurrected - not as a spirit, but in his own body, Jesus is in his own flesh and blood. Remember, when the OT speaks of resurrection, it only speaks of bodily resurrection and when Judaism always speaks of bodily resurrection. For the Jews and for the disciples there is no other kind of resurrection, there is only bodily resurrection.

So the disciples are taken back. They are filled with joy and amazement (41). See, its not just that Jesus just appears - that takes them back - what takes them back, is that it really is Jesus, not a ghost, not a spirit, but the Jesus they love and know, standing right before them.

Now the first thing that Jesus says is "shalom", that is "peace." The structure of this sentence indicates that Jesus is using the word "peace" as a metonymic for salvation, that is - a figure of speech where one word is substituted for another for which it is closely associated. An example in our time would be to substitute 'suit' for 'business executive', or 'the track' for 'horse racing'. Here, in verse 36, when Jesus says, "peace" the disciples take it, in their cultural context, as salvation. In other words, the peace Jesus brings is found in his salvation he offers.

When we have genuine salvation - we will be at peace about it.

Let's recap what is going on here. We have women who are very close to Jesus and who have seen every detail that Jesus suffered three days before; And we have the men who have spent three years working with Jesus, the men who knew him better than anyone else, the men who could tell you and I every intimate detail about who Jesus is, they see the empty tomb, they are confronted by angelic beings, they are told Jesus is alive, they even have Jesus stand in front of them - and they don't believe.

What am I missing here?

Imagine yourself in their place.

Wouldn't you believe if you experienced any one of those things?

Maybe.

So, is this faith we have, getting all of our facts straight?

Is this faith we have, making a positive statement about Jesus?

Is this faith we have, is it something we generate, something we make happen by our own will?

Now, earlier I told you that there was a time in my life where I looked the part, I spoke the part, I did what everyone else did - But something was missing. I wasn't trying to be deceptive, I just didn't know any better.

Does that makes sense to you? Are you experiencing this?

It is more common than you think.

These people we read about here, these very real, and historic people....in their minds, for all intents and purposes, they think that they are believers - I mean they hang out with Jesus everyday - Jesus is their friend, what more could you ask of them? They have walked with him, talked with him, heard his teaching - they even followed Jesus. Yet, yet, we see right here - they don't believe.

Well, if they don't believe, then, that goes to reason that they have no real faith, in other words, they are unbelievers - when push comes to shove - they are revealed for who they really are - faithless.

Now, notice in both instances, the women and the men do believe, they do come to believe. All is not lost, The Good News is that though they start without faith, they end up with a powerful faith.

It is as if they are awakened from sleep, it is as if they enter into a new reality. One moment they are lost, and the next they are found. There is that moment, it is hard to place, but there is that moment, where they do not believe, and then, in an instant, in the blink of an eye they believe. One moment, nothing, the next hallelujah!

When do the women believe? They believe when they remember the words of Jesus. When do the men believe? They are also reminded of the words of Jesus - and then Jesus has to open their minds.

What does Jesus remind them of? WHO he is.

Jesus is not whomever they thought he was. Jesus is God incarnate.

Who can raise themselves from the dead? No human can, only God Himself can.

Let me wrap this up for us today. I don't have a magic bullet for you this morning, but I can tell you that I have been there - hoping to believe, but finding it hard to make happen in my life.

So here is some practical advice for getting out of that hard place of wanting to believe, but not really believing:

- Adding up the facts and doing analysis of Christianity as compared to other religions can be great stuff - but it is not faith.
- Knowing about Jesus, and knowing who Jesus is - that's even better - but that's not faith.
- Copying how my parents act, or how my Christian friends act - is not faith - that's acting.
- The amount of faith you have, doesn't matter, Jesus said we only need faith the size of a mustard seed, the size of a grain of sand.
- Don't try to produce your own faith, faith comes from God alone.

I Believe! Help Me In My Unbelief

Luke 24:1-12, 36-49

10

Have you ever asked God to specifically show you how real He is, in a personal way, in a way tailored just for you? Have you ever asked God to come into your life and reveal Himself to you in a way that you personally cannot miss?

Let's pray do that right now.