

John 20: 1-18

¹ 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. ² So 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." ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹² and 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. ¹³ They 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." ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus 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.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Don't Believe It

A sermon preached by
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Text:
John 20: 1-18

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What do you believe? What don't you believe? Do you believe that Jesus was missing from his tomb? Do you believe in the Easter Bunny?

Do you believe that I would do this?

[*Jim puts pink and white, fluffy Easter bunny ears on his head*]

What do you believe?

“Prepositions can be very eloquent,” writes Frederick Buechner:

A man is ‘in’ architecture or a woman is ‘in’ teaching, we say, meaning that is what they do weekdays and how they make enough money to enjoy themselves the rest of the time. But if we say ‘into’ these things, that is another story. ‘Into’ means something more like total immersion. They live and breathe what they do. They take it home with them nights. They can’t get enough of it.

So what are you *into* these days? Maybe that’s the better question. What is it that drives your life? Into what are you totally immersed? What do you live and breathe?

Me? I’m into bunny ears – for today anyway. If I said I was “in” bunny ears, that simply means that I’m wearing them on my head (which is obvious, I think) or maybe that I sell bunny ears for a living – “Hey, I’m in bunny ears now. Wanna buy a pair?”

But if I claim to be “into” bunny ears, it means that I just can’t get enough of them – can’t seem to go a minute on Easter morning without my bunny ears. Just wearing them makes me believe that there must be an Easter Bunny. Why else would I be so willing to strap these fuzzy things on my head and stand here in front of you?

[*Jim removes bunny ears*]

Jesus walks all over John’s Gospel talking about believing. I don’t think he’s talking about the Easter Bunny, but he is wondering aloud about believing.

- Jesus spots Nathaniel under a fig tree and calls him by name; Nathaniel immediately proclaims Jesus “Son of God”; Jesus says, “Do you *believe* because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” (John 1:50).
- In his exchange with Nicodemus, who wants to know about being born anew, Jesus says, “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not *believe*, how can you *believe* if I tell you about heavenly things?” (John 3:12).
- Right after he had changed water into wine at the wedding at Cana, some wanted him to go quickly to heal a young man who was at the point of death; Jesus is frustrated, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not *believe*.” (John 4:48).
- Jesus gave his disciples the power to do the works of God, and they insisted that he give them a sign so they could believe; “You have seen me,” he says, “and yet do not *believe*.” (John 6:36).
- The crowds wondered about Jesus; “Are you the Messiah?” they asked; Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not *believe*. The works that I do in God’s name testify to me (John 10:25).
- Jesus reminds Martha when she doubts that he can help her dead brother Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who *believe* in me, even though they die, will live,

and everyone who lives and *believes* in me will never die. Do you *believe* this?" (John 11:25-26).

- Even in his last days in this life, he reminds his disciples about believing, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. *Believe* in God, *believe* also in me ... Do you not *believe* that I am in God and God is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but God who dwells in me does this work. *Believe* me that I am in God and God is in me; but if you do not, then *believe* me because of the works themselves. (John 14:1, 10-11).
- Thomas wasn't sure about all the talk of resurrection; so the Risen Jesus said to him, "Do not doubt but *believe*. ... Have you *believed* because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to *believe*." (John 20:27-29). And then John ends his Gospel with this: "[This is] written so that you may come to *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20: 31).

What do you believe?

New Testament Greek, the language of the Gospel writers, speaks of believing "into" rather than believing "in" something.

Frederick Buechner continues:

Believing *in* God is an intellectual position. It need have no more effect on your life than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams or the theory that Sir Francis Bacon wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.

Believing God is something else again. It is less a position than a journey, less a realization than a relationship. It doesn't leave you cold like believing the world is round. It stirs your blood like believing the

world is a miracle. It affects who you are and what you do with your life like believing your house is on fire or somebody loves you.

Do you **believe** God or do you just believe *in* God?

Someone once said, "Don't believe everything you read," and we've put that phrase into many different contexts. "Don't believe everything you read in the newspapers;" "Don't believe everything you hear;" "Don't believe everything you see;" "Don't believe everything you see on TV;" "Don't believe anyone over 30." Do not believe... whatever.

I *do not* believe in Mel Gibson's God – the god he portrayed in his movie a few years ago – a one-dimensional Jesus, a god without redemption or god as a brutal, sadistic, parent. And I *do not* believe that our God watches from a distance while we humans torture each other and destroy relationships. *Nor do* I believe in Tim LaHaye's God who judges and condemns and rejects – who selectively leaves behind any of God's beloved children. And I *do not* believe in the god of Joel Osteen and the other Gospel of Prosperity preacher, a god which gives some of us wealth and success while leaving others in poverty.

I *do believe*, though, that God is right here with us. That God, in the incarnation of Jesus, is truly "God with us" – Emmanu-el. I *do believe* that God is in the midst of our brutality and our mistreatment of each other, that God is right in the middle of our relationships in this world, that God is very present in our days and nights. And I *also believe* that we, unbelievably, choose to ignore God's presence in all of those things and we turn our backs on each other and on God's desire for our lives.

“We believe *in* God,” writes Frederick Buechner, “when for one reason or another we *choose* to do so. We *believe God* when somehow we run into God in a way that by and large leaves us *no choice* to do otherwise.” [emphasis added]

Most of the time though, we don’t really believe God. We might claim we believe *in* God, but most of us would be reluctant to claim that we are totally immersed in God. We are *into* soccer, we are *into* music, we are *into* baseball or knitting or reading or country music. But we are not *into* God in the same way that Jesus tried to teach us. We are not into the living of a life which honors God in all that we do. We are not into believing that we can truly love each other like Jesus’ new commandment requires us to believe. We are not into believing that the world is any different now that Jesus has been here, now that God has walked among us, now that the Spirit is in our midst.

The male disciples didn’t believe. Mary encountered the Risen Jesus at the tomb and she believed – she was clearly into believing that God could truly do what Jesus had told them God could do. She believed. Peter had to see for himself – he didn’t believe it so he ran to the tomb along with the one John calls the beloved disciple. John writes that the beloved disciple, “who reached the tomb first, also went in [following Peter], and he saw and believed,” but what he believed was only that the body was gone. John finishes the scene telling us that “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

They didn’t believe. Despite all the times Jesus taught them about believing and belief, about God’s authority and power, about God’s love and passion. Despite all the references to the word “believe” in John’s Gospel alone – 48 times out of a total of 80 in all 4 Gospels – John still has to end with the conclusion that most of the disciples – and that also means most of us – simply don’t believe. We are not *into* believing God.

There is a scene in one of my favorite movies, *Apollo 13* – astronaut Jim Lovell’s story of the ill-fated moon mission when NASA almost lost the three-man crew due to a malfunction while in space – where we see Congress passing a resolution asking people to pray, we see the Pope leading 50,000 people in prayer at the Vatican, we see Jews praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. But some of the administrators and engineers at mission control in Houston express what any of us might consider legitimate concern about the prognosis for the mission.

“The parachute situation, the heat shield, the angle of the trajectory, and the typhoon are just some of the variables,” says one of the men.

“I know what the problems are, Henry,” says the other, “It will be the worst disaster NASA has ever experienced.”

“With all due respect, sir,” says flight director Gene Krantz, “I believe this is going to be our finest hour.”

Isn’t that how we are when it comes to God? Some of the disciples – most of the disciples – some of us – most of us, perhaps – believe that the death of Jesus was and is the end of all possibilities. After the crucifixion, the disciples were dejected and depressed, overcome and overwhelmed, disappointed and distressed, obtuse and obstinate. They didn’t believe. “The parachute situation, the heat shield . . .,” said the NASA administrators. “The Roman legions, the religious elite, the crowds, the shame . . .,” said the disciples. “It will be the worst disaster ever,” said the administrators. “It already is the worst disaster imaginable for us,” say the disciples.

But not for everyone. For some – just a few, maybe, but enough to keep Jesus alive – this was not over. For those who truly believed – those who were *into* their belief in God – this was going to be the world’s finest hour. This is the day, Mary insists, when Jesus is with us again. Believe it!

It's what the church's parking lot sign has been telling the world these past few weeks. Henry David Thoreau – “Live your beliefs and you can turn the world around.”

Do not believe this – [*bunny ears on again*]. Oh, sure, believe that I'll do *anything* to get your attention – but you do not need to believe that bunnies lay eggs and leave us baskets of candy.

Do not believe it – when the world tells you that God is dead. Do not believe it – when the world acts as if you don't matter. Do not believe it matters when someone rejects you because of your faith. Do not believe it if others are trying to get you to give up your search for a deeper relationship with God. Do not believe it when others tell you there is no tangible evidence that God is alive. Do not believe it when the world tells you that the suffering and the cross is all that God has in store for us.

Believe God. Believe so that you are *into* God and *into* each other. Immerse yourself in God. It is then – and only then – that, like Mary, you will experience the newness of God's resurrection in your life. Do not believe the hypocrites and their propaganda. Believe God.

Don't worry about the evidence. Simply believe. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Amen.