

**April 24, 2022**  
**John 20:19-29**  
**Coming to Faith**  
**Michael Stanfield**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

How does one come to believe in Christ?

How did *you* come to believe in Christ?

What is the best way to come to believe in Christ? These are the central questions of today’s text.

I came to believe by way of a little Methodist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. The pastor of that church was a former missionary to Brazil and a fantastic storyteller. He told stories from his life and ministry that captured my imagination and made the scriptures come alive. That pastor’s faith was authentic and it practically oozed from the very pores of his skin. He was the most joy-filled person I think I have ever met. His preferred mode of travel was by way of humming, whistling, or singing. He literally could not help himself.

He had witnessed first-hand the power of personal testimony shared together in community while in Brazil. So, he got our Church, Moriah Methodist to participate in what was called a Lay Witness Mission. I think Presbyterians had something similar at the time called Lay Renewal Weekend. Either way, it was a weekend in which people, young and old from various churches came from all over the region sharing, over the course of a weekend, their very humble, very personal stories of how Christ had changed their lives.

These shared stories of personal experience changed *my* young life. In fact, it was at that tender age of twelve that I first felt a tug toward a call to ministry. From then on, personal stories and experiences of the faith became the fodder that most precisely fed my soul.

Soon after that, my father was transferred to Richmond, Virginia with his job. There in our new church, I discovered that *my* experience of faith was not the norm among my peers. Faith by and large was taught to be a religious category – the acceptance of certain fundamental tenets – whether you really understood them or not.

One can certainly believe in God this way – that is by simply accepting tenets about God – but is that what Jesus really meant when he said “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe”? I don’t think so.

Yet for the vast majority of us Mainline Protestants, assent to particular tenets has been *the* undisputed “legitimate” way to Christian faith. The individual stories of the experience of what one *perceives* to be Jesus have been given far less importance – decidedly so – than that these objective aspects of faith as outlined in the Tradition.

For us in the Reformed Tradition faithfulness was defined by Martin Luther and John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli and John Knox. And how did they see it? Well as precursors to the Enlightenment, they saw the bible as holder of revelatory truths – yes – but truths that were *not* self-evident. They had to be interpreted. And the way that was done was by way of the dissection of the Bible to reduce it down to its most basic and thus most “real” meanings.

As a result, we now have the concepts of the Sovereignty of God and God’s providence; of original sin and how hopelessly infected we are with it; we have a whole subcategory within theology on *soteriology* and the theories of atonement; we have covenantal theology and its relationship to the “real and only true” sacraments – Baptism and the Lord’s supper; we have the foundational Protestant concept of Justification by grace through faith, and sanctification into holiness as disciples of Christ; we have all those theories about predestination, the incarnation, and the importance of God’s revelation as a Trinity. We have all of that and so what do we have really?

A young reporter once asked Mark Twain what causes things to be funny.

The noted humorist replied he did not know if it would be possible to give an exact answer to this question.

Not satisfied with the “non-answer,” the reporter asked a follow-up question. “Well shouldn’t it be possible to break humor into small parts ... and to study the parts ... rather like dissecting a frog?”

Twain thought a few seconds and then said, “Yes, that may be possible. But remember, when you dissect a frog you can see the parts, but you no longer have the frog!!”

Humor is impressionistic and embodying. You either get it or you don’t. If you have to explain why it’s funny, it was either never really funny in the first place, or suddenly ceases to be funny and just becomes work. I think it is similar with faith in God.

Now, there is nothing wrong in and of itself with learning, in depth, the great theological themes of the bible. In fact, I believe there are those of us whose growth in Christ absolutely depends on it. However, I would have to say that, these days, we are probably in the minority. Most of us come to faith – that is a genuine relationship with God – in a way that is more global, intuitive, relational, and mysterious. For us analytical types, knowing the ins and outs of these theological abstractions can be both satisfying and edifying. For others, which these days is most, analysis is actually an impediment to faith – unless it is coming from one’s authentic experience – from who one genuinely is.

And by and large, the dissection of these transforming concepts does not, by necessity, translate into transformed lives. On the contrary, attempting to live out of dissected concepts, rather than the reality of the storied, resurrected Christ, divorces one from one’s own lived experience. Faith then is reduced to mere belief in abstractions and becomes compartmentalized into:

1. the realm of the sacred (which is how we act in church and around other church folks) and
2. the realm of the secular which is most of the actual lives we live.

Real transformation is dependent on a relationship. And we come around to a relationship with God not by an erudite analysis of theological abstractions, but by our own personal experiences of God and our relationships with those whose faith in Christ is genuine and lives in them in a way that is compelling – that tells us a definite story that points to there actually being something to this God thing.

One does not have to become a medical doctor to be a conduit of healing and wholeness. By the same token, one does not have to become a Doctor of Theology to live a life of faithful discipleship.

If you will remember from your anatomy and psychology, the human brain is divided into two hemispheres – the left brain which is used for analytical, logical focused, cause and effect, reductionist thinking and the right brain which is used for global, impressionistic, acausal, intuitive thinking. These two hemispheres are connected by the corpus callosum which allows them to communicate with another. The more we engage intentionally in exercising both parts of the brain, the more holistic and even ingenious our approach to life.

That said, the more natural way of integrating any new attitude – including an attitude of faith is by way of the right half of our brain first and then to use the left half to reflect on and clarify the experience.

Neuroscientist Ian McGilchrist says that in the West, up until about three hundred years ago, the more global, right brain dominated. But since the Enlightenment, there has been usurpation, a reversal, and subsequent domination of the left brain over the right; it has given us science and the technological marvels we experience today. But the price has been steep. This process of reversal, he says, has meant that we are increasingly trapped in a hall of mirrors, trapped in abstractions of our own making, unable to comprehend or connect with actual *human*, embodied reality.

We came to accept a perspective *about* reality – one that is theoretical, abstract, fragmented and absolutely dominant – rather than reality itself. We adopted a reductionistic frame of reference that often keeps us from seeing or experiencing a more global connectedness. See, David John, Jr., “The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church,” Thomas Nelson, 2018, pg 18.

Global connectedness is something that we feel more than fully understand. It therefore tends to come more from powerful stories than from well-defined abstract concepts. In fact, I ask you - how many of you here remember the exact thrust of most of my sermons, weeks later, And how many of you remember the stories I tell?

Human beings don't embody abstract concepts; they embody stories – the stories of their very lives. That's what today's text is about: authentically, genuinely, faithfully, enthusiastically, believing the *story* of Jesus – his life, ministry, death and resurrection – no matter what it takes – seeing, touching or whatever. Those first disciples' job was to believe by first-hand experience of the Christ from the beginning of his ministry to his ascension, so that in the absence of the historic Jesus, they could authentically embody the stories about the nature and person of Christ that others who had never met Jesus before might also be compelled to believe.

And belief would only be a beginning. The personal storytelling would pave the way for the embodiment of Christ's Spirit in every generation thereafter. And that embodiment would come, not through the perfect apprehension of abstract theological concepts. It would come through the love of Christ and through telling and retelling that story and how it connected with the individual story of their lives in the most personal of ways.

As a human being, if you want to know better how to relate with more compassion to existing ecosystems and lower life forms, which would you say would help you more? Personal encounters with live animals in the wild and short of that, photos and videos and paintings of said animals and their environments from around the globe by real artists and cinematographers – or those same dead animals dissected on a tin pan?

Several of us recently watched the documentary, “My Octopus Teacher” together. It is the true story of a man who dove off the coast of South Africa every day for a year and developed a deeply moving relationship with an Octopus. It happened because he let that amazingly intelligent animal tell its own story.

The very thought of the vivisection of such an animal now feels to me like a heinous crime. Through that film, I discovered that if I want to relate to a fellow life form, I need to encounter a live version and if I can't swing that, the perspective of one who has spent significant time *with* that particular life form, having, as it were, one's own personal story of that life form to tell, will do just fine.

It is exactly the same with the Christian faith. My early experiences were telling in this regard.

I can get a lot out of studying the abstract theological concept of the person of Christ by comparing the Christology of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the Apostle Paul. And as a preacher that knowledge is very helpful, perhaps even required. But if I want to really understand Christlikeness or to convey that to others, I need to see it lived out genuinely in someone I know

personally. I need to see and feel the love of Christ from them. I need to hear the amazing stories of God's providence and grace in their lives. I need a living snapshot or video of Christlikeness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to get an intuitive understanding of the possibility of a fuller way of living by way of faith in Christ.

I need to see a Marcia Lake diligently working to prepare for Sunday School. I need to see a Becky Livingston who week and week and out provides beautiful flowers for worship. I need to see a Debbie and Odell Newkirk whose dedication and quiet kindness turn the day around. I need to see a Susan and Bob Winkelman faithfully leading a small group of folks in serving the homeless once a month, rain or shine. I need to see a Karen and Bill Kennedy who do whatever is necessary whenever it is needed with love and enthusiasm for those gathered in the name of Christ for any reason. I need to see a community of faith that so genuinely cares about each other that they have a hard time going home after worship on a Sunday.

Richard Rohr says, "The branch that imagines itself to be separate from the Vine (which is what Enlightenment thinking does), acts as if it is separate from God. We call the result sin, *but the real sin is the imagined state of separation*. It is both our own delusion and our own decision!"

Richard Rohr, *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation for December 17, 2017*. cac.org. Retrieved November 26, 2018.

Remain separate no more. Hear again the powerful story of Thomas and the disciples in the upper room – of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus and how he breathed new life in them. And in so doing, allow Jesus to breathe on you. And then do not keep that to yourself – but share that story – *your* story – *our* story – a story of precious sightings and of resurrection life, a story of love and service to God. Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, we thank you that you came not as a "teaching" but as a person we were meant to know and with whom we were meant to relate. Make your story, our story – personal and powerful and real rather than impersonal removed and conceptional.