

Believe!

Luke 24:1-11

March 31, 2013

The women returned from the tomb and reported to Jesus' apostles: to Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, to all of the eleven and the rest. They told them what they had seen, or, I should say, what they had not seen. They told them what they had heard, and what they remembered, the words they remembered that Jesus had spoken to them.

But the apostles thought that what the women said was nonsense, and they did not believe them.

And that might have been the end of it. The story of Jesus raised from death might have died right then and there, for lack of credibility, for lack of anyone of consequence to believe it. It might have been dismissed and quickly forgotten, or, at best, relegated to the fringes of memory and history, remembered only as an old wives' tale.

That might have been the end of it,

Except that it was true! Jesus was alive! The apostles thought it was nonsense, and they didn't believe it. But they changed their minds. Jesus changed their minds!

The group of Jesus' followers, soon called Christians, grew. More and more people believed the message about Jesus, the message about the One who died -- for us! -- but whom God raised to life. They believed it because they saw the presence and power of the living Jesus in and among the men and women of the young church.

But as the church, birthed in Jewish faith and tradition, its leader, Jesus, himself a Jewish rabbi -- as the church began to attract Gentile converts, it faced a new crisis. Jewish traditionalists demanded that Gentile believers adopt the whole of Jewish law and custom, while evangelists like Paul argued that such a requirement would effectively negate the power of the gospel itself. The new church faced the real possibility of splintering along racial and traditional fault lines.

And that might have been the end of it.

Except that it was true! Jesus was alive, and the Spirit of the living Jesus gave wisdom to the young church and its leaders, and they found a way to be church ... together, and to extend a gracious welcome to all who believe. The love of Jesus lived on in the church, because Jesus lived on!

In the years and decades and centuries that followed, the growing church, firm in its allegiance to Christ as Lord became increasingly regarded by the Roman empire as a nuisance and a threat. Believers were scorned and ridiculed and became targets for abuse. Official persecution reached its height under the rule of the emperor Diocletian. Church buildings were destroyed, sacred writings were burned, Christian leaders were imprisoned, and believers were tortured until they renounced their Christian faith and made sacrifices to the Roman gods. Some were even executed.

Many did give up their faith. They did what they thought they had to do to spare their lives. They did what they thought they had to do to survive in the midst of a culture, a powerful and wealthy and world-dominant culture, hostile to their faith.

And that might have been the end of it.

Except that it was true! Jesus was alive, and some of his followers did remain faithful, faithful to him, even to death, and their courage and faithfulness made powerful witness to the reality of the One who is alive, and others believed because of them.

Eventually, Christianity won key converts in high places and became the official religion of the Roman empire, which was a good thing, and a very bad thing. As Soren Kierkegaard used to say, "Better well hung than ill wed." And the union of faith and empire is a bad marriage indeed!

When Christianity became the religion of the elite and the powerful, it lost its edge, it lost its distinctive witness to the way of Jesus which is not the world's way, and it became instead the servant of empire. It became a tool of conformity instead of freedom, of reinforcing instead of challenging the status quo, of keeping people in their place instead of turning the world and its notions of power upside down.

The religion of Jesus was used to empower the already powerful, to enrich the already rich, and to comfort the already comfortable, instead of strengthening the weak and comforting the oppressed and loving the poor.

And that might have been the end of it.

Except that it was true! Jesus was alive! And believers, believers like Columba, still followed him, still followed Jesus, not those who sat on thrones and claimed the authority of his name. Columba landed on the tiny Isle of Iona with twelve companions in 563 AD, built a monastery, and he and his spiritual descendants carried the good news of the living Jesus, the humble Jesus, the servant Jesus, Jesus the friend of the poor, Jesus the lover of enemies, Jesus the prince of peace from that island base to much of mainland Scotland, and in the ensuing centuries, to much of the world too including to this particular congregational church in Waterloo!

During the first half of its second millennium, the church continued to struggle with issues of power and control. The Great Schism of 1054 AD divided the church in two: west and east, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, a division that continues to this day.

And some four hundred years later, the church was again torn apart by what has become known as the Protestant Reformation. It was, as its title suggests, a protest movement, seeking, in the beginning, not to abandon the church, but to reform it, to address its failings and corruption and confused message. It was about getting back to Jesus and to Jesus' way.

The legacy of the reformation has been lasting and largely good. The Bible, the word of God, became accessible to the people, to all the people, translated into their own languages. The privileges and responsibilities of ministry, which are no more and no less than the privileges and responsibilities of following Jesus, were extended, not just to a select few, but to all believers.

But the reformation has also had an unfortunate legacy, spurring the division of the body of Christ into myriad little pieces, each with its own peculiar claim to authority and righteousness and fidelity to the gospel. The church was and is divided against itself, and, as Jesus said, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

And that might have been the end of it.

Except that it was true. Jesus was alive, and people of genuine faith in churches of all sorts and flavors were shaped and guided not by their own particular creeds and traditions but by their allegiance to Christ, first of all, and above all. And Christ bound them together. The living Jesus binds them together. When you follow Jesus, the name on the church building doesn't matter.

Today one-third of the earth's population is Christian, some two billion believers. But we are still tragically divided, but not so much by differences in theology or tradition or worship style. No, in our day, the church is divided against itself by politics!

Jesus has been co-opted! Faith has been made, not always the servant of empire, but certainly the servant of one particular political agenda or another. Right and left alike use the language of faith and the authority of Jesus' name to promote their own pet causes and refuse to listen to each other, or -- I dare say it! -- to Jesus!

And this might be the end of it. Are we witnessing the dying gasps of a church that really has nothing relevant or valuable or even helpful to say to a world in turmoil and in pain? Would our politics be more honest if we just left faith out of it? Is the gospel outdated? Is it irrelevant? Is it dead?

This might be the end of it. Except that it is true! Jesus is alive. And Jesus is not finished with us. Jesus has something to say -- something life-changing and world-changing to say -- to those and through those who will listen to him. And though the word of Jesus does have political consequences -- otherwise it would not be relevant! -- it is not in any way beholden to any political agenda or party or regime.

Jesus has something to say and Jesus has something to do -- something life-changing and world-changing to do. "God's kingdom come! God's will be done!" he taught us to pray. And he showed us -- the living Jesus is still showing us! -- how to do God's will, how to build God's kingdom. It is by humility. It is by sacrifice. It is by service. It is by love.

This week, Francis, the newly elected leader of the Roman Catholic church -- not our church, and yet, our church, too, because he and we are followers of the same Jesus! -- this week Francis got himself into all kinds of trouble with members of his own church because he washed and kissed the feet of two women, an Italian Catholic girl and a Serbian Muslim girl, both inmates at a juvenile detention facility outside Rome.

I would like to think -- I believe! -- that he was following Jesus. He wasn't thinking about rules or ramifications and repercussions. He was following Jesus, doing what Jesus would do. No, it's more than that, he was doing not just what Jesus would do. He was doing what Jesus is doing.

Jesus is alive, and when we serve him by serving each other, we see him: Christ in us, Christ with us, Christ among us.