

Binkley Baptist Church

“Are You a Believer?”

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

April 3, 2016

Second Sunday in Easter

John 20:19-29 (Thomas)

A short sermon today...

Because Samantha and Isaac have done the powerful preaching this morning—visibly demonstrating the meaningful symbol of new life in the waters of baptism. And, always when the Table is spread with the symbols of life and love (as it is this morning), little needs saying. Symbols carry the load today.

Last month on a Southwest Airlines flight home to Dallas, I was enjoying on my Kindle the latest Jo Nesbo suspense thriller, enjoying both the book and the sound of silence until...my seat mates (unknown to me) started a conversation. The window seated fellow and the middle seater exchanged pleasantries—with nose in my Kindle I sent the message clearly DO NOT DISTURB.

“You live in Raleigh or Dallas?” “What do you do?” “Have kids?” The guy in the window seat—mid to late 30’s I’d guess—seemed to me to be too invested, I thought, and—I’m prescient about these things—he’s angling for something. The squeezed in the middle fellow—late 40’s I thought—worked construction and was pleasant not put off by the questions. Both lived in the DFW area.

Then, predictably, came the question I knew was coming—like an assembly line conveyor belt delivering a product—“Are you a believer?”

I’m not exactly sure why I felt I needed to rescue the poor middle seater or why I wanted to glare at the window dude but I just...sat there and listened. It was one of those experiences of personal evangelism where the witness seemed too sure of himself, too confident. In fairness he wasn’t arrogant—unlike the aisle guy (me) with his “I’m the religious professional on this row” attitude—in fact he wanted to stress that God’s love was available right then and there. “No matter what we’ve ever done, God will forgive us if we repent.” The thing that bothered me though was that it came off as formulaic and inauthentic. Four spiritual laws—Roman Road of Salvation—and an understanding of the cross and “belief,” which removes any and all questions. Unambiguous certitude. While he never said “irrefutable proof” or “evidence that demands a verdict” I got the distinct impression that he thinks of the “faith” in those terms. Truth with a capital “T.” I was witnessing a time of “witnessing” and I was, what word am I looking for here...DOUBTFUL. Doubtful that both life and faith is ever so easy, breezy.

My flight companion was ready with answers to questions that the other guy didn’t even voice! He seemed like he was driving for a mid-flight conversion. Salvation as transaction not born of relationship and caring concern. Salvation as bing, bang, boom. Little scripture, conviction, sinners’ prayer, swipe of the old salvation card, done!

But as everyone in this sanctuary knows, a life of faith involves a lifetime of conversions, and faith can be at times very tenuous. A life of faith surely includes doubts.

Griffin texted me Tuesday at 1pm as I about to lead the Sermon Shapers. The text read: “Quick: What are three reasons people are skeptical about religion today! I need answers in 5 minutes!” The Shapers gave plenty of reasons, don’t you know!

For many of us belief doesn’t grow from mountains of evidence, it is simply a gift of God. Some people come to believe in the love of God almost intuitively—not needing too much at all in order to orient their lives around love and service.

Others believe that only a born again, dramatic, Damascus Road conversion will do the trick. And it—for them—must become the one, normative route to faith.

William James wrote a book *Varieties of Religious Experience* which affirms what we know to be true here. Once born and twice born children of God can and do become disciples. Some never know of a time when God was not part of their life and others can time-stamp the moment they received God into their mind, heart, soul, and spirit.

I’ve come to a deep appreciation of doubt as an invaluable and essential part of faith and the Christian life.

On the second Sunday in Eastertide we get this story—yet another resurrection appearance of Jesus in John’s gospel. The disciples are locked away by fear in a room and Jesus shows up speaking the word of peace. He shows them his hands and side. He breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit, a word of forgiveness is spoken, and the whole dialogue is enacted again.

Thomas was not present for this encounter, so he’s not convinced of the appearance. “Unless I see...I must see for myself.” You would have said the exact same thing. The next week Jesus makes a return appearance and Thomas is there this time. Jesus invites him to place to touch his risen body and says, in essence, “I’m available to you too.” As Gail O’Day from Wake Forest Divinity School has said, “Jesus came to Thomas in a way that he could receive/believe.” This has been the testimony of the church ever since, Jesus coming to us in a myriad of ways. I’m a believer that God comes to us in as many different ways and forms as we might need.

The guy on the plane who asked, “Are you a believer?” Well, he finally got around to inviting the guy to his church in Oak Cliff and to his Sunday school class. “What’s the name of the church?” asked the construction guy.

“Water-mark Fellowship,” he said. Of course, I thought.

We are water washed and spirit-filled people, too, Binkley-ites. And today, water, Word, and table met. It is a sacramental time not a transaction.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.