

## *Experience Is Believing*

Psalm 16      John 20: 24-29

We tend to believe that learning occurs most often in our modern way of thinking through the encounter with abstract content. We show this in our schools where we place children and youth in classrooms and subject them to acquiring vast amounts of abstract knowledge. The teacher's job is to take the abstract content and make it meaningful for the student, developing associations with the abstractions and using repetitive routines to breed familiarity. This is done so that when the state-mandated tests come along and the student's ability to work with these abstractions is examined through abstract problems, the student can show sufficient ability at working with the abstractions. If that sounds like an awful lot of abstractions, it is.

In fact, learning really happens through action, experience, and encounter. I am reading Barbara Tversky's book "Mind in Motion." Tversky is the widow of cognitive psychologist Amos Tversky whose work with Daniel Kahneman contributed to groundbreaking work in behavioral economics for which Kahneman gained a Nobel Prize in economics in 2002. (Amos died in 1996 and Nobel doesn't give awards posthumously.) Barbara Tversky has had her own career as a highly-respected scholar while her late husband garnered most of the attention. She has been a professor of psychology at Stanford and Columbia, and she also specializes in cognitive psychology. Cognitive psychology involves the study of internal mental processes—all of the things that go on inside your brain, including perception, thinking, memory, attention, language, problem-solving, and learning.

Tversky's thesis is that basic learning for human beings has always come through active experience. How do the youngest children learn things, like a baby figuring out what a hand is good for, learning how to sit up and balance, and then to walk, then run, and ride a bicycle? A person could read about such things in the abstract, but the learning only happens by action and experience. You can read about hitting a baseball or about driving a car, but until you actually do it, you really don't know much of anything.

One of the frustrations with teaching students in prison is the limitation on what can be experienced in that confinement. The program in which I volunteer has a class for students to obtain their CDL or commercial drivers license, and another class with a curriculum developed *by the students* to obtain logistics certification, two high-demand positions in today's economy. However, all of their learning has to happen in the abstract; they can't drive a truck and they can't experience the ebb and flow of content in a warehouse. Learning comes through active engagement.

What does this mean for faith and witness as Christians? It means that the high value we often place on *knowing* the right things and *believing* the right things is typically based on abstractions. People pride themselves on being able to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. Yet it's remarkable how many people don't really know what they're saying in the Lord's Prayer, even though they can repeat it flawlessly from memory. And if they have gaps when it comes to the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed has gaps *built-in* so that Jesus has no life - he is born, suffers, and dies. It says absolutely nothing about his ministry; it's as informative as a headstone. Yet people think that memorizing the Apostle's Creed is somehow important. It could be important, but only if your primary value is having a proper faith based on abstractions, not actions, not experience, not ministry like Jesus. The disconnect between what people say they believe and what they actually believe in practice are often two different things.

Our first scripture is Psalm 16 in which the speaker, supposedly King David, expresses the reasons for his devotion to God and what he has learned as a result. Experience has taught the psalmist: "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing." The psalmist values and esteems those people who seek to follow the way of the Lord - the saints or holy ones - who are "glorious" or noble, not the elites of society who may talk big about their beliefs but whose lived experience indicates their actual indifference to the way of the Lord.

The psalmist goes on to detail how his experience of faith has brought him to such devotion to the way of the Lord. He knows the source of his many blessings and he listens for God's counsel in his devotions and life experience.

This lived experience leads him to the faithful confidence expressed in saying: *you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.* God will care for him in death as God has cared for him in life. So, he concludes: *You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

The psalmist does not share a faith based in abstractions, but in lived experience, in an awareness of God's presence and blessings throughout his life. From that, he knows that God will abide with him in every season, including the season of his life's end.

The scripture from John 20 is likely familiar as the story of "doubting Thomas." You'll recall that Thomas's pals, the other disciples, had received a visit while Thomas, having drawn the short straw, was out shopping for toilet paper and hand sanitizer. In any case, Thomas was not around when the resurrected Jesus made a surprise visit to

the others *and* pre-empted Pentecost by giving them the Holy Spirit almost 50 days ahead of time.

Thomas is also known as Didymus - Thomas is Aramaic while Didymus is Greek and both mean “Twin.” To whom was Thomas a “twin” has sometimes been asked. Some speculate that he may have been Jesus’ biological twin brother which would certainly make a mess of any nativity story, or maybe he simply looked like a “twin” to Jesus. “Twin” certainly appears to have been a nickname, much like Simon gets the Greek nickname Peter or Rock (Rocky), since John’s gospel calls attention to it both times when Thomas’s name appears in a narrative - here and the Lazarus story. Yes, it’s all just speculation, but it is fun to play with.

When Thomas hears about this resurrection appearance by Jesus, he refuses to believe it until he can have the actual experience of engaging this resurrected Jesus by examining the wounds which he knew Jesus had received in the crucifixion. Of course, Thomas knew right away that it wasn’t April Fool’s Day, and besides it was definitely way too soon for Jesus jokes. He took them seriously, but he refused to simply take their word for it.

Let’s be honest, contemporary disciples: if a group of your people excitedly said that someone who had died recently had come into their common room, visited, and had a chat while you were out at Target hoping for toilet paper and hand sanitizer, you’re unlikely to believe their story either. “What?? Get outta here. That’s crazy!”

Treating such an account as dubious and demanding personal engagement before going along with the group doesn’t need to be condemned. It’s quite rational.

A week had passed since Thomas made his demand, probably never expecting to get a second resurrected-Jesus visit. When the disciples were together again in the locked room, Jesus appeared again, singling out Thomas for treatment. *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe.*

Thomas stopped doubting, but Jesus made him into an object lesson about faith for the ages. Thomas stopped doubting because experience is believing. Having the experience brings understanding. It’s pretty hard to believe something without seeing it, without having a clear understanding of what’s going on.

We’re called to question what is before us, to seek better, higher understanding in the light of the resurrection. As we consider our effective witness, we should realize that

experiencing faith as you practice it is a whole lot different from simply hearing about it and believing some authoritative set of abstractions.

This is critical because in the gospel of John, the latest gospel writing in the Bible, the possibility of eyewitnesses, even descendent relatives of eyewitnesses, are nonexistent. Communicating an understanding of the faith can no longer occur through any direct contacts with the past. Communicating an understanding of the faith will require faith in action, the experience and practice of what living a resurrection faith is all about.

No, people can't inspect the physical form of the resurrected Jesus. People need to discover Jesus and his resurrection in another way. They need to be able to see it to understand it.

I can even make logical, rational arguments for the stories we have received. Indeed, no writer of an account of Easter morning would come up with the lame, wimpy, uninspired stories we have.

First, the main actors in all the stories are women. Women? Apart from Mary giving birth, women are at best supporting actors, like the woman who touched Jesus hem, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Syro-Phoenician woman who wants the crumbs off the table. In the Easter morning story, all four gospels have women in the starring roles, women we have never even heard of before. In the climax story, you don't suddenly introduce women when all we've heard about is the idiotic men. Besides, the story is supposed to be about the men, not the women as all the gospels make clear.

Second, there is no big show. Moses on the mountaintop - big show! Elijah talks with God - big show! Jesus' birth in Luke has a host - an army - of angels singing! Jesus' transfiguration is a big show with bright lights, big clouds, and cameos by Moses and Elijah. For Easter, we simply get bewildered women followed by confused useless men, plus a couple of useless angels, an empty tomb, and no show. This is **the big event** - where is the show?

Consider how, in Mark's gospel, the risen Jesus tells the women to inform the disciples, but instead they go back and say **nothing**. Indeed, all of what gets said at the tomb is pretty unremarkable.

I could go on, but you get the idea. If you were going to make up a good story about the resurrection, you would not write up the uninspired stories like the ones that we have. They are so lacking in polish that they most likely reflect solid recollections of what happened.

The point is that I could tell you all about how the Easter accounts are worthy of consideration as actual recollections, but that doesn't get you any closer to a resurrection faith, a Kingdom faith.

In the same way, it's nearly impossible to understand Kingdom faith if you simply read scripture and never put any of it to use. What we end up with are corruptions of the kind of faith that Jesus taught and practiced. We have people of faith disconnected from the work of the Kingdom. The worst part is that they think the corruption is exactly what Jesus wanted. Generally that means cheap grace, ridiculous biblical literalism, backward social values, law and order, and flag-waving nationalism. None of that actually relates to the Kingdom of God as Jesus gave witness to it.

Resurrection faith means asking questions to seek better understanding, to root out misunderstanding and corruptions. More importantly, it means living and practicing a faith that matters. It means realizing that there are many doubting Thomases in our society, and their doubts are with good reason. When we understand and practice a living witness to Jesus, then they will experience our faithful witness to the way of the Lord and his Kingdom and then they may believe. They will know from our actions and attitudes born of experience that the resurrection that means salvation and new life for all.