

## *Believe!*

Wednesday in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Easter (Yr. B), 2021

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*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’ John 3:16-21*

The word BELIEVE is found seven times in the Gospel of Matthew.

The word BELIEVE is found nine times in the Gospel of Mark.

The word BELIEVE is found six times in the Gospel of Luke.

The word BELIEVE is found *thirty-six* times in the Gospel of John.

Clearly the phenomenon of believing is of great importance to the author of the Gospel of John. Four of those thirty-six uses of ‘believe’ are found in the text that we just shared. This text includes the famous first verse: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Many of us have heard this verse invoked in messages and moments of evangelism. And for some the resulting belief has been a blessing. Others of us may have heard John 3:16 invoked as a weapon, threat or dividing line more than a promise and a blessing. And in this context we must in fact contemplate the three additional uses of believe that follow in this text: *Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

Whatever our stories or our traditions or our experiences of evangelism or of John 3:16, and whether or not we are theologians, all of us are engaged with belief – belief in God, or not, and belief in his Son, our savior, Jesus, or not, and more. We also know the temptation of reducing belief to a yes or no proposition – about the virgin birth, or the resurrection, or how, precisely, one is or is not ‘saved.’ Jesus himself – or the author of this Gospel expanding on the words of Jesus that precede this passage – does seem to use ‘belief’ to draw a straight and sure dividing line: *Those who believe ... are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already ...*

Interestingly, however, of all four gospels this Gospel of John arguably gives us the most diverse and poetic and symbolic understanding of what belief *is*, what it looks like. Sometimes it does look like our assent to a proposition about Jesus. But not always. Consider, for instance, that this evening’s gospel arises from the seeking mind and heart of Nicodemus, who, we are told, *came to Jesus by night* – the night here being a simple, powerful metaphor for a closed mind. Nicodemus is *in the dark*, as are we all sometimes.

And there follows the dialog with Nicodemus in which Jesus commends being ‘*born from above.*’ It’s a compelling image, but one that is better translated into our individual gestations of faith than reduced to a formula. The same is true of other passages throughout John, where we encounter the Good Shepherd, the Light of the world, and the bread of life – each of which may suggest a propositional truth, and in each of which, above all, we are being invited more deeply and profoundly into relationship. The One who is Good shepherd holds and protects us. By the bread of life we receive true and lasting nourishment. The Light of the world shows us the way of life. Christ is our midwife as we are born from above.

So we are invited, in this precious season of resurrection, to *believe.* We are invited to contemplate – and to revisit or challenge if need be – our experiences and understanding of what it means to believe. We are invited to look closely and critically at notions and experiences of belief that divide us from others, that result in our feeling superior, or inferior, or that feel like a weaponized fortress. We are invited to move toward belief that abides in Jesus, with ever-more freedom from fear, with ever-greater love and gratitude and peace, a safe home where, by God’s grace, new life is continuously possible. *Amen.*