

Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31
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“It was a dull autumn day and Jill Pole was crying behind the gym... and she hadn’t nearly finished her cry when a boy came around the corner of the gym whistling with his hands in his pockets. He nearly ran into her. ‘Can’t you look where you’re going’ - said Jill. “Alright” said the boy, “you needn’t start”, and then he noticed her face. “I say, Pole, what’s the matter?”

Isn’t that a lovely beginning for a children’s book? Don’t you feel you just want to keep reading? Its from *The Silver Chair* by C. S. Lewis. And sharing this book with you connects me to one of the most important, beautiful, meaningful memories of my own childhood, in Mexico City, which I also want to share with you this morning:

Two or three time a year, my mother would take us all the way downtown Mexico City, to go to the British Bookstore - a drive which, by the way, makes going from here to downtown Los Angeles look like a walk in the park. And my mother would buy for me as many books as I picked out. It was wonderful! Each time we went, almost giddy with excitement, I would spend what felt like hours picking out just the perfect books to take home. For the next few weeks, I would read my new books, over and over and over again. And this is one of them, *The Silver Chair*. [One of the cool things about these books is that they were published by Penguin Classics, and they have this line on the back that says: “For Copyright Reasons, this edition is not for sale in the USA.” I thought it was really cool the have all these books in Mexico that were not for sale in the USA!]

But other things happened as well. As years when by and I read and reread so much of this wonderful literature, my library became absolutely my most treasured possession. The authors of the books, to this day, are dear friends and conversation partners. And, totally unbeknownst to me, an enormous part of my own spiritual formation was taking place, in that many of these books, picked out seemingly by chance, were written by some of the best spiritual thinkers and Anglican theologians of the late 19th and mid 20th century. Authors like George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis or Madeleine L’Engle. People who formed me in ways that I did not appreciate until I was adult and I was able to look back at their influence on my life later on.

One thing all these authors did very well, and I think it is especially present in the prose of C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald, was bring a profound art and skill and grace into bridging the movement from the mundane, the ordinary, to the extraordinary and the magical.

The story in *The Silver Chair* begins in the most mundane of places. [Although to me it sounds kind of exciting, the truth is that, in English books, boarding schools are the height of “mundaneness.”] So, the children in the story are at boarding school, being bullied by older students, and trying to hide by going to the back of the school grounds.

“If only the door was open again” said Scrub as they went on, and Jill nodded. For at the top of the shrubbery was a high stone wall and in that wall a door by which you could get out onto the open Moor. This door was nearly always locked, but there were times when people had found it open, or perhaps there had been only one time. But you can imagine how the memory of even one time kept people hoping and trying the door. For if it should happened to be unlocked, it would be a splendid way of getting outside the school grounds without being seen.”

Well, since it’s a story, the door is open this time, and book goes on:

“They had expected to see the grey heathery slope of the Moor, going up and up to join the dull autumn sky. Instead, a blaze of sunshine met them; it poured through the doorway, as the light of a June day pours into garage when you open the door. It made the drops of water on the glass glitter like beads, and showed up the dirtiness of Jill’s tear stained face. The sunshine was coming what certainly looked like a different world, what they could see of it.”

Just allow yourself to imagine the adventure the begins on the other side of the door!

And indeed, this sense of marvel, of mystery, of wonder.. has been very present to me as I have been reflecting on the Gospel readings, not only for today, but last Sunday as well.

Keep this wonder as we move quickly to the end of today’s reading in the 20th chapter in the Gospel of John. The *point* - is that these stories, Mary

Magdalene and Peter and the beloved Disciples and Thomas, are all written *so that we may believe* and in *believing that Jesus is the Son of God*, that we may *have life*. That is the whole intention, and promise, in the telling of the story of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

Let's ask some very practical questions about believing and about faith, framed in ways that all of us can take home today, in terms that are right for you right where you are. What does it *mean, look like, feel like, experience like*, to be faithful in believing? *How can we connect these words and this promise with something we can take home and into the experience of our own lives?*

Let's begin by looking at *wrong* ideas about faith and put them on the table, so that we can discard them. *Believing* and *faith* are not about a set of propositions that we give intellectual assent to. The faith that moves us, the faithfulness that compels us, that moves our will, that brings us to community - that faith does not come from a belief in a set of statements or propositions. It *never* has, and it never will. Neither you nor I are here because we memorized and recited a list of beliefs.

Furthermore, faithfulness and belief do not come about because somebody "convinced" us. They don't come about because somebody made such a good argument about the existence of God, the reasonableness of Christ, or the reasonableness or legitimacy of this particular church. In fact, most of us know that our minds can create a "logical" argument about just about anything, and that the things that *move* us have to come out of and into a place in our beings that is much deeper than that. So then, reasonable arguments, or manipulative arguments, or propositional statements - none of these things have anything to do with faith and belief in a way that matters.

And if these don't, then, what does?

Whenever we reach these points of question out of a biblical text, the answer is often embedded in the very same text. Did you notice, for example, that in the Gospel of John, we also just read the Pentecost narrative today. Jesus comes and says to the disciples, "peace be with you," and then he *breathes* on them. *The whole point* was that the disciples could not come to a real understanding of Christ until after Jesus had been resurrected and breathed his spirit on them.

The stories in the 20th chapter of John's Gospel, stories of encounter with the risen Christ, are all stories of faith. But first, they are stories of *encounter* - and that is the key. Our believing and our faith come, not from arguments or propositions, but rather from a real encounter with the Holy. Believing comes, firstly, foundationally, from an authentic encounter with the Holy.

If you and I could be in a more intimate setting, if our conversation were so safe that we could begin to talk about the real experiences of our lives... how many of us would start, gently, tentatively, sharing experiences of encounter with the Holy, stories we might not have shared with anybody else? The words might be very tentative, but a part of our hearts would know that we are here, in this church, in Christian community, *only* because of those experiences of encounter that once happened to us, in our own lives.

About a week ago, I was having a conversation with a friend, and the conversation started with a book about visions. "Have you ever seen a vision? Tell me about it." Another day, we did just that, talk about visions and encounters with the Holy. My memory of that conversation is that it began and ended with silence. "Let me tell you..." But then, only this long, long, long, period of silence, and then at the end, "there's just some things that are hard to talk about, aren't there?" Well, how many of us have had experiences that we could only share by sitting with somebody else in companionable silence, in the hope that they would understand? Experiences of the Holy that come from places that are completely different from the ordinary, that we may find hard to connect into the rest of our lives, and yet are the most guiding, deep, and precious part of our entire spiritual experience.

These experiences of encounter with the Holy cannot be scripted. The Spirit of God can never be put in a box, and these experiences can never be "caused" or manipulated into existence, because they come from God, not us. But what we *can* do as a Community, and what we *can* do as individuals, is to live in an disposition of openness. Thus, for example, C. S. Lewis created, for me, a disposition and openness to *wonder* through his writings. And from "wonder" to the "Holy" there is only the smallest of steps.

Consequently, a very real and practical thing to do, if we are to be a vibrant and living community of faith, is create *amongst* ourselves and *in our own lives*, an environment that is open to the experience of wonder. In many ways we do that already. Think about the difference in the formation of our

children in something like the Catechism of the Good Shepherd program, with its beautiful “playing with the Holy,” as compared to giving children a list of things to recite and to memorize. Think of your own experience of music, or walking, or fishing, or hiking, or camping or whatever it is. All of those experiences that open your soul to a place of wonder.

Let’s look at this Gospel story, then, as an invitation to cultivate wonder amongst ourselves, in the expectation that the experience of encounter with the risen Christ is there for all of us, that this experience is what lies at the bottom of our faith, and that this is one of the blessings that Jesus gives in the story of Thomas. “Blessed are those who have seen and believed.” Blessed are *you*. Blessed am *I*. Blessed are *us* - when we stand on some mountain top in a moment of clarity and wonder, and we have an experience of the Holy that then transforms and guides our lives.

But the story doesn’t end there. The story continues, because those experiences of the Holy, by their very nature, are so qualitatively different from so much of the rest of our lives. They taste different. They *feel* different. That is, perhaps, why we can only describe them with silence. There is something about that space that doesn’t lend itself to ordinary words or ordinary discourse, and they are easy to forget because they are so luminous. So faithfulness, the real experience of faithfulness in believing, is not faithfulness to a set of statements, but rather *faithfulness to experience*. “Blessed are you.” Blessed are we, when we remember those experiences during the rest of our lives when things get dark or difficult, or painful and mundane, and nevertheless we hold on to that revelation and continue in the life of faith.

One of the places I connected with this was in Fr. Harold’s letter to the Congregation over Easter. The sentence that jumped out is that we live in a world of functional atheism. I kind of grabbed on to that theme because I spent last summer, the whole summer, in a place of functional agnosticism. Here I am, newly ordained, doing all this Church work, but there is also a part of me that is so disconnected. What is happening? Well - I thought to myself, maybe I should pray for a another experience of the Holy, so that I “remember” or “re-connect.” But as soon as I had that thought, I knew not to. It’s *not* about praying for another experience of the Holy. *It’s about being faithful to the experience of the Holy that we have already had.*

Let me illustrate further by again coming back to *The Silver Chair*. Like any good book it has a quest, and the children are first in a place where they are given a quest. The one giving the quest is Aslan, the Lion, and Aslan gives Jill a whole series of things that she needs to remember so that she can complete the quest. But then he adds something that has stayed with me throughout the years - *“up here on the mountain the air is clear and your mind is clear. It will not be so when you go down into Narnia. As you go down the air will thicken and you will have to work hard so you don’t forget.”*

That is, finally, the faithfulness that matters. That is the faithfulness that connects with our being. We encounter the Holy in luminous, numinous places, mysterious places, places of wonder. But the blessing that Jesus gives to “those who believe without having seen” is the blessing to that part of our being that is not connected with that experience, but nevertheless remembers, and remembering that experience of the Holy, continues the life of faith right into the ordinary of our days, and in doing so transforms lives that can be mundane into lives of wonder, and lives of “functional agnosticism” into lives of faith.