

Easter 3 – April 18, 2021
St. Clement's Anglican Church
PSALM 4; 1 JOHN 3:1-7; LUKE 24:36B-48

Just for fun, a few years ago, Peter and I went to see a magic show. It was a sold-out performance at one of the downtown theatres, and though I can't remember all the amazing sleights of hand and mind, I do remember enjoying witnessing what appeared to be real magic taking place.

As the show began, I realized that I had a choice to make. I could spend the evening resolute in the knowledge that what seemed impossible was, in fact, impossible, and spend the whole two hours squinting at the stage while I looked for invisible wires, hidden trap doors, plants in the audience or other tricks.

Or, I could let the seemingly impossible remain a mystery, sit back, and allow myself to get swept up in the magic of the evening.

Which choice would give me the most authentic experience? Which would send me home marvelling and uplifted? Which would make me feel my time and money were well spent? Well, I realized I would be short-changing myself if I spent the evening bound up in scepticism.

It occurred to me at the time that Christians have a similar choice to make. We can spend the majority of our life looking for reasons to debunk the most marvellous stories of our faith, including the resurrection, or we can choose to believe them. We can stay on the fence, or we can lean in to a life in which we make room in our hearts and our minds for the miraculous.

I am not saying Jesus's empty tomb was a magic trick. But I think that people who choose to be continual sceptics – whether in matters of faith, or in a magic show, or the possibility of a new relationship – might get to the end of their life triumphant that no one has been able to “trick” them, as they might see it, but they may have lost out on the fullness of what it is to be human.

Choosing to believe that there are aspects of reality that lie beyond our limited understanding opens a door to a whole realm of thought and experience that I, for one, wouldn't want to miss. I could, as many do, acknowledge only the existence of things that are measurable, observable, and knowable.

But as I explained to someone once, I would rather live my life as a poem than a spreadsheet, and that means believing in things unexplainable. On the other side of death's divide I may well be proven wrong about some of the things I have trusted in or wondered about. But my life will have been immeasurably enriched in the meantime.

I think God knows that we are a stubborn bunch when it comes to belief. We saw it in the disciples, too, despite their first-hand experience of Jesus. They had witnessed miracles aplenty. Thomas, for example, had been present when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, yet he was hesitant to believe Jesus had himself been raised when he heard the report from other disciples. We likely recognize this same trait in ourselves. We may experience what truly seems like a spiritual presence or a divine intervention, but before long we find ourselves wanting just one more sign. And another.

It seems that we humans are built both for doubt and for belief. And this is a very good thing, I'm sure, as it's wise not to believe everything that crosses our path. But believing in nothing is not the answer either. The other day I was remembering a corporate Christmas event I attended years ago, during which I was speaking to a stranger who was celebrating Christmas with her grandchildren. "We still keep the kids believing in Santa Claus," she said, somewhat wistfully. "After all, you have to believe in something."

As you might imagine, I had some other suggestions about things her grandkids might learn to believe in at Christmastime, but in that moment I chose to hold my tongue.

As a species, we have a longing for the supernatural. It seems these days that three-quarters of the new movies and TV shows have a zombie factor or similar other-worldly component to them, and I read

that between 2010 and 2018, the sales of fantasy, science fiction and paranormal books doubled.

Now, atheists might defend this current obsession with the supernatural as being a rational activity – it is an escape, but we know that it is one of our own making. No one is trying to “trick” us into believing it’s real. But to me this surge in zombie movies and ghost stories feels like a cheap substitute for authentic participation in a world that is charged with the grandeur of God. A world that is *not* of our own making, and all the more marvellous because of it.

Last week in the gospel reading, Jesus did his best to “prove” to Thomas that he was indeed risen, by showing the wounds on his hands and on his side. This week, he does the same with other disciples, and eats a fish right in front of them for good measure.

Why does Jesus care so much about what we believe? I really don’t think it’s because God will be mad at us if we don’t staunchly defend every statement in the Apostle’s creed. Instead I think it’s because Jesus desperately wants us to live a life that is more than we can ask or imagine. In John 10:10 he says “I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” And real abundance is possible only once we open our hearts to the mystery and magic that underlie all of creation.

I am not advocating for the literal reading of every Bible text – which would be difficult at the best of times, given all the internal contradictions in the Scriptures. I am not suggesting there is one right way to think about the resurrection, and the form it took. I am not myself prepared to commit myself to only one theory on that, because I intend to keep exploring the big questions my whole life through.

As I explained to Bishop Melissa when I began discerning a path toward ordination, I don’t need people to think what I think. Or what anyone else thinks. But I would love them to feel what I feel. And what I feel is a deep trust in a spirit of love, joy and possibility that was present at the time of creation, was made incarnate in Jesus, and that remains present and available to us throughout and beyond our earthly lives. Blessed are those who have not seen, but believe, Jesus said, and I think he is right.

Sometimes we get signs that point to the truth of Christ. But sometimes signs feel thin on the ground. The psalmist today writes: “Many are saying, ‘Oh, that we might see better times!’ Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, O Lord.” They’re hoping for a tangible sign of God’s presence and favour. But then the psalmist goes on to say: “You have put gladness in my heart, *more* than when grain and wine and oil increase.”

So let us give thanks for the gladness in our heart, a gladness we make room for by taking the leap of faith. If you have found sitting on the fence a little uncomfortable at times, I encourage you to *choose* to believe. You can always get back on the fence later if you would like. But during these weeks of Eastertide, at least, I invite you to stop looking for the hidden wires and the magician’s tricks, and just enjoy immersing yourself in the experience of a risen, living Christ who walks with us yesterday, today and tomorrow. Amen.

- *The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*