

Easter Sunday April 9, 2023  
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**Belief is an Expression of Love**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

It can be difficult if not impossible to know what to believe these days. There is so much misinformation so easily available and personal opinions appear to carry more credibility than data, which can be easily distorted. Such a “deep fake” atmosphere can make the most trusting person wary, skeptical, or cynical, even of authority. Religion is no exception. Even as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus this morning, it is a celebration shadowed by cynicism that can’t believe what it can’t see.

But there is more to belief than data and information. And that something more is what the resurrection is about.

Today’s Gospel is a powerful and dramatic account of Jesus’ resurrection that begins with grief. The author of John’s Gospel indicates this by telling us Mary Magdalene went to Jesus’ tomb while it was still dark. This darkness is both an indicator of the time of day, and the emotional state of Mary and the other disciples. They were in a dark place anyone who has ever felt the deep grief of loss can understand and relate to.

Although grief is often labeled a negative emotion, that isn’t necessarily true. Grief is just one expression of love. We grieve not just what or who we lost, but what or who we love. Love is also deeply connected to belief, which is why it is important we recognize its presence in the Gospel.

The account of Jesus’ resurrection has been preached on and studied from the perspectives of Mary Magdalene and the two other disciples. But there was someone else present who must have witnessed all the events described in today’s Gospel whose perspective we rarely consider. That person is the risen Jesus himself. I wonder if he was there the entire time and watched Mary arrive in the dark and find his tomb empty. I wonder if he watched her run away and watched as Peter and another disciple, the one described as someone one he loved, come running to see for themselves the empty tomb and discarded burial clothes. I wonder if Jesus saw Mary Magdalene return and watch in confusion as the two disciples went into the tomb only to emerge and go back where they had come from. I bet Jesus watched as they walked right past him and did not notice he was there. I wonder if Jesus watched Mary’s conversation with the angels. I

like to imagine him standing right behind her the entire time as she cried and looked frantically for his dead body. I wonder if he smiled to himself because all Mary and the disciples had to do that morning was turn their attention away from the tomb and turn around to see the Risen Jesus.

It was so difficult for them to turn their attention away from the tomb. Turning around would be an act of belief, and it can be difficult to believe what you can't see, even if it is in front of you.

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown observed belief played a major role in the resurrection account in the Gospel today, because it is only when someone believed Jesus has been raised from the dead that darkness was transformed into light. Perhaps that moment occurred when the beloved disciple believed, even though he didn't understand. How is that possible? The only evidence he saw was discarded burial clothing, and certainly we could come up with a logical explanation or two if we thought about it long enough. How could he believe with so little evidence?

Ludwig Wittgenstein observed evidence had little to do with belief. "It is love that believes the resurrection," Wittgenstein wrote, which could be why it is the **beloved** disciple, the one with a closer relationship with Jesus, who first believed. That doesn't mean Peter and Mary Magdalene don't matter, they just had different perspectives, and each came to believe in different ways, depending on their relationship with Jesus.

When I wonder about the Risen Jesus outside the tomb, waiting patiently in the dark for someone to turn around and notice him, I don't believe he was waiting like we wait for our turn to check out a store or when we wait for our ride to show up or for the next episode of our favorite TV show. The Risen Jesus is the embodiment of God's love active here on earth and is evidence of what God's love can do. So, when Jesus was watching and waiting, he was also loving all three of his disciples, and when they let themselves receive that love, they were able to believe.

It is essential to mention the love I am talking about, the love Wittgenstein was talking about, is not romantic love, nor it is parental love, nor the love children have for parents. This love is the love that is God. The best way to describe it, which is perhaps inadequate, is to care for the wellbeing of others.

It is a love that never gives up and can change and adapt to be with someone, like the Risen Jesus stayed with Mary Magdalene, who had such a hard time turning around. But when she did, something wonderful and amazing happened: The person who had persistently insisted she needed to take care of Jesus' dead body became the first person Jesus commissioned to proclaim and to embody his resurrection to his followers and to the world.

Once Jesus spoke her name, an act of love, Mary finally recognized the Risen Jesus was right there in front of her, that he had been there the whole time, and the tomb lost its power over her. It was no longer the harsh reality of injustice and loss and became a testimony to God's love, power, and possibility. Through the Risen Jesus' love for her, love that stayed with her as she struggled, Mary believed, and her belief helped her live into Jesus' commission to proclaim the good news Jesus was raised from the dead.

Perhaps one of the revelations of Jesus' resurrection is just like grief is one expression of love, belief is another expression of love. As New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright describes it, "It is love that believes resurrection. It is, conversely, the resurrection of Jesus that awakens love, love for him, love for one another, love for God's world."

While it is true that we live in a world where it is difficult to know what to believe, despite all the data and information and opinions readily available to us, today's Easter Gospel points out there is more than data and opinions. There is the love of God embodied in the Risen Jesus who is, and has always been, closer than we realize. Whenever we get stuck or frustrated, all we need to do is turn around, and consider the perspective of that love. It can be easy to forget you are loved by God, but you are. God loves you. God loves you more than life itself. That love won't make all the bad things that happen disappear, but that love can be what helps you get through anything, that love is what can help you, like Mary Magdalen, share God's love with others, even those you or don't like or disagree with. And when we share God's love, it can help others believe, and when more of us show our belief by what we do and what we say, loving God and loving our neighbors, then hope shines a little brighter, and that is what we all can bring to the world on Easter and every day.