

"BLESSED ARE THE BELIEVERS"

A Sermon By

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"BLESSED ARE THE BELIEVERS"

TEXT: "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe."

(John 20: 29)

INTRODUCTION

A friend was telling me this past week that as he was leaving his Church on Easter, he overheard a man in front of him say to the preacher at the door,

"Reverend...you sure are in a rut! Every time I come to Church, you preach on the Resurrection!"

Well, that was two weeks ago. It was a good Easter - a beautiful Spring day. And last Sunday, Kenneth Halcott spoke to us about the post-resurrection appearance of our Lord on the Road to Emmaus. Today, I'd like to talk to you about His encounter with Thomas.

DEVELOPMENT

Jerry Kramer was a member of a team that once dominated the National Football League - the awesome Green Bay Packers under Coach Vince Lombardi. Kramer is also an articulate man who has authored two best-selling books about his experiences. In his most recent book he reflects on his own sense of mortality. His words would be helpful for many of us. He writes,

"I think a lot about death these days, which is funny, too, because I've never been healthier. I've had only one serious illness in the past ten years, only one near death experience. I haven't broken a bone, not even a finger, since I stopped playing football sixteen years ago. My weight's not bad, about 240, twenty pounds less than when I stopped playing, and most of the time I feel awfully good. And yet now, more than ever, I sense that I'm mortal.

A year ago, I lost my father to cancer and I don't think I'll ever get over his death. In some ways, I think it was more difficult for the family than it was for him. Dad was a very religious man and he was ready to go. He had his faith and he said he was locked in the arms of the Lord. Sometimes I wish I had that kind of faith. But I don't. I just have questions."

I picked up on that as I read it and clipped it. "I just have questions" he said. His father's death was harder on the family than it was on him. Why? Because Dad, "was a very religious man and he was ready to go. He had his faith and he said he was locked in the arms of the Lord". I like that.

"BLESSED ARE THE BELIEVERS"

"Blessed are the believers". That's true, you know. So often when we look at this important passage in John's Gospel we focus on Thomas' doubts and say quietly to ourselves, "Yes....I can identify with that". And we miss the punch line, the important part. We miss the words of the Master ...the words of Jesus to Thomas,

"Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe!"

Yes, blessed are the believers. We are not talking here about the smugly self-righteous or about those pious pontificators who spout off answers to questions that no one is asking. We're talking about people who have come to grips with their doubts in an honest and forthright way and have made a commitment of their will to trust in the care and providence of God.

They are, indeed, the blessed of this earth. They are healthier, happier and generally more effective in relating to others than are the doubters and the cynics. It is they who move the world forward, for there is power in believing - more power than the unbeliever can ever know. Part of that power is the power of "vision" - for truly if seeing is believing, the converse is equally true. Believing is seeing - seeing possibilities and promises that bode good fortune for all who perceive their presence. So, I say it again, blessed are the believers.

#### WE ALL HAVE OUR DOUBTS

Of course, we have our doubts. All of us do. Woody Allen is right. Faith would be easier if God would show Himself by depositing a million dollars in a Swiss bank account in our name!

I came across a true story recently about a young man named Charlie who was in love with a charming and gorgeous young lady named Ava. She was in love with Charlie, too, but so far he had been unable to persuade her to marry him. Then one day he invited her to lunch. They drove to the Los Angeles Coliseum, the largest sports arena on the West Coast.

In the center of the vast playing field were placed a small table and two chairs. A maitre d' showed them to the table, a captain seated them, and a waiter waited behind each chair. Apart from this small oasis, the Coliseum was empty. Something like 100,000 empty seats stared down at Ava and Charlie.

The table was elegantly set. Caviar and champagne were served. Then a soufflé and salad and more champagne. And as they were waiting for dessert, Charlie directed Ava's attention to the huge electronic scoreboard at the far end of the field.

In a pre-arranged signal he raised his glass, and on the board flashed the words, "Darling, Ava...will you marry me?" And she said, "Yes".

Why can't God do something like that for us? It would be easy. A giant comet streaking across a dark winter night with its tail sky-writing in our behalf, "I love you...(signed) God". Of course, if that happened, immediately a group of cynics and doubters would get together and explain to us that it was just a freak product of certain atmospheric conditions.

But why doesn't God do something spectacular like that? We can sympathize with the British philosopher and mathematician, Bertrand Russell, who was once asked what he would say if after death he found himself confronted by God. He replied,

"I shall say to Him, 'Why did you make the evidence of your existence so insufficient?'"

There is a part of us that says with Thomas, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in His side, I will not believe". We all long for certainty. But that is one gift that God has not granted us.

And undoubtedly, He has His reasons. If His aim is to produce mature spirits fit to spend eternity in His presence, it makes sense that He would not reveal Himself in His fullness to us. Such certainty would keep us perpetually immature. If a child knows that his father will always be there to solve every problem, to resolve every crisis, to comfort every sorrow, the child will never develop self-reliance. Our insecurity may be essential to spiritual growth.

WE HAVE CERTAINTY ENOUGH

Besides...most of us have certainty enough. It's interesting how often the name of God slips out off the lips of even those officially committed to non belief...to atheism.

Last Fall Time magazine reported to us how Prime Minister Gorbachev of the Soviet Union was forced to edit his own remarks when he visited the UN...I think it was November. Before he spoke to the General Assembly, Gorbachev met with UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar. And when the Secretary-General thanked Gorbachev for the Soviet's recent support for UN peace-keeping efforts, Gorby answered,

"God is on your side at the United Nations...."

And after a short pause, he re-phrased his statement in a more orthodox Marxist fashion saying,

"The objective trends of what is happening in history are on your side".

We cannot be surprised at the Soviet Premier's verbal slip.

Pope John Paul once said that he would never forget the impression left on him by a Russian soldier back in 1945 who knocked at the door of the Cracow Seminary where John Paul was serving. The war was just over and this was long before his election to the Papacy. When asked, "What is it you want?" this soldier replied that he wished to enter seminary. The conversation between the Russian soldier and the young Polish priest went on for a while. Even though the soldier never in fact entered and was far from clear in his own mind what a seminary really is, the meeting taught the young priest one great truth which he summarized as:

"How wonderfully God succeeds in penetrating the human mind even in the extremely unfavorable conditions of systematic denial of Him".

In the years of his adult life that soldier had scarcely ever gone inside of a church. At school and then later at work, he had continually heard people say, "There is no God!". And in spite of all that he said more than once,

"But I always knew that God exists...and now I would like to learn something about him...."

That soldier believed the evidence in his own mind and heart. Living in the kind of magnificent world in which we find ourselves, it is easy to agree with the Psalmist, "The fool says in his heart there is no God" (Psalm 14: 1)

The words of George Santayana in his poem, "O World" come to mind,

"O world, thou chooseth not the better part!  
It is not wisdom to be only wise,  
And on the inward vision close the eyes;  
But it is wisdom to believe the heart...

Bid then the tender light of faith to shine  
By which alone the mortal heart is led  
Unto the thinking of the thought divine"

YES, CERTAINTY AND BLESSED ARE...

A British biologist by the name of George Romanes, wrote a book that was designed to advance the cause of atheism. He said, "I took it for granted that the Christian faith was played out". But when, however, he saw that Christianity "worked" and that many eminent persons, some of the most illustrious in the fields of science, had ranged themselves on the side of the Gospel, he resolved to let the Bible speak for itself. And as a result he wrote a book called, Thoughts on Religion, showing why - from a merely human point of view - everyone would be a Christian. He came to this conclusion that,

"Unbelief is usually due to indolence, often to prejudice, and never a thing to be proud of"

For most of the world's people, there is certainty enough!

This is not to say that faith is to be accepted without careful thought. God gave us minds to protect us from gullibility to every silly idea that comes down the pike. We need to closely examine every new idea to which we are exposed, whether it comes from the preacher, the politician, the professor, the pundit, the publication. God does not honor gullibility. Nevertheless, we will never make much progress in life until that moment when we take our stand, until we resolve in our own mind what we do believe and to whom we are committed. Blessed are the believers. This is the first thing we need to see. And the second is like unto it.

THE BELIEVERS ARE A BLESSING

In turn, the believers are a blessing!  
Where has there ever been a monument erected to the non-believer, the cynic, the doubter, the critic. As someone has said in recent weeks (Dallas Green...the opening day of Spring training in Florida), "He who pulls on the oars has no time to rock the boat". Believers are those who know that the world can yet be a better place. Consider our own society. Who have been the builders? Who have constructed the hospitals, the great universities, the social service agencies. Not the cynic, the doubter. Behind every one you will find persons who hold in their hearts not cynicism, but hope. Not doubt, but faith. Not hostility, but love.

I hope I don't offend any of you when I dare to suggest that most cynics are idiots. I say this in the "original" sense of the word for the Greek word IDIOS meant "one's own private affairs". The Greeks considered anyone who turned his back on the public good - who ignored the health and the security of

the whole society in order to look after his own affairs - an idiot. So, now you know the rest of the story. You know where the word originated. It leads me to say this.

Believers are not idiots. They are people who know that if they make this a better place for their neighbors, they will also make it a better place for themselves. They have learned that the path to greatness is the road of service. In those soaring words of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"Everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your noun and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love..."

"When evil men plot, good men plan. When evil men bomb and burn, good men must build and bind. When evil men shout words of hatred, good men must commit themselves to the glory of love".

Newscaster David Brinkly once put it like this:

"A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him".

WHERE ARE YOU?

Where are you this morning? On the side of the doubters or on the side of the believers? Anybody can be a doubting Thomas. It really takes no particular strength of character to say, "Unless I put my fingers in the marks of the nails and place my hand in His side, I will not believe". That doesn't take much courage.

But it does take strength of character to go through life saying,

"Look, friend... I don't have all the answers, but I know who is making this world a better place in which to live. It's those who are followers of the Man from Nazareth. And I want to make my stand with them. I don't have all the answers, but unless someone proves otherwise, I will take my stand with those who believe this beautiful world was the creation of a good and a loving God.

I don't have all the answers, but I believe that the death of Christ upon the Cross of Calvary has somehow changed this old world of ours forever. I don't have all the answers...but put me down as a believer!"

Listen again to the word of our Lord to Thomas,

"Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed, Thomas, are those who have not seen and yet believe". Amen

PRAYER

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- |                              |                          |          |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------|
| 1. <u>Charles, father of</u> | 2. <u>Toily, wife of</u> | 3. _____ |
| <u>Karen Oldham</u>          | <u>Eric de Freitas</u>   |          |
| 4. _____                     | 5. _____                 | 6. _____ |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to Kilbrides who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, April 9, 1989

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors...delighted...make yourself known to us....be free in the sharing of your name.. Visitor card.. Guest Book in narthex.
- B. Join us downstairs for coffee. Worship with us on other Sundays. Work with us in our programs of service in which we are involved.
- C. You worship in a Church whose roots are deep....recently celebrated our 152nd birthday....doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner of His Kingdom since 1837. We minister in the name of Christ, and it is in His loving spirit.

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns...listed in bulletin...review them on your own before departing. Quite a bit going on...today and in the next week or so.
- B. Remember to support the Bake Sale...today as a part of the coffee hour, for the benefit of the June 24th Church Picnic. Doreen Morales does such a good job...deserves our support!
- C. Today, around 12:40, representatives of Fine Art Decorating will be our guests here in the sanctuary to share plans for the sanctuary restoration and redecoration. As it says in your bulletin, "after you've had your coffee, made a couple of new friends, as well as a purchase at the Bake Sale"....come on back up here for the sharing of plans for the sanctuary.
- D. And tonight. Remember this is our big April Fellowship Supper sponsored by the Outreach Committee. Be sure to support the committee that helps to sensitize our consciences on outreach concerns...plan to come and hear about the "soon to open" Service Center for the Homeless. See Jane Chaney regarding your contribution for the food table.

III. NEXT SUNDAY

- A. Another busy Sunday. Coffee hour "in honor" of our 25 new friends who have been worshipping here since the first of the year. Also, it's the date of the Annual Meeting of the UMW...and the Adult Fellowship has a spaghetti dinner on

Saturday evening.

- B. A lot going on right now...so stay "on board" and share in these good things that are happening.

IV. LIFT UP IN YOUR PRAYERS

- A. Continue to "hold" Toily de Freitas and her husband, Eric, in your prayers.
- B. Also, the father of Karen Oldham. And remember David and Rick Kilbride in your prayers, also....their father, Jack, passed away on Tuesday evening of this week.

V. OTHER CONCERNS

- A. 9th graders from Regis High School with us....welcome. Peter Scully.
- B. Rose on Altar

VI. OFFERING: "More blessed to give than to receive"