

## COMING TO BELIEVE

You may not feel special today, but take it from me, you are. You may not think of yourself as part of an elite group, but you are. You're part of a little remnant of people who attend church on the Sunday after Easter. And praise God for that, and for all of you!

The truth is, for many Christians, going to church on Easter isn't so much an act that comes from the heart as it is something that's done out of habit, fueled not by joy but by a stoic sense of obligation, and maybe a pinch of guilt. "Okay, kids. I hate to ruin your fun but it's time to put down your Easter baskets and get dressed. We're going to church."

Can't you just hear the squeals of delight? Not!

Church attendance on the Sunday after Easter is an act of desire. We came here today because, for whatever reason, we wanted to attend. We wanted to be here.

There were 140 people in church last Sunday. Today, if history is any indication, our attendance is roughly half that. And it will be that way in most churches. People turn out in droves on Easter Sunday, and it's glorious! But then, like a chocolate bunny in the hands of a five-year-old on a warm spring day, the excitement melts.

A lot of pastors take the day off on the Sunday after Easter. I read about one veteran minister who boasted that in his entire forty-year career he never preached on the Sunday after Easter. And furthermore, he said nobody in his congregation ever noticed because they weren't in church either!

In our church, the choir doesn't sing on the Sunday after Easter. We give them the day off. That's not a criticism, by the way. In fact, I think the decrease in attendance on the Sunday after Easter is understandable. Not excusable, but understandable. It's hard to sustain our enthusiasm once Easter is over. The Easter season lasts for fifty days, but for most people, Easter—at least the cute, fluffy bunnies and Easter baskets Easter, the Easter bonnets Easter, the little girls in patent leather shoes and little boys in bow ties Easter—that was over last Sunday.

Let's be honest. I don't think many people woke up this morning and said to the family, "Hey, it's the Sunday after Easter! Exciting things are happening in

church today. Let's go!" For the vast majority of people, that just doesn't happen. The crowds drift away after Easter Sunday because, as I said, it's hard to keep the passion going once Easter is over.

The author of the Gospel of John knew that very well. Bible scholars tell us that John wrote his gospel about sixty years after Jesus lived; so most of the people who first read it hadn't even been born when Jesus walked the earth. They never saw him, never heard him speak, never shook his hand or felt his arm around their shoulder. All they had were the stories people told about him. Word of mouth was all they had to go on.

John's challenge—which is the church's continuing challenge—was how to help people believe now that Jesus was no longer around to be seen and heard or touched. John surely knew that it was difficult to believe in something when you've never seen it, heard it or touched it for yourself. But he remembered a story about one of Jesus' disciples, Thomas, that he thought would be helpful.

The story of "Doubting Thomas" gave John a way of talking about how people who never saw Jesus come to believe he was resurrected from the dead. And that's why the church tells this story every year on the Sunday after Easter. Because it gives Christians, it gives you and me, the opportunity to think about how we have come to believe in Jesus resurrection.

The story is one of the most familiar in all the Bible. Thomas wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples after being raised from the dead. When Thomas returned they told him, "Jesus is risen. We saw him." But he wasn't buying it. "Unless I see for myself, I won't believe it." And with that, Thomas became the patron saint of all of us who insist on seeing for ourselves before we decide whether something is true or not. It seems that Jesus was sympathetic to Thomas and his unwillingness to believe, because our Lord went to the trouble of returning the following week and going through the whole thing again to make sure Thomas had his chance to believe.

But story ends on an interesting note. As if knowing that, in a way, we're in that room with Thomas and the other disciples, and we're overhearing what's going on, Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me, Thomas? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's you and me Jesus is blessing. The blessed individuals our Lord is talking about are those like us who have never seen the risen Jesus in the flesh—who only know the story of his resurrection by word of mouth, told by those who did see him and who then passed it on to somebody, who then passed it on to somebody else, who then passed it on to us.

How do we become believers in the risen Christ when we haven't seen? When somebody tells us the story. But not just anybody. If you're like me, you

don't believe "just anybody." They have to be credible witnesses, people whose lives demonstrate that the risen Jesus lives in them.

David H.C. Read, a great Presbyterian preacher, told his congregation one Sunday, "One of the reasons I believe in the Resurrection of Christ is that my mother told me she believed it. And to this day," he said, "a strong element in my belief is the number and the quality of the people who have told me."

That's my experience, too. And I'll bet it's yours, as well. I've come to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead in large measure because I have great respect for and trust the people who, down through the years, have told me that they believe it. My parents, the priests and ministers I've heard preach in church, my Catechism and Confirmation teachers, other members of the churches I've belonged to in my lifetime, and my wife, all of those whose faith has allowed them to trust God in the face of trouble and pain, and inspired them to serve God with gratitude because Christ is risen. And their faith inspires me to do the same. I've heard them say they believe, and their witness was credible to me because I saw them live in such a way—with love and courage and grace under fire—that I can't explain their behavior in any other way than that Jesus is risen and lives in them.

In the library of Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the librarians can show you bloodstains in some of their books. The stains run deep through the pages, because in the battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863, there were so many wounded soldiers that the nurses ran out of pillows. So they took books from the shelves in the library and laid the heads of the wounded and dying on them.

Since those awful days in July of 1863, generations of students have read from those same books. And I suspect the words they read in those blood-stained books have sunk a lot deeper and stayed in their minds a lot longer than the words from other books in that library. Because those blood-stained books have been places and done things the other books in that library haven't.

How do we come to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead?

We're talked into it, that's how. By people whose lives bear the stains of Christian generosity, sacrifice, mercy, kindness, goodness, and love. So, if you have faith, if you believe the Easter proclamation that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, give thanks to God for the people who have told you the story and whose lives backed it up so that you couldn't help but believe what they said.

And let us all pray that when we tell others, "Jesus lives!" they will hear us and say, "Yes, I believe it, because I can see that he lives in you." Amen.