

Probably easy to overlook in our reading of the Gospel with which we opened service on this day of resurrection were these words:

. . . but this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them.

In other words, they *doubted*.

Some things are apparently more easily believed than others. I was entering Fellowship Hour following worship a few weeks back, and I was quite surprised at the conversation between two members of the congregation. It went something like this:

P1: Well did you notice the news the other day?

P2: No, what was it?

P1: They have finally been able to make measurements that confirm the existence of gravitational waves!

P2: Well, I had always believed in them anyway; I had tremendous faith in Einstein and was in complete agreement with the General Theory.

P1: Well, I must admit, I had my *doubts*.

“Well, I must admit, I had my doubts.”

One might have doubts about such concepts as gravitational waves, which would be produced by, as example, the collision — my star-tling event — of two invisible black holes, themselves the theorized survivors of the implosion of stars. And since such waves are a ripple, a traveling *warp* in the four-dimensional concept of space-time, something which itself cannot be observed, anyone without some *doubts* about the existence of such waves either had not been paying attention, or is quite a student of astrophysics and believer in Einstein.

I am sure that when Einstein originally proposed his “Theory of [General] Relativity,” there were more than abundant *doubts* among physicists; Einstein himself, after all, expressed doubt about Quantum Theory. *Doubts*. The only parishioner of whom I am aware that I ever drove away with a sermon was a man — a good man, I have visited him since though he never revealed his issue to me — a man who was upset at what I said one Easter, “If you do not have doubts, you are not paying attention. If at some stage of our faith journey we have not asked, ‘Rose from the dead, really?’ We probably have not grasped the magnitude of the Easter event.”

I’ll be blunt: while I hope that you will all ponder my words today, on Easter, I usually try to focus my words on those who perhaps do not have belief: belief in Easter, belief in Jesus as the Son of God, belief in God. I am fully aware that some come to church on Easter because a family member expects them to do so, and rather than being critical of their reluctance, I like to take advantage of the three or four hours of sermon time allotted me to confirm the legitimacy of doubting, but to try to offer a way to resolve those

doubts in favor of belief, and also to seek to persuade that there is no conflict between religious faith and reason; that the latter can in fact help the former to grow.

Which is a way of saying to the faithful that rather than to *shake* faith as those colliding dead stars shake space-time, I believe the kind of Bible study that I lead and the comments I offer on Scripture help to *shape* faith. Let me give an example. The celebrated story of Noah and the Ark, the story of the Great Flood, appears in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and it is a somewhat confusing read, because it is the result of an editor's work more than 2500 years ago to try to combine as one two *differing* stories. But did that editor believe the Noah aspects of the story to be *factually* true? As set in the chronology of the Old Testament, the Great Flood would have occurred more than a thousand years before there was a written Hebrew language; it would have been passed down orally for at least that long. And more than one thousand years before it was written in the Hebrew language, in Sumeria — in modern Iraq — there arose a mythological story of a great flood caused by the gods of that people as told in their *Gilgamesh Epic*.

To this day, there are those who set about trying to find remnants of Noah's Ark, but I suggest that the purpose of the story as given us by that 2500-years-ago editor was to say, "Yes, there was a great flood, but it was caused not by the Sumerian gods, but by the God of Israel, the god who created all that is and is more powerful and merciful than any of the gods in whom you others might believe."

Am I being a heretic? Stop and think: a local flood may well have been understood by people 3000 years ago as having covered the whole world — which to them was flat and limited to how far they could travel, not round with a diameter of 8000 miles, for which its flooding during the history of humankind did not — I'll state that as a fact — did not happen. But there may have been an actual major local flood.

But does that make the *message* or *messages* of the Bible story *not true*? Does *doubting* the facts mean the story does not contain *truth*? No, it makes it *not factual*; the truth of the God of Israel's being the most powerful and merciful of gods simply does not turn on the facts' of the Noah story being true.

Noah himself apparently had his doubts, as this dialogue provided by the now properly-disgraced but once brilliant comic, Bill Cosby, showed:

Noah!
Somebody call?
Whoompa, whoompa, whoompa
Noah!
Who is that?
It's the Lord, Noah
Right!

Where are ja?

What you want? I've been good.
I want you to build an Ark
Right!
Whats an Ark?
Get some wood build it
300 cubits by 80 cubits by 40 cubits
Right!
Whats a cubit?
Lets see a cubit...I used to know what a cubit was
Well don't worry about that Noah
When you get that done
Go out into the world and
Collect all of the animals in the world by twos
Male and female, and put them into the ark
Right!
Who is this really?

What's going on?
How come you want me to do all these weird things?
I'm going to destroy the world
Right!
Am I on Candid Camera?

Wait, Johnson, you have gone from Einstein to Noah to Bill Cosby and Noah; how does this have anything to do with the Easter event? With faith and reason, with resolving doubt?

I think one thing that we can learn from Luke's telling of the Easter story is that the skepticism of Cosby's Noah had to have been present in most who first saw that empty tomb or first heard — or hear today — reports of that empty tomb.

But just as I do not believe we would have had the Noah story if there had not been some cultural memory of an actual great flood, though not so great as in the story, I do not believe we would have the Gospel story of the empty tomb, if there were no basis for those reports. If there were no basis for those first reports, I do not believe we would be here today.

Let me give two parallels to what I am saying about belief and the Easter story: Even in the probably apocryphal story of Noah, even in Cosby's humorous telling, despite doubts, Noah must have believed because he had faith to *act*. Consider also that though Einstein *hypothesized* gravitational waves, some physicists had faith in Einstein and thus *believed* his theory, but wished to prove it *to remove doubt*. Government and institutional people with the dollars to spend, yet who I am sure had their own doubts,

put *their faith* in those physicists' evaluation *and put up the money* (of course, not their own money) *put up the money* for the experimental apparatus that, in specific satellite tests some years back, seemed to confirm some of the propositions of Einstein's theory. More recent experiments with different apparatus appear to have confirmed the existence of those gravitational waves. I *believe* the reporters who themselves *believed* the physicists who announced those findings, even though neither I nor the reporters could evaluate their experiments.

And it is at least arguably *rational* for us to believe in gravitational waves because we believe in some other things physicists have told us that we know to be true: the apple does fall to earth when it leaves the tree..

Now put this in a different context: some people had *knowledge* of an empty tomb — even skeptics of the Easter story, such as John Dominic Crossan, usually accept this. Those first hand witnesses told others who, because of those others' *faith* in the witnesses — as with the physicist's faith in Einstein — told still others, and those still others had *faith* and *believed* them . . . and thus, here we are.

We can choose to *believe*, or we can choose not to *believe*, but we need to understand why we choose as we do: whether there is *reason* to *believe* in those words handed down to us. *And I believe that just as there is a rational basis for our believing in gravitational waves, there is a rational basis for our believing in the story of the empty tomb, a rational basis for that faith* — and I want to emphasize this — *that rational basis for our faith* is that those to whom *this story . . . seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them* are those from whom we have been handed this story. Their doubts were resolved; they *believed*, and *they acted on* that belief, they *trusted*; they risked — and, not always successfully — their lives.

It is not proof, but it is a rational basis for faith.

And *acting upon* our faith determines both how you and I deal with the rest of the people in the world, whether we do regard them as God's children and so of intrinsic value and whose well being is our concern as people of faith.

That faith also directs our lives. *Faith* does have its "costs," though that is a misleading term, for if we are people of faith, we give, we do not keep everything for ourselves; we work for Christ's Church and its followers; we do not just do whatever seems easiest and most pleasant . . . And . . . And if we are people of faith, our whole life takes on a new meaning, for we know that, as Paul wrote, "If we have been baptized into his death, so certainly are we baptized into his resurrection."

In other words, for the person of faith, including the person whose faith *has been tested by doubt*, that their doubt preceded the testimony handed down by those earliest reporters of the Easter event can help ease our doubts, and with the faith we then hold, we can believe that just as Jesus' death on the cross was not his end, neither shall our deaths be our ends.

I believe that in ways more mysterious and elusive than the generation of gravitational waves, Christ has risen, and I believe that means we shall have life eternal. Not only do I believe it, despite the inevitability of doubt, I have faith in it.

I hope -- I pray -- that faith shapes my life, overcoming any warps in my space-time.

In the name of our Risen Lord, Amen