**Let’s Talk About Doubt**

August 1, 2007 started like any normal day in Minnesota. Thousands of commuters filled the highways and streets on their way to work and school. After a full day they headed home along the same routes, including Interstate 35. Every driver and passenger had faith that the bridge would get them safely across the “Mighty Mississip”.

At 6:05 PM everything changed when 456 feet of the bridge collapsed and dropped 108 feet into the river.

         111 vehicles fell with it. Only 17 were recovered.

         145 people were injured and 13 were killed.

They had no way of knowing that the bridge would fail. I imagine the survivors of that terrible event now think about it every time they drive over that, or probably any bridge. Their faith in the bridge was genuine but the bridge lacked structural integrity.

Here’s a lesson we can draw from this: It’s not good enough to have faith. Our faith must be in what is true. This morning we’re going to apply that lesson to faith in Christ. Faith in Christ only matters if Jesus is the Son of God.

The thing that makes us Christians is that we believe the story is true, that Jesus is the Son of God, born of a virgin, that He lived and taught and did miracles, was crucified, and He rose from the grave.

Probably just about everyone here today believes the narrative, but do you sometimes have doubts? Perhaps when a prayer doesn’t seem to be answered? I’m confident that we could divide this room into three categories of people: those who have had doubts; those who will have doubts; and those who are brain dead.

When it comes to faith in Christ, doubt can be unsettling. We don’t like to doubt. We want to be certain of our faith, after all, *faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*(Hebrews 11:1) Admitting doubt might be a sign of spiritual weakness, or a lack of spiritual intelligence.

         Some people will deny their doubt: *If I doubt I must not be truly a Christian*.

         Some will surrender to doubt: *If there is doubt it must not be true*.

Set your minds at ease. Doubt has always been and always will be an issue for followers of Jesus. Understand, doubt is not necessarily fatal, however, like a flu virus, left untreated it can become a serious problem. If you doubt, investigate. If what you believe is true it can withstand any examination. If it can’t, well you ought not to believe it.

In 2018 our church is going to focus on being “externally focused”, but we’re not going to simply do nice things. To the best of our ability we’re going to model ourselves after the church of the New Testament. To that end Ben and I will be preaching from the Book of Acts to see how the first Christians went about being “externally focused”.

As we work our way through Acts we’ll see that the “external focus” of the church was a consequence of being convinced that Jesus is the Son of God and thus Lord of Life. The early Christian Church was about truth. They believed and proclaimed truth; facts about what God did through the man Jesus. They lived and died for this truth.

Modern critics of the Christian Church suggest that the stories of the New Testament were created by the church to support the narrative they wanted to propagate. They say the books that were selected to be included in the Bible were carefully chosen because they supported the agenda.

Have you ever read or been told of the vicious and brutal persecution Christians faced in the first century of the church? It would make ISIS look soft. I ask you, would anyone, in the face of brutal pitiless and excruciatingly torturous death hold to a myth? Would anyone accept such treatment if they weren’t convinced that the story was true?

By the thousands people suffered that evil, not for a myth, but for truth.

The Apostle Paul stated clearly concerning what Christianity was about,

*When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except****Jesus Christ and him crucified****.*1 Corinthians 2:1f

It wasn’t Paul’s well-crafted entertaining sermons that moved people to faith in Jesus. It was testimony of the truth.

Christian faith is about truth, facts of history, real people, real events. Peter also emphasized this: *We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.*2 Peter 1:16

Paraphrase: *We weren’t regurgitating a company line with a well-planned narrative. We told the truth of what we witnessed with our eyes and ears*.

We’ll see, as we go through the Book of Acts that the church was consistently about truth; facts of history; real people; real events. Far from simply doing church stuff, the earliest Christians we about witnessing to this truth.

This morning we’ll read Acts 1:1-11. The Book of Acts is actually Volume Two of the history of the church. Volume One was the Gospel of Luke which the author introduced like this:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.*

*Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.* Luke 1:1-4

No one can say who Theophilus was. He must have been an official of some sort for Luke called him “*most excellent*”, a common courtesy title. What is clear is that Luke was concerned that Theophilus knew the true story; facts of history; real people; real events.

Luke began Volume 2, The Acts of The Apostles like this, *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.* Acts 1:1f From here he picked up where he left off in the Gospel.

As we read verses 3-6 I want you to see something. Although they were concerned with true facts of history, including Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, they weren’t without doubt. In fact it was the presence of doubt that gave rise to Luke’s careful investigation and writing. He understood that the story needed to be true.

*After His suffering, He showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while He was eating with them, He gave them this command:*

*“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* Acts 1:3-6

It’s rather subtle but did you catch it? They didn’t come right out and say, *We don’t believe you*, but their question betrayed doubt. If they were going to carry His message, they wanted assurance. They wanted their doubts satisfied.

I think most Christians today want the same thing. We want to know that what we believe is true. We want our doubts satisfied. So let’s talk about doubt.

Don’t confuse doubt with skepticism. Skepticism is a choice, a decision to doubt. Don’t confuse doubt with unbelief. Unbelief is also a choice, a decision to not have faith. Doubt is merely to wonder, to have questions.

Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive. Faith and skepticism are. Faith and unbelief are. Doubt is part of the process of coming to Hebrews 11:1 type faith in which we are *sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*.

Seldom will you meet someone who does not believe in God after having carefully and thoroughly studied the issue. Some will say, *God cannot be proved, therefore He doesn’t exist*. That’s foolishness. They didn’t carefully and honestly study the issue. If they had they would know that the entire history of arguments for or against God are at best suggestive, never conclusive. Rational argument cannot settle this question.

Kai Nielsen is Professor Emeritus at the University of Calgary and an advocate for atheism. (Although his name is spelled like mine we’re not related.) He wrote this, *To show that an argument is invalid or unsound is not to show that the conclusion of the argument is false. All proofs of God’s existence may fail, but it still may be the case that God exists*.

Albert Einstein wrote the same thing in a letter to Queen Elizabeth of Belgium in 1932, *As a human being one has been endowed with intelligence to be able to see clearly how utterly inadequate that intelligence is when confronted with what exists*. We seldom can know things with the kind of certainty that eliminates all doubt.

There are absolutes.

         *2+2=4* is absolute. In any language and in any time in history we can know that 2+2=4.

         *The whole is greater than the part* is another absolute.

We can know both of those propositions with certainty that removes all doubt. But what are those to life? Neither will help us discover the meaning of life. The things that bring meaning and purpose to our lives are seldom doubtless.

What brings meaning and purpose? I would suggest: ethical values, social attitudes, and religious beliefs. These are the things that define why we’re here and what we’re here for, but they will never be absolute. There will always be someone with different ethical values, someone who doesn’t agree with our social attitudes, someone who rejects our religious beliefs.

At some point we have to choose which ethical values, which certain social attitudes, and which religious beliefs we will hold. And because these aren’t absolutes, we will have doubt.

British poet Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote,

*Nothing worth proving can be proven, nor yet disproven.*

*Wherefore thou be wise.*

*Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt*.

He was saying, whatever you choose to believe, you will have doubt. Choose that which enhances your life; that which makes your life better.

17th century mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal pointed out that, *In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe, and enough shadows to blind those who do not*. If you want to believe something you’ll find plenty of support for what you believe. If you don’t want to believe, you’ll find plenty to turn you away.

That’s true of all matters of belief.

         It’s true of inane subjects: People who want to believe in Sasquatch will find plenty of supporting evidence, videos and footprints. Those of us who don’t want to believe will laugh at the videos and footprints.

         It’s true of mildly important subjects: People who don’t want to believe in catastrophic man-made global warming look outside and say, *Really*? People who want to believe in global warming say, *This cold and snow is the result of melting ice that puts moisture in the air and clouds the Sun’s energy*.

         People who want to believe democrats or republicans are right and the other party is evil will find all the evidence they need to support their views.

         People who want to believe that Jesus is the Son of God are convinced by the evidence. People who don’t want to believe in Him are also convinced.

Does God exist? What is the purpose and meaning of life? What is the point of history? Who can answer these questions in such a way as to satisfy everyone? At best we can demonstrate that something is probably true, but there will always be an element of doubt.

To believe in God or to not believe in God both require faith.

Alister McGrath, a former atheist himself wrote, *To accept Christianity demands faith, and so does the decision to reject it. Both rest on faith, in that nobody can prove with absolute certainty that Jesus is the Son of God, the risen Savior of humanity, just as nobody can prove with absolute certainty that He is not*.

Christian faith is not belief without doubt. It is trust without reservation.

Stephen Jay Gould, an evolutionary biologist, to the dismay of those who think science has disproved God wrote...*science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it. We simply can’t comment on it as scientists*.

There will always be doubt. Very few if any people come to faith by removing doubt. Perhaps C.S. Lewis or Josh Mc Dowell could make such a claim. Mortimer Adler seems to have argued himself to faith in Christ, but in reality most people come to faith by the attractiveness of the Gospel. We see what Christ has done in the life of a friend and how He can lift us out of the morass of meaningless life. And we trust that any doubt will be satisfied over time as we grow in faith.

In my experience Christians don’t doubt because the evidence is faulty but because we can’t understand what God is doing right now. Sometimes we misinterpret our inability to understand as a sign that something is not true.

Try something after church. Go out and look up at the sky and count how many stars you can see. Only one, and if it’s cloudy not even the one. Later, after dark go out and look up again. Now how many stars do you see? (I counted once. There are 753.)

All of those stars were present in the afternoon. You just couldn’t see them. Stars don’t need darkness to exist. They need darkness for us to see them.

Doubt generally comes because we have unrealistic expectations about certainty. We think we should be able to prove everything the American way, “*beyond a shadow of a doubt*”. We can’t! Because I can’t see stars in the daylight doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Because I can’t fully understand God doesn’t mean He doesn’t exist or that Jesus isn’t His Son.

We can live with the tension between faith and doubt, after all, His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). As we walk with Christ, we experience His reality in ever more convincing and life-changing ways. Our doubts dissipate as we grow in our relationship with the Savior.

Now let’s get back to Acts. Jesus’ followers wanted to know with confidence that Jesus not only was who He said He was but also that He would do what He said He would do. “*At this time are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*” they asked.

Jesus’ answer didn’t satisfy their doubts. *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*Acts 1:7f

Jesus had told them that they would suffer persecution because of Him. They wanted to know it’s true before they put their lives on the line. They were to be His witnesses to truth. The Greek word for “witness” μαρτυς refers to someone who offers testimony about someone or something.

We now use that word to describe people who are persecuted and killed for a cause. We call them martyrs. Perhaps Jesus was being prophetic when He said, *You will be my martyrs*.

Do you think they would have willingly suffered for this narrative about Jesus being the Son of God who died as a sacrifice for the sins of men if they didn’t know it was true? Of course not. Nobody would.

They were eyewitnesses. They saw what happened to Jesus, and they saw Him alive again after His brutally execution. They knew the history, they knew the real people, they knew the real events.

They knew that “*faith comes from hearing the message*” (Romans 10:17) and they would be the ones giving testimony. Their doubt wasn’t about the message. Their doubt was whether or not it was worth the trouble.

*After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.”*Acts 1:9-11

Not only is the story true, the people and events real, the message as it pertains to the future is also true. Jesus will return one day. That’s all His followers needed to become “externally focused”.

They knew story of Christ is not myth or fake news. It’s real history that can be verified - or proven false which - it never was. And they were willing to go into all the world and testify of it.

As we go through the Book of Acts we’ll see several speeches by the Apostles. Each of those speeches emphasizes that the people and events are true. Jesus really did the things they tell of Him. These things, especially His resurrection, prove that He is the Son of God.

Let me share some things we can take away from this discussion:

**First**, we need not be dismayed by occasional doubt. Doubt is not skepticism nor is it unbelief. It’s simply questioning. If it’s true it can withstand any honest examination. If it can’t then it’s probably not true.

If the story is not true it has no authority over us. If it’s just a myth or a fable with a good moral to share, it might be wise but it cannot make any demands on us. We’re free to disregard it with no eternal consequences.

However, and this is the **second** take-away from this truth, being true, it verifies Jesus’ claim to be Lord of our lives. He’s not just Savior, He’s Lord. If we’re not convinced enough by this truth to be committed to Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, can we expect anyone to be drawn to the Gospel we testify of?

**Third**, and probably most important in our context, we should be captured by this truth. We should be excited about what Jesus did and what He continues to do through His church. If we’re not excited about it can we expect people with whom we share the Gospel to be interested?

Luke had done extensive research to provide Theophilus with truth. The people with whom we share, our Theophiluses, have a right to expect us to be changed by the message. If we don’t live like people certain of Jesus, who will care what we preach?

David Brooks, author of the excellent book, The Road to Character, wrote elsewhere (this is not a quote), *You do not contribute to value until you are seized by something within you that must be shared*.

Allow me to apply that to what we’re talking about: *You do not contribute anything of value to your Theophilus until you are so seized by truth that it must be shared*.

My final thought, when doubt comes, trust what you know.

         You know God loves you.

         You know that He gave His Son for you.

         And you know that in all things He’s working for your best.

Live with that knowledge and your doubts will be satisfied.