

Easter 5, Year A

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The Messiah is One of Us

I am going to be honest with you. Belief in God and belief in Jesus can be a tough sell.

It's been this way for a long time. We measure it in the decline in church attendance over time – ask Jean Robson or Rick Pearce about how many people filled these pews, and how many kids ran through these halls back in the 50s when they attended here as children.

We can measure it in our adult children's reluctance to join a faith community or profess a faith tradition – my own kids included. We can measure it in the lack of language that people have for spiritual things or scriptural stories or faith practices. Or in the fact that schools and organizations schedule their events right during worship times.

And if we want to go back to the time when we believe the church was thriving -- to make Christendom great again – we may just be kidding ourselves. Because at those times when the Christian churches were at their largest, they were also sowing the seeds of their decline – in their exclusivity, their rejection of non-dominant groups, their racism and chauvinism and abuse of political power, their abuse of children, their fear of sexuality, and their suppression of the gifts of women and queer people.

So when Jesus says “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe in me”... I have to say: Jesus, getting people to believe in you is the very thing that troubles my heart.

And yet here we are, gathering around that very belief in these stories, this table, this community, We give it our best shot.

It reminds me of this story by the hermit and writer Francis Dorff , who wrote it in 1979.<sup>1</sup>

*There was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.*

*In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. “The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again,” they would whisper to each other.*

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<sup>1</sup> (The Spiritual Journey of a Misfit: a Personal Pilgrimage. Sunstone Press, 2015).

*As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."*

*So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."*

*When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving— it was something cryptic— was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."*

*In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one?*

*Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?*

*As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.*

*Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this*

*special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger people who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if they could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality.*

What was the Rabbi's gift exactly? Was it some miraculous insight, or some trick? I think actually the Rabbie was simply giving back to the abbot something that was at the very core of his belief – the Messiah is one of you. That is indeed at the very core of our Christian faith – the Messiah is one of us, Christ dwells among us, God makes a home in us.

And a belief like that is not is not something we keep up in our heads -- it is a lived commitment to something we cannot fully know, but that we embrace anyway. In the same way, Jesus is not an idea to believe in. Jesus is a way. Jesus is a truth. Jesus is a life. Or as Jesus would say: The Way, The Truth, The Life.

How do we engage with a way and a truth and a life? We travel a way. We allow a truth to shape us. We live a life. That is what belief looks like when we let it out of our heads and invite it to play.

I like to describe belief as walking toward something as though it's there.

In this passage from John, Jesus was describing the life that his followers were to have with him after his death and resurrection and ascension. That is the time that John's audience was in, and it's the time we are in.

One thing that I believe in my bones is that I'm not alone in my need for the Christ in my life. And I'm not alone in my need for a loving, forgiving, healing and accepting community that draws its identity from a loving, forgiving, healing and accepting God who dwells in it. Jesus came to bring those needs together. That is what salvation is. And the need for that connection doesn't just exist in here, in these walls - it exists outside those doors as well.

I also firmly believe that when Jesus was talking about his father's house and its many dwellings, he wasn't describing heaven, or some celestial retirement home. He was describing us –we are the many dwellings in the Father's house. Just ask the author of the first letter to Peter, who describes the followers of Jesus as living stones.

“Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house,” the author of the epistle says.

The Messiah is among you, Francis Dorff says.

Believe in God. Believe in Me, Jesus says.

And all we need to do is walk Jesus as though he's there.

That's what I say.

Amen.