

reSTART: 6. Faith
Matthew 17:14-21
October 15, 2017
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Everything has a starting point. You had a starting point, even if it was by accident, your life had a moment when it began. Even faith has a starting point. Most people who come to faith are first introduced to faith in childhood. When I was a child, I didn't ask many questions about faith. I just accepted what I was taught. Someone – a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, pastor or youth leader said, this is what we believe – and you didn't question it – it's what you believed, but then you got older and began to question or you had experiences that didn't match what you were taught – and you began to wonder, or you walked away entirely. So, what if we hit the restart button on faith – an adult kind of faith. That's what this series is about. Where and how would we begin? This morning, since this series is about faith, I want to talk about FAITH – what is it?

If you know the Bible, you might be thinking Hebrews 11:1. **Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.** But before we look at what to believe, I want to take a step back and look at faith itself. The word faith is not a uniquely Christian word or a religious word, even though we use it in a religious context. Faith is an ability, something only humans have the ability to do. We have a dog, but our dog doesn't believe anything. He doesn't have that ability. He doesn't have a dream or a vision for the future. All he wants is plenty food, an endless supply of chew toys, and someone to take him outside a dozen times a day – and that's enough. For us, life is much more than that because we can imagine and dream. God has given human the ability to believe.

And the ability to believe is the most powerful force at humanity's disposal. Everything that's ever been accomplished by humans began with an idea or a belief. [slide] Thomas Edison is credited with inventing the light bulb. What would motivate him to make 1000 attempts at creating something that had not been created? [camera] He believed it could be done. Someone gets an idea and believes it is possible and starts speaking or acting on that belief. Eventually other people get on board and the world begins to change. Jesus said, "Faith can move a mountain." I don't think he meant that literally, but throughout history we've seen all kinds of mountains moved by faith. Medical mountains have been moved with cures for diseases that don't even exist anymore – because someone believed it could be eradicated. And if the disease crops up as measles did a few months ago, we know what to do. We've seen educational mountains being moved, racial mountains, human rights mountains. Faith may not move the mountain but it can create the idea that can.

The power to believe and to bring together a movement around a belief: it is behind good and behind bad. Some have used belief as a weapon as Adolf Hitler did. He had ideas and put words to those ideas and others came alongside and horrendous things were done. Or in this country, we had the Civil War because some people said, "I believe this." And others said, "You're wrong. And I believe this." No, you're wrong. No, you're wrong. Words were exchanged and emotion and the next thing was a war that nearly split a nation and took 600,000 lives. Every time we watch the news, we hear people who believe differently and see the world differently and people come together around those beliefs and horrible things happen or wonderful things happen.

We can find example after example where someone believed and eventually it became possible. We've heard that seeing is believing. Did you know that believing is seeing? Believe something long enough and you see it. Some of you are really smart. You got into the best

colleges and got a good job. You have a roof over your head, a couple cars, you get a vacation a couple times a year. You're not just middle class but upper middle class. Life is good. And then you meet somebody who made tens of millions of dollars by starting their own company in their parent's garage. Never went to college or never finished college. And you get to know that person and think to yourself – he/she is not all that smart. They never could have gotten into the school I attended. And then you say, "If I had that idea, I'm so smart I would have talked myself out of it because it wouldn't work, and they were dumb enough to try it." Nobody told them it was impossible. They believed and look at them now. The ability to believe in something is a gift from God, and it is the most powerful thing at humanity's disposal.

Another thing about faith: **We constantly look for evidence to support what we already believe to be true.** Isn't this true of Republicans? And Democrats. And Libertarians, and independents. Everybody does this. We watch something on television or read something on the Internet and say, "Didn't I tell you that's true." And then we see something that's just the opposite and we say, "You can't trust them." We look for things to support what we already believe and filter out anything else. It's what makes belief powerful and dangerous. But I think God gave us the ability to believe. When it comes to religious belief, we see religious movements have emerged when someone had an idea or a whole bunch of ideas and others came alongside and when that leader died or was martyred, the followers continued those beliefs. We have the answers, the way to a better world. So, why are we here? Is there simply a smorgasbord of religious ideas, and we just pick the one that makes the most sense? Aren't they all mostly the same?

Here's where I want to turn to the scripture that you've heard this morning. There was a time when the disciples were with Jesus that he commissioned them and sent them out two by two to do what he had been doing. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons. And they did all that. When they returned to Jesus, they were ecstatic. It felt easy. It must have felt like nothing could stop them now. But now was another day – Matthew 17. Jesus had been away for a day or two. He'd gone up a mountain to be alone and to pray and while Jesus was gone, the disciples face a new challenge that was needing their attention. They thought they could do anything, but now suddenly nothing worked. They were powerless to help the father who brought his son for help. But then Jesus returned and he was angry. **You unbelieving and perverse generation** He's angry because they lack faith, but they thought they had faith or power or at least something. Jesus, remember what we did a few months ago and now it doesn't work! **how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.** And Jesus steps in and heals the child. And then he has a message for the rest of us. Do you know why you could not do what you thought you could do? **Because you have so little faith.** And then he says, If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could move a mountain – nothing will be impossible for you.

However, the secret is that the size of faith isn't important. What's important is who you believe in. It's like the wanting to see the moon as night. The size of the window doesn't matter, but if the window is on the wrong side of the house, it will be impossible. The smallest faith can produce great things, but what the disciples have not yet discovered is that it's not what you believe but in whom.

So, why am I a Christian? Why do I choose to follow Jesus?

When Jesus died, those closest to him (his disciples, his family, his followers) believed he was dead. After all the teaching – the Sermon on the Mountain and all those amazing parables; after all the miracles that he performed; after all the healings; after all the ways he got under the skin

of the religious authorities; after all that – when Jesus died, his closest followers believed he was dead. And everything he said and did died with him. Whatever faith they had that Jesus was the one and that he was starting a movement that would change the world. All that was over. Period. Amen. Done. End of story. Why? Because he's dead. We thought he was the Messiah. We thought he was the Son of God. But once again the stronger and more powerful people and ideas in this world prevailed. They won. Jesus lost. And the followers of Jesus ran. They feared for their lives. If they ever truly had faith, it disappeared the moment Jesus was arrested. For three years, they traveled with Jesus, but it all turned out to be a lie. Usually, when the leader of a movement dies, the followers step in immediately and pick up the cause. But not this time. Jesus had built this movement around himself, so when he died, he could not be who he claimed to be. It's over. The people who knew him best did not believe him. He's dead, and dead people stay dead. You know that.

Three days later, Jesus appears. Those who saw him are stunned by this but still not sure what to think, so they go back to fishing. Something they had left behind three years earlier. But a few weeks later – 50 days later – these same followers go into the streets of Jerusalem and begin to preach about Jesus. And what do they preach about? Not what Jesus did or what he taught. Jesus told some of the greatest stories. They could have told those stories, but they didn't. They went into the streets and their message was this: He died. God raised him. We saw him.

Twenty years later, the apostle Paul – a man who hated Christians and tried to squash the movement until he himself met the risen Jesus – was in Athens. We looked at this six weeks ago. Paul was taken to the Areopagus. The Athenians said, "Tell us about Jesus." And Paul said, "God has done something, and it is for all people. It's Jesus." He doesn't describe the miracles that Jesus did or the teaching that he gave. All Paul says is that God has done something. **He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.** (Acts 17:33) Do you know why we are here – why the church has survived 2000 years – why I believe and why I think you should be a Christian? When Jesus died nobody believed – zero. They all lost their faith. Then they saw something. They saw the risen Jesus – and that was the message. God has done something for the whole world. Jesus died and was raised from the dead. We don't believe this because the Bible says so. There was no Bible for 250 years. But there were eyewitnesses who saw the risen Jesus and they were willing to die – not for what they believed, but for what they saw. Matthew and Mark saw and wrote about it. John saw and wrote about it. Luke investigated the event and was convinced. James, the brother of Jesus – (what would it take for your brother to convince you he was the Messiah?) James did not believe until he saw his brother risen from the dead. Peter writes "I believe". Paul writes "I believe Jesus rose from the dead." All these people who after Jesus died believed none of this, saw something and that single event change how they lived. And they put their lives on the line – martyred because they saw something and would not stop talking about it, so that you and I might believe it too.

Question for each of us is this: "Who is Jesus?" Jesus said, "In this world, you will have trouble, but have no fear, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) I am not a Christian because the Bible says so, I am a Christian because something happened – and believing that has changed my life and until my dying day, I will not stop talking it. Faith – a gift from God – the most powerful force at our disposal. So the question is "Who is Jesus?" Are you ready to believe?

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of October 15, 2017

Weekly Prayer: God of love, grace and peace, as the anguished father in the Bible prayed, “I believe—help my unbelief.” Ground our lives ever more deeply in the reality of your existence as the ultimate source of life, love, peace and grace. Amen.

Monday, October 16

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 6

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith.

By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible.

It's impossible to please God without faith because the one who draws near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards people who try to find him.

Observation: Hebrews 11:1 said, “Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see.” This is challenging, especially if hard experiences have left us wary of trusting anyone or anything. Yet belief isn't limited to the realm of religion. Cosmologists and physicists wrestle with ideas like “dark energy” or “dark matter” —unseen, largely unexplained forces that even so leave clear signs of their existence. Religious belief, too, deals with unseen forces like divine love, grace and dependability, forces that also leave the marks of their existence in our lives.

Application: Oxford scholar Alister McGrath wrote, “Coming to faith doesn't mean merely having a new idea. It means recognizing in our minds who God is and what he is like, and responding to him in our hearts.” What experiences or people have helped your faith in God move beyond assent to trust, commitment and obedience?

Prayer: Lord God, you gave me a mind that questions and seeks answers. You gave me a heart that can marvel at things bigger than my analytical powers. Help me exercise both my intelligence and my capacity for marvel when I say, “I believe.” Amen.

Tuesday, October 17

Scripture: Acts 17:22-34

Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, “People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown God.’ What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’ Therefore, as God's offspring, we have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought. God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the

world justly by a man he has appointed. God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some began to ridicule Paul. However, others said, "We'll hear from you about this again." At that, Paul left the council. Some people joined him and came to believe, including Dionysius, a member of the council on Mars Hill, a woman named Damaris, and several others.

Observation: Christians don't just believe ideas—we believe in someone. To philosophers in Athens, the apostle Paul laid out the kind of God in which he (and Christians after him) believed. In verse 28, he even quoted a Cretan philosopher named Epimenides and the Stoic poet Aratus. The Apostles' Creed, like Paul, made it plain that Christians trust in a personal, life-giving, loving God made real in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, not just a vague, abstract force.

Application: Few in today's first-world cultures hold the specific idea Paul challenged in the Athenians: "We have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought." In what ways, however, can we idolize "human skill and thought" in place of God? Do you find inner resonance when Paul said, "God isn't far away from any of us," or do you struggle to believe that is true?

Prayer: Lord God, I believe in and trust you as a personal being who loves me and my world. Help me live and act in ways that show that your love has touched my life. Amen.

Wednesday, October 18

Scripture: Exodus 34:4-9; 2 Corinthians 3:1-3; 1 John 4:16-19

So Moses cut two stone tablets like the first ones. He got up early in the morning and climbed up Mount Sinai, just as the LORD had commanded him. He carried the two stone tablets in his hands. The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: "The LORD! The LORD! a God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness, showing great loyalty to a thousand generations, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion, yet by no means clearing the guilty, punishing for their parents' sins their children and their grandchildren, as well as the third and the fourth generation." At once Moses bowed to the ground and worshipped. He said, "If you approve of me, my Lord, please go along with us. Although these are stubborn people, forgive our guilt and our sin and take us as your own possession."

Are we starting to commend ourselves again? We don't need letters of introduction to you or from you like other people, do we? You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter, delivered by us. You weren't written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren't written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us.

Observation: All Christian faith is founded on trust in a real God who loves us. This was (and is) quite extraordinary. Egyptians, Canaanites, Greeks or Romans—none of them believed their

gods loved them. But Exodus said God showed Moses a divine character based on the profound realities of love and forgiveness. And that belief makes a real difference. Paul told the Corinthians that their changed lives were some of the best evidence that God is real.

Application: These Biblical ideas are so familiar, repeated so often, that it may be hard for us to catch their depth and power. Have you ever known (or been) a person who tends to see God as out to get you, an angry being to be placated by good behavior? How does that view affect our ability to love or trust God? What difference do you see between “God loves” and “God IS love” (which John said in 1 John 4:16)?

Prayer: God of love and grace, as the anguished father in the Bible prayed, “I believe—help my unbelief.” Ground my life ever more deeply in the reality of your existence as the ultimate source of life, love and grace. Amen.

Thursday, October 19

Scripture: John 21:1-7

Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter told them, "I'm going fishing." They said, "We'll go with you." They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." He said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water.

Observation: John 21 told about Peter and six other disciples back at the Sea of Galilee. (John did not explain why they chose to go fishing, but Bible students have ventured a variety of guesses.) Despite their past fishing experience, they were not successful on their own. (Perhaps they were rusty after following Jesus for three years.) Yet when Jesus guided them, they hauled in a huge catch.

Application: This story (like the one in Luke 5:1-10) told of Jesus showing experienced fishermen like Peter where to find a startlingly large catch. When have you found yourself ineffective (in your personal life or an area of ministry) because you weren't open to Jesus' wisdom? When has “practicing the presence of Jesus” made your efforts clearly more effective?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you promised to be with me “every day until the end of this present age” (Matthew 28:20). Help me keep my heart open, attuned to your comforting, guiding presence. Amen.

Friday, October 20

Scripture: Mark 9:16-24

Jesus asked them, "What are you arguing about?" Someone from the crowd responded, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn't allow him to speak. Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn't." Jesus answered them, "You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put

up with you? Bring him to me." They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been going on?" He said, "Since he was a child. It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" Jesus said to him, "'If you can do anything'? All things are possible for the one who has faith." At that the boy's father cried out, "I have faith; help my lack of faith!"

Observation: Jesus came down the mountain from his transfiguration (or transformation—see Mark 9:2-13), and found this desperate father waiting. He pleaded for Jesus to cast out the demon plaguing his son. (Many diagnosticians today believe the boy was epileptic. That's probably right, but this was no time for Jesus to give the father a lesson in neurology.) The father knew he didn't have a big faith—but he had faith enough to ask for help with his lack of faith!

Application: Bible scholar, Donald English wrote, "The miracle does not depend on the degree, quality or amount of the man's faith, but only on his having faith to link him effectively with the ministry of Jesus. It is the 'faith as small as a mustard seed' principle at work (Mt. 17:20; Lk. 17:6)." What has helped you avoid trying to "measure" the size of your faith, and to just exercise it instead?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it is so often true that I "kind of" have faith. Remind me that there is no "kind of"—I either have faith in you or I don't. Help me especially when I encounter my lack of faith. Amen.

Saturday, October 21

Scripture: Romans 14:1-10

Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand). One person considers some days to be more sacred than others, while another person considers all days to be the same. Each person must have their own convictions. Someone who thinks that a day is sacred, thinks that way for the Lord. Those who eat, eat for the Lord, because they thank God. And those who don't eat, don't eat for the Lord, and they thank the Lord too. We don't live for ourselves and we don't die for ourselves. If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God. This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God.

Observation: Jesus' kingdom is not just for "superstar" saints with huge faith. Paul asked believers to welcome all who had faith. Some Roman Christians were fixating on the lesser details of their faith (as the Pharisees had). In doing so, they were in danger of missing the central Kingdom ideal: living a life of love. Paul reminded them that in the end everyone answers to God, and only God knows a person's heart. Judging another person's faith life is likely to be inaccurate, since we can't read hearts, and harms us spiritually even more than those we might judge.

Application: John Wesley, Methodism's founder, asked in one of his best-known sermons, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?" Paul reminded the Roman Christians that each person is unique, so each person's spiritual journey is, too. We need support and accountability to grow spiritually, but comparing others to ourselves and judging them is destructive and hurtful. How can you best help others on their personal journey without comparing or judging it by your journey? Who has helped you in that way?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for teaching us big ideas about your Kingdom, your grace and your forgiveness. Guide me through your Spirit as I seek to live out those big ideas in my everyday life. Amen.