

There is more to faith than having it.

When we talk about “having faith” we tend to talk about it like it's an object, as if faith was a thing that we can possess in the same way that I “have a car” or “have a house.” But faith is not an object to be had. Faith is a process. It's something we do.

I would like to look at this idea of faith as a process through the lens of today's Gospel reading.

Today's reading tells the story of Jesus' biggest resurrection appearance to his disciples, up to this point, in Luke's gospel. Previously, the women had been to the empty tomb and talked to the young man robed in white. Later on, two disciples on the road to Emmaus had walked and talked with a stranger all day without realizing who he was. And then, when they sat down to rest at the end of their day's journey, the stranger broke the bread, blessed it, and gave it to them. And suddenly their eyes were opened, and they realized it had been Jesus with them all along. So, these stories were floating around, and the disciples didn't really know what to make of them.

But then, all of a sudden, Jesus is standing there, in the midst of them, while they're trying to figure it all out. And he says, “Peace be with you.”

Next, the text says, **“They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”**

In other words, they were afraid. This corresponds to the first phase of spiritual development: A time that we all go through as kids. One of the big concerns during that time is safety. Kids can't really protect or provide for themselves, so they frequently live in a state of fear. Jesus here meets the disciples in the midst of their fear. What he offers them is his presence and reassurance.

Jesus says, **“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”**

Those of us who are parents or grandparents have probably experienced a kid waking up in the middle of the night saying, “I had a bad dream.” They come and crawl into bed with us, and we put our arms around them and say, “Hey, it's okay.

I'm here. It's all right. It was just a bad dream.” We are comforting them and calming their fears.

In this first stage of spiritual development, people (especially kids) are looking to simply be comforted. They need to know that we, the grown-ups in their lives, are there for them when they need us. Our job, when it comes to their spiritual lives, is simply to be with them and **Tell the Story** of our faith.

It would not make much sense if I, when teaching a first-grade Sunday school class, were to say, “All right now children: I want you to take this doctoral dissertation home and come back with a 10-page paper next week!” That's not the level where our kids are at. When teaching Sunday school to kids, we're just trying to tell the stories.

For example, in the story of Easter, we tell them how the stone was rolled away and Jesus rose from the dead. We tell them these stories again and again because the stories are how they're getting exposed to the content of our faith. Later, when they get a little older, there comes a phase, usually around the time when they become teenagers and young adults, when they start to ask questions. If their parents and church family have faithfully given them love and reassurance, they will hopefully know that church is a safe place to explore those questions. This is what we see Jesus doing next with the disciples.

The text says, **“While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”**

There's a lot of very understandable skepticism happening here. That's why Jesus says to them, **“Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.”**

In the midst of their doubt, Jesus is giving them the freedom to explore the questions and examine the evidence. In the same way, our young people are going to ask us some pretty tough questions as they explore their faith and make it their own. They're going to get us thinking about our own spiritual path in ways that we maybe haven't before. That's one of the gifts that God gives to our younger people: To keep us on our toes, so that we don't get too complacent!

I would call this second stage **“Exploring the tough questions.”** Let's go back to that example of the story of the resurrection:

In the first stage of spiritual development, we just told the story. Now, as we come into what scholars call “critical awareness,” we start to examine the evidence for

the resurrection and find that it's kind of ambiguous. We ask, on the one hand, "Do dead people come back to life?" Well, in terms of our own personal experience, most of us would have to say, "No." So, the story of Easter raises a tough question: "How is this possible?" Our lived experience creates doubt about the story of the resurrection.

On the other hand, historians have uncovered some interesting pieces of evidence that actually point in favor of the resurrection.

First and foremost, historians know that there were several Messianic movements within Judaism, around the time of Jesus. Lots of people showed up claiming to be the Messiah, most often leading some kind of armed revolution. All of these movements, once their leader was either captured or killed, either fizzled out, dispersed, and ceased to be a thing. But that didn't happen with Christianity. Something happened that kept us together as a movement: some kind of experience that made Christianity different from all these other Messianic movements. The unanimous report of the early Christians is that they kept going and stayed together because Jesus had risen from the dead.

Another interesting bit of evidence is the day on which we worship. Their experience of the resurrection caused the early Christians to shift their primary day of worship from Saturday, the Sabbath, to Sunday, the first day of the week. The day on which they claimed Jesus had risen. And this switch had already been established by the time the New Testament was written.

I like the fact that the evidence for the resurrection is ambiguous. It doesn't prove or disprove anything. Therefore, we always have to make a leap of faith.

So then, the first stage of spiritual development is all about "Telling the story." The second stage is about "Exploring the tough questions." Both of these are critical stages of spiritual growth. We need to go through them, but it's also important that we not get stuck in them. If we only ever tell the story, and never ask the tough questions, then we fall victim to fanaticism, denying any evidence that challenges our preconceived notions. On the other hand, if we move into asking the tough questions, but never move past that, we can kind of get just as stuck in the stage of skepticism.

We're sort of left with a ditch on one side of the road and another ditch on the far side. Is there a third way, through the middle of the road? I think there is.

Let's return to the gospel the story: The next thing the text tells us is that Jesus **“opened their minds to understand the scriptures.”** Something else needed to happen, some sort of “opening of the mind” into spiritual awareness.

I think this corresponds quite nicely to the difference between truth and fact. Facts can be verified or falsified. But some things can be true without being factual.

A great example is in the story of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare. Romeo stands outside Juliet's house and says, “What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!”

Now, do you think Romeo is trying to say that his girlfriend is a ball of hydrogen undergoing nuclear fusion? That would make no sense. He's not making a factual statement; he's speaking truthfully, saying, “The one I love is beautiful, like a sunrise.” If you have ever been in love, you've probably felt something similar. Personally, I think my wife's got a smile like sunshine. I might be biased, but that doesn't make me wrong! It is a true statement.

That's the difference between truth and facts. That is what emerges as the gospel says, “Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” And that's also what happens as we continue to move forward in our process of spiritual development. We go from telling the story, to asking tough questions, to seeing the truth that is deeper than the facts. I like to call this stage, **“Embracing the mystery.”**

By embracing the mystery, we acknowledge that there aren't cut and dry answers to all of our questions. But, at the same time, our questions don't invalidate our faith. We can hold onto our doubts and hold onto the beauty of the stories themselves, as we retell and re-hear them from a new perspective.

The beauty that comes out of this process is that we can hold two truths together at once. In the Episcopal Church, we do this in almost every aspect of our theology. We have multiple interpretations of our beliefs, some of which disagree with each other.

Let's return again to the story of the resurrection: We've already told the story, explored the tough questions, and examined the evidence. As we embrace the mystery, we find that there are some among us who affirm, in no uncertain terms, that there was indeed an empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday. There are others who might say, “Well, I don't know if there was an empty tomb or not, but maybe it's a metaphor for the circle of life? As winter gives way to spring, it's as if the whole earth is springing to life again. It's a kind of resurrection.” Others might

interpret the story of death and resurrection as a metaphor for our spiritual lives: We die to our selfish way of living and rise to a more God-centered or reality-centered way of living.

All of these different interpretations, if we're embracing the mystery of the resurrection, can be true in their own way. There are faithful Episcopalians, and Christians of every denomination, who hold on to each of these interpretations. I think it's really cool that we make room for all of them in this church.

A great example of this diversity of interpretations is *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, a book written by Dr. Marcus, J. Borg and Bishop N.T. Wright. Both are accomplished biblical scholars. Bishop Wright affirms the more traditional understanding of the resurrection, that there really was an empty tomb on Easter Sunday. Dr. Borg understands the resurrection as a metaphor, but with a deeply spiritual meaning. They've written this book together to present their different perspectives in dialogue with each other, as faithful Christians, fellow Anglicans, brilliant scholars, and good friends. (If anyone is looking for future options for the parish book club, *The Meaning of Jesus* by Wright and Borg would be a really good one.)

Here in the Anglican theological tradition, we see our theology as a dialogue between scripture and tradition, and reason. We see faith, not as something we have, but as a process.

What we see in this morning's gospel is that Jesus loves his disciples through every stage of this process. He does not berate them or threaten them. He calms their fears, explores the questions, and opens their minds.

As it was with them, so it is with all of us. Wherever you find yourself in this process of faith, whether you're telling the story, asking the tough questions, or embracing the mystery, I invite you to accept the fact of where you are today. Furthermore, I invite you to accept yourself. Finally, I invite you to accept that you are accepted, just the way you are, and exactly where you are in this journey. Just as Jesus was with his disciples, Jesus is also with you.

Wherever you are in your process of spiritual development: Keep going! Keep telling the story. Keep asking those tough questions. Keep embracing the mystery. The process never ends! And remember: Jesus is with you, loving you all the way.

Amen.