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#109

## “Stumbling Blocks to Faith”

John 20:1-18

### Introduction

One of the student's favorite features of the Winter Conference each year is a thing we do called *Stump the Pastors*. We take whatever pastors are at the conference and put them on a panel and let the students ask any question they want. It's really pretty fun. And there is a whole assortment of questions that get asked – some of them pretty silly as they try and embarrass us. (There's nothing better than seeing a pastor squirm!) But most of them are serious, genuine questions that they are dealing with in real life. They can be theological in nature; many questions about the distinctives of the church; some that have to do with culture and how to think; lots that deal with application of the Word to our life. You never really know for sure what's behind a question since they are all written out anonymously ahead of time. One questioner last week wanted to know that if God can and does do miracles at times, how come He's never healed and amputee and made the limb grow back.

We always try and take the questions seriously, because we are keenly aware that stumbling blocks to our faith can come from many directions and sources. Our answers may not always be as complete as we'd like, but we always try and go into the Word of God and find the answers. You never know how God might use His Word to strength faith.

Anyone can struggle with their faith. The most faithful followers of Christ can go through periods of searching and wrestling. The truth is, faith is not the natural disposition of our soul. It could well be that some of you here are struggling with your faith on some level. Today we are going to study some of Christ's closest followers who struggled with their faith. And what we are going to find is that the solution to weak faith, is not trying harder, but is God's grace. The solution to our struggles of faith is found in Him. As we learn to cry out to Him, even when we are weak, we will find that He is able to overcome for us.

### [John 20:1-18]

It was still dark, but the dawn was rapidly approaching. Mary Magdalene wanted to get the tomb of Jesus as quickly as she could after the Sabbath. She and some other ladies had prepared some spices and perfumes for Jesus' body. Luke tells us that in addition to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other unnamed women also came early that day to the tomb. So there was quite a cluster of them.

John focuses his story around Mary, the one who evidently was the leader of these beloved women. We need to get a little sense of what it must have been like. They were hoping to find someone to roll the stone away so they could take in their spices and perfumes. What they found instead, in the near darkness, was an open tomb and a missing body. Luke tells us they were terrified.

Think about that for a minute. They were already emotionally spent by the crucifixion which they had personally witnessed. Now Christ is gone. Their minds must have scrambled to digest the

evidence. Quickly, Mary reached a logical conclusion – the body had to have been moved. But Luke gives us another important detail. Before they went to tell the disciples, they saw an angel in the tomb. And we need to know what that angel said to them. Luke 24 gives this report: *When they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living One among the dead? “He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.” And they remembered His words, and went and told the eleven.*

So when Mary and the others ran to the disciples they had already been reminded of the promises of God. But still, they clearly could not grasp the the truth. Their faith was faltering.

They were not alone. Luke 24:11 records for us the response of the eleven. *But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them.* Wow! Their first response was not astonishment, or wonder or joy or faith. Their first response was dismissive and unbelief.

Peter and John raced to the tomb to see for themselves. One can only wonder at their thoughts as they ran to where Jesus was buried. John tells us that Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb – presumably at a much slower pace. When Peter and John left, she lingered. And still we see her unbelief. Here she is standing outside the tomb crying.

Think about this. Knowing now that the angel had already spoken to her, his question makes more

sense. *Woman, why are you weeping?* Her answer reflects her struggling faith. *Because they have taken away my Lord.* And then she turns around and she sees Jesus. But she doesn't recognize Him. Have you ever run into someone in a totally different place than usual – and because you didn't expect them, you didn't recognize them?

There's a lady who works at Pizza Hut whose has been our waitress off and on for years. When I had lunch there last week she told me that she had seen me at the grocery store recently – walked right past me, spoke to me, and I clearly didn't recognize her. My only explanation is that I didn't expect to see her. She was out of context – wrong place, wrong clothes, no pizza . . .

The last person Mary Magdalene expected to see was Jesus. He was dead. She would never see Him again.

So the question we want to consider this morning is *what are some of the things that cause us to struggle with our faith? What are some of the stumbling blocks to our believing God?* There are many possible answers to that question, but we will consider two of them this morning.

1. Walking by sight. Or another way of saying it is we constantly fight against our inclination to believe only what we can see. Everything *naturally* within us constantly says *I'll believe it when I see it.*

When there is a problem with secular science, the fundamental problem is a denial of God who at times suspends His own natural laws and the order of things for the purposes of His glory. We call them miracles. Secular science has to deny creationism because it denies God and the unseen realities of His supernatural work.

But Christians are subject to the same kinds myopic rationale. Some evangelicals observe with their eyes the decline of morality in America and a growing secularism, and they conclude that the world is going to get worse and worse until Jesus returns. They will tell you that Christianity is in decline and would be overrun by Islam or atheism were it not for the imminent return of Christ.

But in both of these examples, a careful study of the Word of God and the facts can bring a vastly different conclusion. The Word affirms and strongly teaches a historic six day creation as well as a gradual growing of the kingdom of God as the church disciples the nations. Creation scientists can't answer every question, but they can show you how a science that starts with God and His power is not inconsistent with good scientific protocol. And a world view of history will quickly show you that while Europe and America may be in a temporary downward slope, overall the gospel is being spread around the world and the church is growing.

So what is the solution to walking by sight instead of by faith? The answer is not what you may think. It's not that faith and sight are incompatible. It's not the faith requires us to throw out good thinking or reasoning. Remember how this very subject kept coming up during Jesus' earthly ministry?

John 4:48 - *Unless you people **see** signs and wonders, you simply will not **believe**.*

John 6:30 - *So they said to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may **see, and believe** You?"*

John 11:40 - *Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that **if you believe, you will see the glory of God?**" (Context was Lazarus' resurrection. Some there saw it and **did not believe!**)*

John 20:25 - *Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.*

John 20:29 - *Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.*

The place to start if your faith is stumbling, is not with yourself, but with God. It is to acknowledge that God is real, He is present, He has revealed Himself and He is powerfully and actively involved in this world. How can you start there if your faith is wavering? Start by simply calling out to Him. Remember the words of the father of the demon possessed boy? *I do believe. Help my unbelief!* That is not a bad prayer to pray. God promises that if we call to Him He will answer us. If we seek Him we will find Him.

It wasn't Mary that solved her problem that day. It was Jesus. She sought Christ at the tomb, but she found Him in ways that she never could have imagined. And the most moving part of the dialogue between Mary and who she thought was the gardener, was when He spoke her name. In that one word, Mary's eyes were opened. The shepherd calls his sheep by name and they recognize his voice. That's why we must understand that overcoming stumbling blocks to our faith is primarily through grace. Call out to Jesus. He'll strengthen your faith.

## 2. Not knowing the Word (or not remembering the Word)

Peter and John came to the tomb that day without any thought or conviction that Jesus was alive. As we already saw in Luke 24, they did not believe it. But they should have. They had every reason to. Why? Because Jesus had told them

ahead of time. He'd given them His word. Verse 9 of our text is revealing. *For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.*

The first time he told them they were in Caesarea Philippi. Peter had just professed the Jesus was the Christ. Then Jesus spoke the words that led to Peter rebuking Christ. Here's what Jesus had told them.

Mark 8:31 - *And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*

Then later when they were walking around the Sea of Galilee. Mark 9:31 - *For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.*

And then finally as they took that last painful walk up the long hill to Jerusalem which would begin Jesus final days before the crucifixion. Mark 10:32-34 says *again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles. They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.*

Clearly they should have been *expecting* His resurrection. But you and I know that it is easy to forget the Word of God. It's far too often that we don't understand what we should understand. But know this too: whenever it happens, it happens to our harm. Not knowing the Bible, not remembering the promises of God weakens your faith and brings

you much trouble. How can you believe God if you don't know His Word?

What is the answer to this troubler of our faith – this lack of knowing the Bible? Again the first and best answer is God's grace. God took Peter and John to the empty tomb. And something in that tomb, the way the burial clothes lay – almost perfectly undisturbed – the way the face-cloth was rolled up separately from everything else. Something in that tomb bore witness to them – and they knew. They saw and they believed.

Later they would reconcile the Word of God with their observations. But understand that they were allowed to see and believe so that we could believe without seeing. Their eyewitness testimony would become the basis of a good deal of the New Testament.

And so if you really want to overcome struggles in your faith, saturate yourself in the Word. Isn't it strange that when we start struggling with faith we often are also struggling to be in the Word? Your answers are found in God's promises.

Jesus rose from the dead. It is a historical fact. And that fact is the foundation for everything else we believe. Will you affirm again today that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead to set you free? If you will begin there and then seek Christ with all your heart, He will strengthen your faith. He will pour out His grace upon you.