

BELIEVING IS SEEING

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

It's not news to anyone that the number of people in Europe and the West who believe in God has plummeted in recent decades. A survey released earlier this year by the Federal Statistical Office showed that the number of permanent residents in Switzerland who do not believe in God has increased from 11% in 2000 to 25% in 2016.¹ There are many reasons for that decline in faith, but one reason is that we no longer need faith to explain how the world works. For most of human history, whenever something happened that couldn't be explained otherwise, people fell back on God to fill the gap. When the ancients were terrorized by a thunderstorm, they explained the lightning bolts as the spears of the gods. When 50 million people died in Europe and Africa and Asia from bubonic plague in the 14th century, it was explained as the punishment of God. Even today, in the most advanced societies, we still attribute things we can't predict or control to God. My car insurance policy includes coverage for what it calls "acts of God." That covers events like a tree falling on my car roof or a deer that runs in front of me and smashes my fender.

The problem with using God to fill the gaps of our knowledge is that as those gaps grow smaller, God gets crowded out. If you are in awe of God because you thought that lightning bolts were God's spears, what happens to your belief once you know that lightning bolts are sparks of electricity caused by positively and negatively charged particles that build up in clouds? If you obeyed God because you feared God might send some dread plague to punish you, why should you bother with God once you know that the plague is caused by bacteria carried by fleas and rodents? If biology tells me that deer ran in front of my car because it's mating season and he was in hot

¹ "Non-believers make up a quarter of Swiss population," www.Swissinfo.ch, January 31, 2018.

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pursuit of a doe, then why should I call my dented fender an act of God when I know it's the act of a love-crazed animal?

If we believe in God because God is the one who conveniently fills in the gaps of our knowledge, then as our knowledge increases we have less reason to believe. This morning's gospel lesson shows us that belief isn't the result of some logical deduction that fills in the blanks. We believe in God because we encounter someone whom we can't know through empirical deduction. We believe because we are confronted with awe and wonder and mystery.

After Easter the disciples told Thomas that Jesus was risen from the dead. Thomas knew that such things don't happen in the course of nature, and he set out a list of things he had to see before he would believe. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." He had to see the evidence to be convinced.

A week later, as Thomas and the other disciples were gathered in a room, Jesus joined them and said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." That scene has been depicted in paintings showing Thomas carefully touching Jesus' wounds, but Caravaggio and the other old masters got it wrong. The Bible doesn't say that Thomas' response to Jesus was a careful forensic examination to gather evidence that Jesus really was alive. According to the text, Thomas' response was "My Lord and my God!" It was a response of wonder and awe. He believed, and in believing, he saw the risen Christ in all his power and majesty.

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The way we come to faith in Christ is different from the way we come to understand how a computer works or how to repair an automobile. Don't get me wrong. It matters that belief is compatible with rational thought. God does not demand that we leave our brains at the door when we come to church. But for most people, it's not a rational, well-reasoned argument that leads to an affirmation of faith like Thomas'. It's awe and wonder and an experience of transcendent love that lets us see who Jesus really is.

It's that way with all of our deepest relationships. I can give you a long list of reasons why I love my wife. She has innumerable good qualities and those qualities matter. I might not have been attracted to her if she were not kind and generous and smart. But that's not what causes love. There are probably thousands of people who have the same attributes that my wife has. But I love her and not those thousands of other people. Love is a mystery, a deep sharing, a sense of wonder that is a whole different sphere of reality.

My wife and I have been watching the British television series "Call the Midwife." It's about young nurses who deliver babies in the East End of London in the 1950s and 1960s. In every show, there is at least one scene of a woman giving birth, and every time we watch one of those scenes, my wife gets choked up. Now, she knows how it works. There's nothing mysterious anymore about the science of obstetrics. Rationally, it's the human body doing its part for the preservation of the species. But there is something beyond knowing how it works that makes it special. A birth carries with it a mystery beyond the science. It's an affirmation of hope, of life, of love.

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Mr. Spock on Star Trek was always puzzled by the irrational things the human beings on the Starship Enterprise did. They did things that made no rational sense to his Vulcan way of seeing the universe. They would do things out of love or conviction that he couldn't understand. Earthlings could be rational and logical; they had to be in order to run a star ship. But they also lived on another plane of reality, one that exasperated Spock because he couldn't see it. That is the realm of life where we encounter God, that reality that touches the depths of our human souls.

Arnold Benz is a professor of astrophysics at ETH and a worshiper at IPC. He has written two books that explore the relationship between the empirical reality to which he has devoted his life's work, the world of science and rational proof, and the reality of God that we experience as loving, feeling human beings, a reality that is beyond scientific explanation. In the preface of one of his books, he describes how he decided to become an astronomer. He was in high school, on a summer trip through southern Morocco with some friends. One night they decided to sleep under the open sky.

It was refreshingly cool... An unbelievable peace enveloped us. It was quiet: no din of civilization, no animals, no rustling in the air, nothing. The night opened the skies for us to reveal an unusual and overpowering splendor of the stars....

Because the air was totally clear, the stars hardly glittered and yet shone intensely. The sky was alive.... The bright stars gave the appearance of being closer... Interstellar space achieved a dimension of depth.... The darker the veil,

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the brighter the stars appeared. Everything seemed to be linked, and to constitute an impenetrable totality....

That night in the Sahara stimulated my thirst for more knowledge and assured me, too, that this knowledge needn't stifle the sensation of amazement. With a sense of wonder, I had encountered a totally different perspective, which was not in competition with physics. On the contrary, my fascination with the quiet and mysteriously glowing stars and the prospect of pursuing new methods of scientific investigation had both captured me with their spell.

During this night in the desert, I decided to study astrophysics.²

For Professor Benz the galaxies and the nebulae became icons opening onto the perception of expansive mysteries that are beyond the reach of science. Most of us are familiar with icons. They are the small images on our computer screens that we click on to get access to an application that lets us write an email or create a spread sheet or surf the world wide web. Icons are where we enter into a world much bigger than the image on our screen. If you go into any Orthodox Christian church, you'll see the icons for which the symbols on our computer screens were named. From the earliest centuries of Christianity, believers have used icons to help them connect with the divine. To those of us who are unfamiliar with those religious icons, they appear flat and two dimensional. I know someone who paints icons, and she explained to me that an icon in the Orthodox faith is not supposed to be a true-to-life representation of the person it portrays, whether that's Jesus or Mary or one of the

² Arthur Benz, *Astrophysics and Creation*, trans. Martin Knoll (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016), pp. 1-3.

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saints. The believer meditates on the icon to open himself or herself to the presence of the Holy Spirit and let the Spirit draw the believer into closer communion with God.

For Professor Benz the galaxies and the wonders of nature do something similar. Science can explain how stars are formed from the residue of the Big Bang and how that stardust, over billions of years, came together to form you and me. For some people, that knowledge eliminates the need for God. If the origin of the universe and life can be explained by Professor Benz using science and math, then what use do we have for God if there are no more gaps in our knowledge to be filled? But for Professor Benz the more he learns, the more he is in awe of the one who is still creating galaxies we have yet to discover.

On Easter God showed how this physical world of flesh and matter is one in Christ with the realm of the Spirit, that reality that can't be measured and is beyond our rational understanding. Jesus comes to us in our very human form and by the power of the Holy Spirit opens our perception to see him for who he is, Very God of Very God as the Nicene Creed describes him. Things that have very logical explanations, like a star shining in the sky or a recovery from a terrible disease become for us like icons that open our eyes to see another reality and exclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God."

We are not passive observers of that realm of the Spirit. We have a relationship with God who knows us and hears us. One of the things we Christians do is tell God our concerns and ask God's help. We pray for those who are sick. We ask God to bring healing and comfort to those who suffer. When the people for whom we pray recover from their illness, and we give thanks to God for answered prayer. Sometimes there is a perfectly logical medical explanation for that recovery. Sometimes there is not. We know

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that God can intervene with nature and change the course of things. Jesus showed that when he performed miracles. But if the person for whom we pray does not recover, that does not weaken our conviction that God is there. Some of the most powerful witnesses I have ever seen to God's goodness and mercy have been in the way friends have faced their death with dignity and courage and hope.

Jesus sent his followers to be icons in the world so that through us the world can see what he intends for all people. In the passage we read this morning from Acts, we see the community of believers who share all things in common. "God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them." People who owned land or property would sell it and give the proceeds to the community to help anyone who was in need. They did that in the spirit of God who gives so generously to us. In seeing those believers care for one another, people were drawn to see the God who offered them new life.

Last week was the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. King, a Baptist minister, saw the promise of the resurrected Lord and that is what motivated his life. He didn't have illusions that he would create a perfect world, but he believed God's promise of a new creation. Through faith he had been to the mountaintop of God's promise and seen what God intends for all people. He worked to break down the barriers that separated people from one another. He's best remembered for working to break down walls of racial segregation, but in the later years of his life he spoke forcefully against the Viet Nam war. He was in Memphis, where he was killed, leading a struggle to procure decent wages for garbage collectors because he believed that as one who knew the power of Jesus he was called to work for justice

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in the public sphere. He was an icon through which the world saw the promise God gives through Isaiah of a world where the wolf lies down with the lamb and all God's children live in harmony.

Don't you ever wonder why Jesus didn't give a public display of his wounds to the crowds who demanded his murder the way he showed them to Thomas and the disciples? Why didn't he prove to them that he was alive, that their plans to do away with him didn't work? He knew that believing didn't come through seeing. Seeing came through believing. The people who crucified him had seen his miracles, they had heard his teaching, but they weren't convinced. Seeing the risen Christ is a gift given by God. And God reveals that gift through those icons, those windows that are given to lead us into that new way of seeing.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest and poet once wrote:

"Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces."³

The gaps in our knowledge of how the world works grow smaller, but God is not diminished one bit. The risen Christ appears to us in signs that we see by faith. Through nature, through prayer, through the community of faith, through signs of his power that we read in scripture or see in daily life, he comes to us, he summons us to believe, and believing we say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God."

³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44389/as-kingfishers-catch-fire.