

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 27, 2014
Matt Moberg
Faith + Doubt: Idol of Certainty and Hope of Faith
Acts 10:9-16

We are starting the Faith and Doubt series tonight, and I'm ecstatic about it. As Carrie Gleeson was saying, it's a great chance for us to come together as a family and speak openly and honestly and encourage one another, and I hope that happens here tonight. If you would be so kind, could we jump straight to the Scripture, Acts 10:9-16.

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. **10** He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. **11** He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. **12** It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. **13** Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." **14** "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." **15** The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." **16** This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Pray with me.

Father Lord, I pray that You would be present tonight. I pray that You would speak intimately into our lives. God, we thank You for the cross and for the empty tomb. Teach us how to live in the aftermath of that in a faithful way. In Jesus' Name, all God's children said,

[All:] Amen.

Hey, I want to start by asking a question. We are talking about beliefs and certainties. My question is this: When you think about what you believe, the things that you find to be objectively true, what are they? And what were they when you think about 20 years ago? Do you believe now the things you believed back then? What about 15 years ago, 10 or 5 years ago, a year ago, 5 months ago? Have you been able to carry the same set of beliefs to wherever you are right now? For me, twenty years ago, I was approximately 8 years old, strapping and full of life. I remember some different things that I believed. I didn't carry much of it into my old, old age of 28, but here are a few things. I remember believing in Santa Claus. Children if you are present, I still do believe in Santa Claus. I remember believing that the Twins would indeed win another World Series. I'm guarding my heart now on that one. And I remember believing that my dad had this mystical power that allowed him to hear a bus when it was coming from miles and miles away.

Let me explain this to you. When we were in elementary school, there was this bus stop down the road where we would go and meet our friends in the morning. Every morning my dad would come out there with us and wait with me and my friend. It's already a little bit uncomfortable but then Dad Moberg goes a step further. He doesn't really give anyone a heads up on what's happening, but he would lie down on the concrete on his stomach, and he'd put his head down and go, "Guys, shhhhh. Be quiet. I like to listen for when the bus is coming." I'd say, "Dad, get up" But he would say, "Listen for when the bus is coming!" Then he'd go, "I got it! Seven minutes. Seven minutes and that bus will be whipping around the corner! Seven minutes and you guys are going to be able to get on your bus!" We would stand there and think he was crazy, but then the bus would come around the corner. My dad would go, "Seven minutes on the dot!" It didn't matter that he was the only one at the time who had a watch on. I was amazed. I didn't know what to make of it. I would get on the bus and my friends would say, "Matt, how are you doing today?" And I couldn't speak because my jaw was still on the ground. I didn't know if I should believe that my dad actually had this mystical ability, or if he was just lying to his child, which I certainly wouldn't have liked if he had done that to me.

Faith and doubt have always been traveling companions of mine. That hasn't been by choice. I think it is just the reality of the human experience. Life is made up of very few objective certainties, but there are a whole lot of things that are unknown. Perhaps this is why Aristotle once said, "The young person is quick to say, 'I know' while the older person is much more likely to say, 'I think.'" Uncertainty is everywhere. It's there when others are gossiping about you but you don't know the words that are being said. It's there when you find out what was said and wonder if it's true. It's there when you are spending late nights at the office hoping that a promotion is going to come. It's there when the promotion does come and you don't even know if it's the right fit for you. Uncertainty is asking someone to be your wife. Uncertainty is wondering if you will ever be asked. Uncertainty is in waiting by a phone. Uncertainty is waiting out pregnancy tests, hoping that this time the lines *will* show up. Uncertainty is wondering when those lines do show up if you actually have what it takes to be a dad or a mom. Uncertainty is when we are praying and emptying ourselves out before God, telling Him everything inside of us while under our breath asking, "Is anyone there? Can anyone actually hear me?"

Uncertainty is all around us. Our lives testify to this truth. Even acknowledging that though, there is a feeling that when that uncertainty creeps into our prayers or our ideas of what faith is, we are doing something wrong, as if the human experience of doubt should be kept out of our spiritual lives. We like to pretend that everything that we believe is certain, that it is solid and we have no doubts whatsoever. We put up this fake shield. But I can't do that because I'm a skeptic to the core. It's a chronic condition. I've always struggled to believe like others seem to do so easily. I remember one morning last year when Brad Jackson was working here. I was going through kind of a tough time in my faith and I went to Brad's office and sat down and said, "Brad, tell me, do you actually believe all this? I just need to know if somebody older, somebody I respect, believes all that we talk about when we talk about God." And Brad in his cool, calm, collective way pulled out the Bible and brought me to 1st Corinthians 13:12 and it felt like hope.

12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* writes it like this.

12 We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

I love those words he gives us, "squinting in a fog." Until the sunny day, we are in a fog, left trying to make sense out of life despite only getting glimpses into what is happening all around us. The Biblical model of faith is staring into that fog and not crouching or hiding or going into our corners, but walking straight into it, believing that the sun is bright on the other side. It is saying, "It is going to lift. I will go even if I do not know."

Our story this morning is answering the question of how to know and what to know when living in a fog. I don't believe that faith in Jesus will eliminate the fog from your life. He does not take your hand and walk you around doubt. Instead, He walks you directly through it if you are willing and courageous enough to follow. I want to go back into Acts 10:9-16. It reads like this.

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. **10** He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. **11** He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. **12** It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. **13** Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." **14** "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." **15** The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." **16** This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

It's really easy to look at this text right here, especially knowing Peter's history. If you recall the passage narrative of Easter, Peter denied Jesus three times. You would think that Peter would evolve at some point along the way, but here he goes again. It's easy from our vantage point to look at Peter and say, "What is wrong with you? You have what I've always wanted, the audible voice of God speaking directly to you and you refuse to obey, not once, not twice, but three times." For those of us with doubts, for those of us with uncertainties, we have this idea that if God were to speak directly to us, if He were to email us, if there was a message in the clouds or something, it would be so easy. We say, "Peter, what are you thinking?"

It is understandable that we would ask Peter this question, but don't think the question is "*What* are you thinking?" The question is "*Why* are you thinking like this? Why, Peter, are you thinking the way that you are thinking?" To answer that question, we have to understand just a little bit more about Peter. Peter, raised in a small fishing community on the Sea of Galilee known as Capernaum, was a man of faithful, religious tradition. He was a man of the Torah. He believed that there were things in this world that were clean and certain things that were unclean. There were things that were pure and there were things that were impure. For Peter, this was good and this was bad. This was touchable and this was not. Peter had a box, a framework, a theology for how God could move and how God couldn't move.

Then this moment happens when he is on a roof with an empty stomach, smelling the food from below. God shows up and He doesn't work inside that box of Peter's understanding. God paints outside of the lines. So when God shows up and says, "Peter, kill and eat. Peter, do this. I am asking this of you." Peter says *no*, and why does he say *no*? Peter disagrees with God because of his faith in God. Peter is saying, "God, I won't do that. God, You won't *let* me." Peter is being

limited by his own understanding, his own belief that is so certain about what he knows and the box in which he says, “God, You move here but *this* is not You. This cannot be You. This isn’t how You do things.” When he yells, “Surely not, Lord!” You can feel the fear inside of his voice. “God, surely not! Surely You wouldn’t want me to do that! That wouldn’t make sense.”

There is a phobia of sorts that I definitely relate to. That feeling where if you are being pressed, if your faith, the things that you hold dear to you, your beliefs about who God is and how God moves, if that is being challenged by something, by conversation that feels incongruent, we say, “Surely not, that’s not me!” You get that feeling, you get that fear that’s tied to this idea that faith is not this solid relationship with Jesus Christ, but instead it looks more like a house of cards where if we lose one piece of our theology or beliefs, we lose it all. We have the fear that when there is one belief that we have held for so long, and something about our theology changes or something about our understanding of God changes, or we have questions about God that do not get answered, if that card gets pulled out, the whole thing comes crashing down. We have that fear, that painful fear, where we just want to curl up in a fetal position and say, “I can’t hear you.”

It makes sense. That is how our brains are wired. When our brains come across something that has cognitive dissonance from what we know, there is an alert system that is flared up. When we come into contact with things that make us uncertain, our fight or flight mode of being is kicked into gear. As a means of survival without losing our sanity, our faith becomes a collection of beliefs that we grip tightly and try to convince ourselves that we believe in the midst of the fog of uncertainties. We end up like the Cowardly Lion, where our faith is just a collection of beliefs and we say, “I do believe! I do believe!” Our faith becomes a psychological gimmick. That terrifies me because if that is our model of faith, we evolve, we change our beliefs, we ask questions, but if we don’t have all our questions answered and pull a card out, the whole thing comes crashing down. What do you do when you do not believe, when you are honest with yourself?

In his latest book, Greg Boyd, the theologian, talks about this house-of-cards kind of faith and why it is so damaging. He says, “Christianity becomes a set of eternal truths that you either accept or you reject as a package deal. Faith isn’t treated as a journey in which one explores and possibly changes beliefs along the way in this inflexible understanding of Christianity, it’s a fixed package about which one must strive to be certain.” Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians describes faith like this,

7 We live by faith, not by sight. **8** We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord [2nd Corinthians 5:7-8].

Friends, we have every reason to be confident in our faith. For critical thinking, we open our minds. We understand that historically, philosophically, spiritually, experientially, we have every reason to believe that Jesus Christ is the self-portrait of God. He is who the Scriptures testify Him to be. We don’t have the certainty of sight, but we don’t live by sight. We live by faith. Because faith is not a psychological gimmick we have to talk ourselves into, convincing ourselves that what we believe is what we believe, our faith doesn’t have to be defined by how free of doubt we are. Doubt no longer has to be the enemy.

Our faith is a walk, a journey, a process of discovery. It is risk, exploration, awe and wonder, anchored upon a commitment, not to a belief, but to a person. Faith is a commitment to Jesus

Christ and you have been set free to follow Him. It looks so much different from a house of cards. It looks more like a tree planted by water with deep roots. When storms come and we are challenged and pushed and provoked, that tree is not going to break, but it is free to bend. We are anchored in Jesus and He refuses to let us break. The tree looks like the voice of the Spirit that is whispering to Peter in the fog. It is about trusting in the Savior over our false fundamentals and certainties. Jesus is the center, the foundation that holds, and what everything else points to. The Bible tells us this in 1st Corinthians 3:11.

11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

It's all anchored on a relationship with Jesus Christ and who He is, crucified, defeater of death. Jesus Himself says in John 5,

39 You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life.

If we are not careful, we turn the Scriptures into theology and our interpretations into gods themselves. Then our faith is really just in our own faith, our own understanding we are gathering inside of a fog, the glimpses that we catch. But Jesus says,

These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, **40** yet you refuse to come to me to have life [John 5:39-40].

Our theologies and our doctrines, our Scripture and our creeds, our beliefs—they are so good, but they are not God. All of these things are maps to lead us to God. They are signs that tell us, this is where Jesus is. This is how you walk toward Christ, the only foundation we have. The Bible pushes us to look deeper into ourselves, into our world. It ultimately brings us closer to Jesus. What we find is, there are the people who are constantly on their own journeys where they are discovering, learning, seeking, finding, trying, confessing. Faith is meant to be lived out. We find people who are wounded but walking by faith, not walking by sight.

The Bible calls this model of faith covenantal. It is a marriage. A marriage is a little bit different from a house-of-cards kind of faith. I was married three years ago to this gorgeous girl right here. Let me tell you something about marriage, what I know from three years of knowledge. Stay after if you have any other questions about marriage. As wonderful as my wife is, she is my best friend, marriage is not always constant bliss. In marriage you have to make adjustments. You have to have patience. You have to have grace. You have to have honesty. If I have doubts, if I have questions about Lauren in whatever way, if I stuff them down, the doubts are going to grow in me and turn me cold and rigid and cynical. But if I press into them, if I ask Lauren and we talk about these things and live honestly with one another, then the doubts that I would have had push me to love her more, allow us to know one another more. It is the Biblical model of what faithful following of Jesus looks like.

The rest of Peter's story tells us about a group of Romans who come to Peter's door and say, "Hey, Pete, our master Cornelius, he needs you. He is a God-fearing man who wants to know more about the Lord. You come with us." Remember that Peter really should not be going to that person's house because the Romans are about as dirty and unclean as they get. This last scene here is stunning. It says,

24 The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter entered the house,

That's a big line right there, "Peter entered the house."

Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. **26** But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only human myself."

Can you imagine what Peter is feeling as he is entering the house, the forbidden place? He is not supposed to be in a Roman house. That is unclean. That is dirty. If you go in there, you are betraying what you have come to know as your faith in God. You are betraying your entire framework, your entire theology about who God is, how He moves, where He moves, and in whom He moves. Peter enters Cornelius' house because he trusts that Jesus is *for* him and *with* him. His faith is in Christ even if it doesn't make sense, even if he is looking as through a fog. Jesus is enough.

Then there is that wonderful line at the end. Peter says to a man who used to be an untouchable, someone who used to be unclean, he says, "Stand up." I love that. "I am only a man myself. We are both just men. We are both just walking in the same fog. We are both trying to find Jesus inside of it. We are both working within the same context here, trying to listen and trying to be led."

The story ends with redemption. It is a beautiful thing. Peter ends up baptizing all the Roman family and their friends who have gathered at the house. The unclean become clean in Christ. We see that redemption is found not in dictating how God can or cannot move, but in trusting that Jesus really has our best interests at heart. It's about trusting that faith is not about a checklist of what we can and cannot believe, but about saying, "Jesus, where would You have me? Jesus, where can I go?"

When we have the doubts creep up, they can become catalytic. They can cause us to ask questions about a God who is too big, too huge, and yet He can handle all of our questions and our fears. When our doubts don't come forth and we stuff them inside, then they are no longer catalysts; they are a cancer and they spread inside of our faith. We live in a fog and for now we see in part, but some day, we will see in full. I believe that to be true. How certain and fixed are you in what you believe when you think about God, about if God is moving in your midst, if God is calling you to new things, if God is calling you to things you do not understand that you cannot make sense of? We need to have the courage of Peter to walk forth.

There is a line in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a wonderful book, where Lucy says about Aslan the lion, "He's wild. He is not tame, but he is good." I have spent so much of my life in sweat, in tears, trying to define the undefinable. I've tried to create math out of a complete mystery, make a formula out of faith. It can't be done that way. We can't pin God down. We can't create cages in which this mighty lion can move or cannot move. God is too big. He is too wonderful. He will not be held captive in our boxed-in beliefs and limitations that we hang over Him. Death itself even tried to hold Him down and we celebrated last week the fact that it couldn't. The tomb was empty. God won. This is not a God who is pindownable. I'm grateful for that.

The reality then, is that we all live in this fog, in this place of uncertainty where difficulty and doubt happen. We feel those things all the time. Faith is not an option, it's a necessity. We have faith that when we leave, we will drive home and make it fine. We have faith that the Minnesota Wild will win mightily tonight. But we do not know these things, although we might know that one. But the truth is that bigger things, the doubts that we have, cannot be dodged. They cannot be dust. We need to lean into them. We need to pray honestly, study bravely, speak openly. We might have ghosts that we need to mourn, but we have a God who has asked us to seek Him because when we seek Him, we find Him. That's a promise. When you seek God, you will find Him. Are you seeking God or are you seeking just understanding God? There is a profound difference.

We walk into the fog full of faith and we are full of doubt, and we listen to the voice of Jesus as He lights a lamp unto our feet and, yes, we are confident that one day the fog will lift. The light will shine, and all will be well. We pray that He will come, but until then, we must keep our eyes open and see what God is pulling us into. As theologian Chris Wright says, "Our hope is hearing the music of the future, our faith is dancing to it today." My prayer is that our church would look like a dancing floor and not an information center, and that together as a family, we would learn how to dance with Jesus and be at peace with Him taking the lead. I don't want to spend my life doing anything else but daily learning how to say, "I can't be in control. I will mess this up. Jesus, what do You want to do? What do You want to say? Where do You want to go?" Let me pray.

Jesus, Lord, I thank You for how faithful and good You have been to us. God, I pray that in the midst of our fears and our doubts that You will pull us deeper and closer to You. And, yes, it might be painful, it might be scary but, God, You say it is worth it. We are called to commit our lives to You in the midst of the fog. Give us the courage to do that. In Jesus' Name, all God's children said,

[All:] Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.