

Believe and Receive  
March 31, 2013  
(Easter)

I want to clear up a misconception people often have about faith this morning. Some people, and you may be one of them, have the mistaken conception that faith is believing in something in the absence of evidence. Mark Twain, a self-proclaimed atheist, is purported to have said, "**Faith is believing what you know ain't so.**" That certainly sounds like something he would say. Maybe you are one of those who believe faith is like that. I hope to correct that notion of faith this morning. I contend that faith is choosing to believe in objective evidence. And the Christian faith especially is a faith, at least in part, based on definite evidence, evidence of the hand of God

It is popular today to focus on the similarities between religions. Some people have chosen to base their faith on what God is looking for on what religions have in common. What they have in common isn't as much as you might think. The popular belief is that the commonality between religions is that God wants us to be good, moral people and to be kind to each other, do good deeds. Do that, and God is satisfied, and will forgive your sins and usher you into heaven when you die.

The problem with such a view of religion could be illustrated this way (**Ball sports slide, showing baseball, football, soccer, golf, and basketball**). In the picture on the screen you see several sports represented. If you try to decide the point of sports by finding what these have in common you would probably come up with a ball. They all include the use of a ball, not all use a round ball, but they all have in common the use of a ball.

So you might conclude that moving a ball, either with a part of your body, or some instrument, is the most important thing in sports. But that would be missing the real point of each sport. While the goal of four of these five is to get the ball to a certain place, that isn't true of all of them. The goal of baseball is to get the batter to a certain place, around to all the bases and back to home plate. It really doesn't matter where the ball goes. As long as the other players don't maneuver the ball to interfere with the batter getting around the bases to home plate, he scores a run. And that's the point of baseball. There is no hole or hoop to get the ball into or a line that the ball has to get across.

It is pointless to reduce sports to what they have in common. To play football instead of soccer, you have to emphasize the differences between them. It is the unique aspects of football that make it different from other sports. It's the differences that matter, not the similarities.

In that same way, it is pointless to reduce religions to what they have in common. It is not what they have in common that matters. What matters is their differences.

This morning I want to highlight several ways that Christianity is different than all the other religions, and why you might choose to believe it is the one true way to God.

The first difference is what Christianity says about people. **Christianity says that no one is good enough for heaven.**

**Romans 3:23 (NIV) ... all have sinned...**

**Romans 6:23 (NIV) ... the wages of sin is death...**

All non-Christian religions of the world teach some form of personal achievement. They teach that you can do something to please God and receive whatever He wishes to bestow upon you for your efforts.

Christianity teaches that no one is good enough to please God. No one can become good enough. No amount of good morality, good deeds, or love can make you acceptable to God.

I am not good enough to meet God. You are not good enough to meet God. Not you, or you, or you, or you, or you, or you, or any of the rest of you.

Now when I said that, how did you react? Did you think to yourself, "Yes I am!" or "I'm better than you, or most or average." Did you have that kind of reaction in yourself?

Or did you think, "You're right. I'm not good enough. I'll never be good enough."

Which one did you think to yourself. Which one did you feel in your spirit? The first reaction is due to sinful pride.

God isn't looking for pride. He isn't even looking for goodness. God is looking for humility. The reason all the other religions are based on earning God's favor is due to mankind's sinful pride. That's what Christianity teaches. Mankind is basically sinful, not basically good. That is a major difference between Christianity and other religions. It is a vital difference, one that is not overcome by looking at similarities.

A second major difference between Christianity and other religions is that, having recognized our sinfulness, we need a rescuer. The wages of sin is death, and following death is hell. If we are going to escape hell, we need a rescuer. We need someone outside of ourselves who can somehow rescue us from our sins.

That's the good news of Easter. Sending us the rescuer we need is exactly what God did so long ago that we call Easter.

**John 3:16 (NIV)** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God so loves us that He provided the rescuer, the Savior that we need.

Note that our response to this rescuer is supposed to be belief. But what is the basis for this belief? Are we just supposed to believe based on nothing, on no evidence of any kind? Are we just supposed to believe some words in an ancient document? (the Bible) Are we supposed to put our faith in something we have no evidence for, like Mark Twain said?

Not at all. That isn't the kind of faith God expects. That isn't the kind of faith Jesus spoke of. Come with me to the last teaching session with His disciples before Jesus faced the cross. This part of the conversation has to do with faith and evidence.

**John 14:1-11 (NIV)**

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take

you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

Jesus says, guys you ought by now to be ready to take me at my word. But even if you are not, believe based on the miracles you have witnessed. That ought to be enough for you to choose to believe in me.

We aren't talking about faith without evidence. We're talking about faith based on evidence, faith that starts on evidence. Look back a few chapters with me.

In John 6, Jesus has a similar discussion with a crowd of people. The day before He miraculously fed five thousand people. This miracle, like the manna that God provided the ancient Israelites through the prophet Moses, authenticated Jesus as the prophet like Moses that the Jews had been waiting centuries to see. And yet, the crowd chose not to believe in Him.

In trying to manipulate Jesus into giving them another free meal, they asked Him...

**John 6:28 (NIV) Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"**

Jesus answers them...

**John 6:29 (NIV) "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."**

He showed them a miracle, the kind of miracle that proved He was the prophet Moses had predicted. And yet, they choose to ignore the evidence of the miracle and not put their faith in Him. Why did they choose not to put their faith in Him, despite this huge miracle? Because of sinful pride. If they chose to believe that He is the prophet sent by God, then they must submit to His authority. And that they did not want to do. Full belief in Jesus, full faith is to submit to Him.

I was speaking with a man this week, a self-proclaimed atheist. I asked him, **"If you had proof that God is real, and that God is a person in the sense of having a mind and will and plans for this world He created, and a plan for your life, would you want to know Him?"**

He thought a moment and said, "No." He admitted that even in the face of incontrovertible proof of the existence of God, the goodness of God, the love of God, the plan of God, he would not want to know God. He wants to continue living his sinful rebellion against God's will.

He said no. The people Jesus was speaking to said no. What do you say? If there was enough evidence to at least begin to believe, would you want to? If not, why should God prove Himself to you? Why should He bother getting you to Jesus if you aren't going to submit to Him?

But if you do want to know God, then believe the evidence.

We don't have incontrovertible evidence. But we have enough evidence to start your faith on something instead of nothing. **We have enough evidence to say, "There is something here. I will start moving towards God. I will start asking God to reveal Himself to me so that I might know Him and serve Him."**

So what evidence is there to choose to believe in? While we don't have time to go in depth into these, let me briefly present them to you. Again, this isn't incontrovertible proof. But it IS a starting place for faith.

**The unity of the Bible is evidence it is from God.**

The Bible is really a collection of ancient documents, written by different people over several thousand years, not in cooperation with each other. Yet they harmoniously present the same message: God's redemption of mankind. Man needs a rescuer and God has come to our rescue.

**The fulfilled prophecies of the Bible are evidence it is from God.**

Some of these concern cities. Some concern kings. Some concern the coming of Jesus. They range in time from several hundred to several thousand years before their fulfillment. That is too much time for a dedicated group of individuals to try to arrange their fulfillment. The only way that so many prophecies could be fulfilled so completely is that God is in it.

**The historical accuracy of the Bible is evidence it is from God.**

Some secular historians have denied the historicity of the Bible for decades. However, archeology has proven the accuracy of the people, places, and events mentioned in the Bible time and time again. Outside sources confirm what the Bible says.

The New Testament accounts of Jesus and early church history have been maligned by many over the centuries since. People claim that Jesus' followers just made up stories to keep the movement alive. This would only make sense if they had something to gain from the movement. They did not.

The Jesus movement of the first century A.D. was not a popular movement. The established authorities saw it for the rival it was to their authority. First the Jewish religious establishment sought to stamp it out, persecuting, jailing, and even executing Christians. A few decades later the Romans sought to wipe it out, and had the military, political, and economic resources to do so. The only explanation for their failure was the power of God working against them.

The historical facts lend great credence to the reliability of the New Testament documents. It is these same documents to teach us of the resurrection of Jesus.

**The resurrection of Jesus is evidence for Jesus as the Savior of the world.**

No real effort at disproving the resurrection has ever come close to succeeding. In fact, some of those who tried to disprove the resurrection were convinced by the evidence and became believers themselves. One of the most well known in our time is Lee Strobel. Mr. Strobel, a Yale Law School graduate and past legal editor for the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper, set out to investigate the claims of Jesus as the Son of God and became a believer based on the evidence.

**The impact of Christianity on the world is evidence of the hand of God at work.**

While there are other factors involved, most of the charitable and education progress of mankind has come about within the Biblical worldview and by Christians. It was Christians who invented hospitals, schools, universities, orphanages, child labor laws, charities to help the poor, the abolishment of slavery, and even the development of scientific thought and experimentation. Science as we know it was only possible because Christians believed in a orderly world that behaved consistently from a beginning towards an end. This was in contrast to most peoples who believed in gods that were fickle and evil or in a confusing, haphazard world of spirits and cycles.

If you will choose to believe the evidence you do have, God will take the next step and reveal Himself to your spirit, convicting you of the truth. That is how each Christian becomes a Christian. We humbled ourselves before the evidence we had and moved toward God, opening ourselves to Him. And then He revealed Himself to us and our faith was settled on the Savior.

All of these are evidence of the hand of God. It is not overwhelming evidence, but it is enough to say, there is something here, something mysterious, something that may be the hand of God. There is enough here to take a baby step towards God and pray, "God, I'm not convinced You are real, but based on the little bit of evidence I see I am open to the possibility of You. If You are real, reveal Yourself to me. I'm ready to know You.

I believe God will honor that prayer if it is genuine. If it is not genuine, if you are just curious about the existence of God but have no intention of submitting your life to Him, why should He? If there nothing God could do whereupon you would bow down and worship Him, which is the Right thing to do, and submit your life to Him, why should He bother proving Himself to you?

But if you are ready to know Him, step out on the little bit of faith you have on the little bit of evidence you have, and tell Him so.

( Invitation )

Maybe you have already been convicted by God and are ready to put your faith in Jesus, for the forgiveness of your sins and to inherit eternal life when you die.

We give you opportunity this morning to do so. Which of the following prayers comes closest to where you are today in terms of faith. Use it to guide your prayer this morning.

Prayer one

"God, I see there is some evidence to begin believing. I am ready to know You and serve You. Reveal Yourself to me as I move towards You with my life."

Prayer two

"God, You have revealed Yourself to me and I believe. I am now ready to see if Jesus is the Savior I need."

Prayer three

"God, I now believe that Jesus is the Savior that I need. I now put my faith in Him as my Savior and turn my life over to Him as my Lord. Fulfill Your will in my life."

Prayer four

"Lord, Jesus, continue to confirm my faith in You and transform my character. Use me as a witness to the evidence people need in order to be saved."