

Acts 1:6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

When I was a child growing up in church, there were two prayers and two pieces of music that were sung every week - can you guess?

Apostle's Creed & The Lord's Prayer Doxology & Gloria Patri

In the Apostle's Creed - every declaration begins with two words: I Believe. We declare that we believe certain aspects of the the faith, when we recite the Apostles' Creed. It affirms our text for today about the ascension: I believe that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

I have found that they are different types of belief. I remember my mother saying: "It says in the Apostle's Creed that the Ascension happened, and that's what I believe. I believe what it says in the Apostle's Creed."

How high is up? Is that where heaven is? The Bible was written from a 1st-century worldview in which most people believed in a three-tiered universe. In this three-tiered cosmology, the sky was the barrier between earth and heaven. The sun, moon, and stars were thought to be stuck into the dome of the sky. From the perspective of a three-tiered universe, it made sense to talk about Jesus being lifted *up* on a cloud, the apostles looking *up* toward heaven. And the people came from a tradition of ascension. Moses ascended Mt Sinai and was gone 40 days, up in the clouds on the mountain, receiving the Law. And Elijah the prophet ascended up into heaven when his time as prophet was over. While these ascension texts don't fit into our 21st century world view very well, they fit the 1st century world view just fine. These texts connect Jesus with the traditions of Moses and Elijah, reinforcing his authority and his connection to the traditions of Israel.

But how does one reconcile the *biblical account* of Jesus ascending “up” into heaven with *personal experience* of watching (on tv) a human land on the moon as well as other 21st century knowledge such as the relative nature of any direction like “up.” If you are in China, the perspective of the direction “up into heaven” is the opposite of our “up”. Consistently measuring biblical accounts against 21st century knowledge can be disillusioning. To make sense of the Ascension, we have to reconcile traditional Christian confessions with a much more challenging scientific worldview. The challenge is to hold both of these perspectives in tension.

I’ve had friends who have told me, “I just don’t BELIEVE this stuff any more. I don’t know what the path to God is. For a long time I have shared the same core Christian beliefs as my parents. Now I just don’t. The people I’ve had these conversations with are not alone in this. Many of us have struggled with “not believing that stuff any more.”

But what does it mean to “believe?” Is it to give intellectual assent to statements of faith? Is it to hear a pronouncement about God, Jesus, sin, forgiveness, the cross, heaven, hell, the will of God, salvation and decide that it is a fact. It is true. We believe?

What is “faith?” Does the sum total of all of those doctrinal statements in the Apostle’s Creed we have said a 1000 times again and again constitute our Faith? We believe x, y, and z. Therefore we have faith. We are Christians?

I do not think that the Faith or Belief that we read about in Scripture is about giving intellectual assent to the declarations in the Apostle’s Creed. But a lot of people DO think that is what Christianity is. Because that is what many say Christianity is, then when people begin to question, and can no longer believe those statements and have difficulty saying them in church, many will walk away from Faith, from the Church, and from the real possibility of relational encounter with the living God.

I believe that belief follows faith. A common understanding today, is that one has faith once one has “believed,” or agreed on the truth of certain doctrinal statements.

Mk 4: storm, disciples terrified. Jesus says: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Is this a question of correct doctrine? This is not faith “in” something. It is simply faith.

Mark 5: Woman with hemorrhage of blood reaches out, touches Jesus, and is healed. Jesus says: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” Is Jesus praising her intellectually correct beliefs?

Mark 9:24: a man asks Jesus to heal his epileptic child, and then says: “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” What is he saying? This is a man coming to faith, and wrestling with the pieces he doesn’t believe, but still having faith.

In his book, “The Heart of Christianity,” Marcus Borg notes that this idea that being a Christian is about believing in certain Christian teachings and that Faith is about Belief is a fairly recent development. The impact has been to create a Christianity that is about the beliefs in your head. It is a matter of the intellect. Christianity, however, used to be

concerned with the deeper matters of the heart - with faith as trust, faith as deep commitment or loyalty, and faith as vision.

Two developments in modern Western Christianity. First, the Protestant Reformation resulted in different groups of Christians defining themselves by their distinctive doctrines or confessions. **Christian faith became about believing the right things.** The **2nd development** was that during the Enlightenment, people began to identify truth with fact – that which could be objectively verified. This led to a questioning of the factuality/truth of the Bible and the Creeds. The impact was that Christian faith came to be associated with believing questionable things to be scientifically true. In other words, faith is about believing something contrary to evidence, contrary to what reasonable people know. A current example of this might be an insistence on a literal 7-day creation.

These modern shifts in thinking have brought us to where we are now in terms of understanding Faith and Belief. If what God cares most about is us believing the right things, if **correct beliefs are what save us**, we may be in a LOT of trouble. But doesn't it seem strange that God would care about something as limited and fallible as our intellectual musings? And, this kind of belief as intellectual assent doesn't necessarily change anyone. In itself, it does not bring about the kind of transformation that must have happened with those early disciples, AND with faithful followers from that day on.

Marcus Borg notes: *“Faith as belief is relatively impotent, relatively powerless. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable. You can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power.”*

Think about people who need lose weight to improve their health. There's a lot of very true, very helpful information about how to improve their health. But just because people believe the information does not cause them to change their behavior in any way. In our discussion of faith as intellectual belief the analogy might go like this: Correct belief is to personal transformation as believing in the right diet will make you healthy.

Intellectual acceptance of the truth of certain statements of belief does not mean that the one who holds those beliefs will experience spiritual transformation or encounter with God. Transformation requires a different kind of faith. This is the kind of faith that Jesus was calling his disciples to and calls US to: Jesus calls us to a faith that transforms. that is about the heart to God, about relationship.

A traditional understanding of faith, would be “trust in God.” The opposite of faith as trust would be-mistrust, anxiety or worry, not disbelief. Trust is relational, it is a way of life. Another traditional understanding is faith as loyalty and faithfulness. This kind of faith involves a deep commitment of self, a giving of one's heart to God. Again, this is relational. The opposite of this kind of faith is infidelity, unfaithfulness, idolatry. Unfaithfulness means giving our ultimate allegiance to anyone but God. Faithfulness

means attending with love and care to our relationship with God, cherishing and tending it as we would any other relationship. It also means loving the things God loves. Can you see the difference?

Diana Butler Bass talks about recovering the traditional meaning of the term “Believe.” Wilard Cantwell Smith was a pioneer in this area, and speaker and author Diana Butler Bass discussed Smith’s thinking I heard her speak last September, and again a week ago in Minneapolis. The Enlightenment and Reformation played a part in our confusion over Faith and Belief. But a big part of the problem is that, unlike Greek and Hebrew, English does not have a verb that is equivalent to the concept of “faith.” In Greek, *pistis* becomes *pisteuo*. The root *pist* stays the same.

In English, we can speak of a noun “faith” but we don’t speak of a verb “to faith.” “Faithing” is not a word.

So, the first English translations used the verb “**to believe**” as a substitute. It was a good solution at the time, because “to believe” carried a similar range of meanings to having faith. However, as we know, language changes. In English, “believe” used to mean something much different than it does now. Literally, and originally, “To believe” meant “to hold dear,” “to love.” The German equivalent “*belieben*” still means that today. “*Lieben* is the verb “to love”

So a more accurate word today might be not “believe” but “belove.” **Faith, therefore, is about loving God.** Not necessarily believing for verifiable fact what was written in the creeds. It is about living in trust, fidelity, and devotion to God.

When we look at the Latin for creed - “*credo*,” it is usually translated “I believe,” which is also understood today as intellectual assent. Again, this is not accurate. The Latin roots of *credo* mean “**I give my heart to.**” “*Credo*” also carries the idea of loving God, and also might be translated as “I commit my loyalty to” or “I commit my allegiance to.” The object of faith, belief, creed is ALWAYS a person: God. Belief is not giving one’s heart to ideas about God.

For Christians who are guided by the Creeds, this shift in understanding can be liberating. Because it means faith is a prayer.

Listen to the difference when we approach the Apostles’ Creed, for example:

I belove God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And I give my whole heart to Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; I put my trust in Jesus, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, I surrender my allegiance to the One who was crucified, dead and buried.... All my life I place in the service of the Holy Ghost, And All my love I give to the holy catholic church and the communion of saints. I trust in my God for the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

I have found this reclaiming of the meanings of “believe” and “creed” to be incredibly liberating. It means that I can hold doubts about fact and doctrine without compromising my deep believing of God. It means that I can let go of any fear about “correct” doctrine and trust completely in the God who is beyond words or human descriptions.

Spiritual practices - that’s what transforms. And that’s what the disciples did after the ascension.

I find myself going through Scripture, trying out these different ways of understanding faith and belief. And I return to say with the father in Mark’s Gospel: “I believe. Help my lack of love.”

May God lead you into greater love, trust and devotion; into deeper faith and believing. Amen.