

# Graffiti



*The words that define our faith have the potential to embody the beauty and mystery of our faith. But all too often, they instead become boundary markers, marking who is welcome and who is not. In this series, we seek to recover the beauty of these words, and through them, the beauty and power of the faith into which God has invited us.*

### **You Gotta Have Faith**

Faith is a word that has a dozen or so definitions at least. We can talk about faith as a whole religious system - the Christian faith or Muslim faith. We can talk about faith as an act of trust - saying I have faith in the government to protect me. Whatever it is, George Michael says you gotta have it. And of course it's a word the Bible uses quite a lot, so it gets used in religious circles - often as a synonym for believing or trusting. Something bad happens and people say, "Just have faith. God has a plan." So what is it? What is faith?

My favorite definition of Faith comes from Hebrews 11: "Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." -- Hebrews 11:1

I like this definition so much because it lands squarely on the counterintuitive nature of faith. By definition, things that we *hope for* aren't real. If they were real, we wouldn't hope for them. By definition, we don't have evidence for what we can't see. We collect evidence with our senses, but faith is living with a sixth sense, faith sees what's not there, hears what doesn't make a sound.

So we could say "Faith is the reality of what's not real and the evidence of what we don't have evidence for." This is a wonderful paradox - something that on the surface seems like a total contradiction, but which is hiding a profound truth. So let's dig in.

Hebrews 11 goes on to cite this whole huge list of people in the Bible who lived by faith. People like Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. People like Moses and David. These towering figures who lived extraordinary lives. I don't know about you, but I feel small standing next to guys like that. Guys who lived so large they cast a shadow over the whole course of human history - they lived thousands of years ago but here we are, talking about them today. Compared to them, what am I? They were extraordinary persons in extraordinary situations. I'm just a regular guy. With regular problems.

I look at them, and I look at myself and it's easy to see why *these* guys get into some sort of biblical Hall of Fame. But me? It's hard for me to imagine ever being included in that sort of list. I look at those guys and see some essential difference between me and them. I look at them like Superman - they've got some sort of special powers, some Jesus magic or something that lets them do these unbelievable things. Do you? I imagine there's no way I could be like those guys. To choose what they chose. To accomplish what they accomplish.

I feel like comparing them to me is like comparing apples to oranges.

### **They Might Be Giants**

Have you ever heard the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? They're three Jews who lived through Babylon's conquest and destruction of Judah. They were deported, taken from Jerusalem to Babylon and forced to serve in the Emperor's court. So while they're there, the Emperor, King Nebuchadnezzar, builds a giant statue to one of the Babylonian gods and demands that everyone worship it. Because Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego worshiped YHWH, they wouldn't worship this statue. When Nebuchadnezzar got wind of this, he was furious and dragged them in front of him. He threatened them, saying that if they didn't worship, he'd have them burned alive.

Can you imagine you were in their sandals for a moment? You've first had the courage to disobey a direct order of the King, and he's found out. He's furious with you, and is threatening to execute you (in a pretty painful and public way). What would you do? Here's what they said:

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. -- Daniel 3:16-18

Can you imagine saying that?

Here's one that totally intimidates me: another guy named Peter was one of Jesus' first followers. Just a few months after Jesus was raised from the dead, Peter got up and preached a sermon that led 3,000 people to follow Jesus. Can you imagine being that compelling of a speaker? I can't, and I do it for a living.

Or Paul, who wrote 1/3 of the New Testament, who traveled all over the world telling people about Jesus. He was shipwrecked, beaten and whipped multiple times, even stoned once. But he never quit. He kept traveling and preaching and writing.

Next to those guys, I feel small. I compare what they did to what I do, what filled their lives to what occupies my time and I just know I'll never measure up. What about you? I think sometimes it's easy to come into a space like this and sing sweet songs and hear the stories about those guys and leave feeling defeated because we don't **feel** what it seems like we should be feeling. We leave feeling smaller instead of bigger. We feel defeated instead of victorious. We won't say that out loud because we feel alone in that.

The good news is that we're not actually alone. The good news is that even though we all feel small sometimes, especially compared to these giants of faith, the truth is, they're human, just like you and me. We are made of the exact same substance as all those heroes.

### **Seeds and Fruit**

It's not a matter of apples and oranges.

Some skeptic is sure to ask, "Show me how resurrection works. Give me a diagram; draw me a picture. What does this 'resurrection body' look like?" If you look at this question closely, you realize how absurd it is. There are no diagrams for this kind of thing. We do have a parallel experience in gardening. You plant a "dead" seed; soon there is a flourishing plant. There is no visual likeness between seed and plant. You could never guess what an apple would look like by looking at an apple seed. What we plant in the soil and what grows out of it don't look anything alike. The dead body that we bury in the ground and the resurrection body that comes from it will be dramatically different. -- 1 Corinthians 15:35-38 (The Message)

<use apple and apple seed> Pretty cool metaphor, isn't it? That everything we see and experience now is just a bunch of dead-looking seeds?

NOT Superman; BATMAN!

### **Ordinary Guys**

The only thing special about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was that they had rich parents who'd paid for a good education. And they had watched as their entire culture was destroyed around them. They were living in a foreign country and being forcibly reeducated to adopt the Empire's ways. That counts as a pretty bad week, right?

And Peter? He was a blue-collar guy, a fisherman, not educated. Not very smooth or suave. But he was passionate. Peter was one of those guys who never did anything half-way. He was either all-in or all-out. And after all that time he spent with Jesus, learning from him, eating with him, teaching under him, Peter came to this all-or-nothing moment. Jesus had just been arrested and was standing trial. And people wanted Jesus dead so badly they were making up stories about him, giving false testimony. Peter was right outside the house where the trial was going on, and some people recognized him as one of Jesus' followers. He had the chance to speak up - he might even have been called in to counter the false testimony.

But instead of admitting that he followed Jesus, Peter denied that he even knew him. Three times. Peter became a betrayer. A failure.

And Paul, the one who wrote 1/3 of our New Testament? The guy who'd been beaten and whipped and almost killed numerous times? He didn't start out following Jesus. In fact, in the first few years right after Jesus died and was raised, Paul went around trying to shut down this new movement of people who followed Jesus. Paul's crusade escalated to the point that he was murdering Christians. He was the Christians' number one enemy. They were terrified of him, and scattered whenever he came to town.

Now can you relate with those guys? Have you ever, like the three guys, felt like your whole world was falling apart and nothing felt familiar anymore? Have you ever, like Peter, messed up big time? Made such a big mistake you don't think there's any going back? Fallen so hard you can't get back up? Or do you know anyone like Paul, someone who, in your eyes, is Public Enemy Number One?

If you can relate to any of THOSE stories, then have some hope. Because *those* are the guys who learned to live by faith. The same boys who watched their world fall apart stood before a king and refused to compromise their faith. The same Peter who denied Jesus stood before thousands and proclaimed him. The same Paul who tried to kill the Church became the person who was willing to die for Jesus.

So what's the difference? What makes us us and them them? HOW were they able to live by faith rather than sight? Well according to Paul, it was the Resurrection.

### **Resurrection: Proof of God's Faithfulness**

The central confession of the Christian faith is that after Jesus was crucified, God raised Jesus from the dead. Listen to how Paul describes the resurrection:

If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. -- 1 Corinthians 15:14-20 (NRSV)

For Paul, Jesus' resurrection is the supreme proof of God's faithfulness. In the resurrection of Jesus, God showed the world that he would not be content to let Death have the last word. The implications of that singular moment are staggering.

Because the only thing Death can do is kill us. The worst thing that can happen to us in this world is Death. Death of our relationships, Death of our choices, Death even of our physical bodies. Death is an end of possibilities. Growth stops. There's no future. There's no possibility that tomorrow can be better than today. Death.

But the question is... what is beyond Death? What happens *after* all hope is gone? What happens *after* there're no more dreams and no more possibilities?

Resurrection is what happens next.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, God says, this world doesn't get to say when it's all over.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, God says the pain and suffering we experience - as real and as painful as they are - are only temporary.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, God says our mistakes don't define us, because God can restore us.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, God says even our enemies won't be enemies forever because God can save them.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, God says that all things are possible and all hope is NOT gone, but blooming, growing into a fruit we can't even imagine.

According to Paul, Jesus is our down-payment (FIRST FRUITS). He's God's commitment to bring us to life, too. Our proof that we're headed to the Promised Land. Our promise that following God's way will lead to life, not death, no matter how bad it looks.

God's way leads to life, even if it does go through the valley of the shadow of death. Even if we are swallowed up by Death itself. God's way leads to life because God is a God of Resurrection.

### **Faith: the Reality of God's Promises**

Because that's true, because Jesus was raised from the dead, we are called to live by **faith**. We're a bunch of seeds called to live like we're already fruit.

"Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." -- Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV)

Faith says, "See this reality around you? It's not really the **most real**. All this evidence you're collecting that this is as good as it gets, that you're a hopeless case, that you'll never be any better than this? It's **not actually** very reliable. There's some better evidence you're not seeing."

Faith is choosing to live like Resurrection is true, even when it doesn't seem like it is. Faith is allowing ourselves to be transformed by the resurrection and living in that transformation no matter what. It's believing that God is bringing Life even when all you can see is Death.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not give into the pressure to conform to their new culture because they saw themselves as more than seeds. They had the courage to face the King without compromise because they knew that God was reliable, that God always follows through on his promises. They knew that fruit they couldn't even imagine was coming. So even though they were facing death, they stood strong. And the fruit was truly miraculous - they were thrown into the furnace, and God did choose to save them.

God miraculously kept them alive, and when they emerged from the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed that he allowed the Jewish people living in Babylon religious freedom. God had transformed the seeds of their broken culture into fruit that reshaped an Empire.

Could you imagine that in your circumstances, in your pain, in those places where you feel lost and alone, even there are whispers of life, hints of resurrection peeking through?

We don't remember Peter as a failure; in fact, he's one of the great redemption stories in the Scriptures. Jesus showed up after he was raised. He came to Peter and forgave him, restored him. Less than two months after Peter denied and betrayed Jesus, he was leading the new Church, preaching and being thrown in prison and proudly proclaiming Jesus to thousands. The difference between Peter the coward and Peter the preacher is the difference between seed and apple. Jesus had transformed the seeds of his cowardice into a bold, courageous fruit through the power of the resurrection.

And his life didn't get any easier; if anything it got harder. But that didn't stop him because he was living like that was the most real. He didn't trust the evidence before him. He looked for Resurrection.

Could you imagine that your mistakes and failures are not the dirt in which you'll be buried, but rather fertile soil out of which you'll emerge healed and reborn?

And do we remember Paul as Paul the Christian-killer? No, we do not. We remember him as the Apostle Paul. The Paul who was sent out by God. See, Paul was on his way to a city to find and destroy the new church there. And on the road, the Resurrected Jesus appeared to him. In a moment, his life was utterly transformed. He went from Christian-killer to a man utterly dedicated to Jesus. He joined the Church he'd been trying to kill and eventually became the most important missionary in the history of the Church. Can you imagine how different our faith would've been if Paul hadn't been able to forgive himself for his past? Or even worse, if those early Christians had regarded Paul as an enemy instead of a potential brother? Can you imagine if they'd refused to forgive and trust him? If they'd refused to work and worship with him? But they realized that Jesus had transformed his seeds of hate and murder into fruit of passion and commitment even in the face of death.

His life didn't get easier either; he abandoned everything he'd ever known and threw his whole life into traveling all over the known world (on his own dime!) telling people about Jesus. He was beaten multiple times, imprisoned, stoned and more.

But that didn't stop him because he was living like that was the most real. He didn't trust the evidence before him. He looked for Resurrection. He lived by faith. He was living like he could already taste the fruit of resurrection.

When you're in those places, you wonder what good could ever come, how God could possibly redeem this situation or that person or the mistakes you've made. And Paul says, You can't even begin to imagine what God is doing. All you can see is seeds, and you're trying to guess what the fruit is going to look like? You can't!

What you can know is that your seeds will become fruit. And we can let that knowledge change how we live now. We can live like we can already taste the fruit of resurrection.

### **What does that look like?**

<my story>

So what about you? What are the seeds in your life? What are the places where you can't imagine anything good coming out of them? Can you believe that God's Resurrection is more real than the Death you're living in?

Faith isn't waiting for God to show up and *then* acting on it. It's not waiting for the seed to grow and *then* biting in. Faith is living like you can already taste the fruit when all you can see is seeds. It's acting like God's already there even though you have *no idea* what's going to happen.

### **Communion**

The world tells us that following God only leads to Death. That we must be crazy to stand up to Kings and forgive people who wrong us and believe that we don't have to be defined by our mistakes. God says, Bring it on. Watch what happens when this world does its worst.

That's what the cross was all about - Jesus died in our place, as our Passover Lamb - to free us from that world. And as we've seen in this series, we're heading towards God's Promised Land. To live a life of faith is to choose to live as though that Promised Land is more real than this wilderness.

I would invite you today to God's Table, to share in the Communion meal. As you take the bread and juice, remember that Jesus died for you. Remember that he set you free, and that because he began your faith, your race, he'll be faithful to finish it.

Today when you come to the table, you'll find a packet of seeds there waiting for you. Please, after you've taken the elements, take a packet of seeds with you. May they be a reminder to you that God is doing more in and around you than you know. May they remind you that because Jesus rose from the dead, we can live like we can already taste the fruit God is growing in us.

*Prayer of Consecration*

### **Benediction**

Remember all those heroes of faith? There's no essential difference between them and you. The difference you see is the difference between the seed and the fruit. So let us leave here walking by faith rather than sight. Faith is choosing to live as though the Fruit that God will bring through Jesus' resurrection is more real than the seeds we see around us now. Let us live by what we believe is coming rather than what we see around us.

We're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever... Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less. That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? -- 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:7 (The Message)