

Freedom Road: Eastertide Faith

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Digging Deeper

Freedom Road: *Faith*

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: John 20:19-20, 24-31; Mark 9:14-29; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 11

Introduction

The empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to witnesses were the twin catalysts of Easter faith for the first followers of Jesus. Although Jesus announced beforehand what his future looked like, the disciples initially refused to imagine any future without him *as they then knew him*. His prediction of a bloody betrayal and death on the cross fell on incredulous ears. “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you,” protested Simon Peter (Matthew 16:22). Peter and his companions were unable to grasp the series of events about to unfold with their Master. So in the hours following the crucifixion, they gathered behind closed doors, largely from fear fueled by grief. For them to *believe* anything good might follow this perceived disaster would require tangible signs and unmistakable developments. Such is the nature of faith. It must walk Freedom Road.

Resurrection faith is the energy to travel Freedom Road. *Faith* requires an object and cannot live on its own inertia. Christian faith is not faith-in-faith or the mere power of positive thinking. There is a significant difference between wishful thinking and saving faith. In small but sure steps the reality of Easter began to dawn in the lives of Jesus’ followers. At first, the signs were small dots on the landscape, rumors that the tomb was empty, claims by a few that they had seen Jesus alive. Here and there scattered reports began appearing from a variety of people. Eventually human witnesses started connecting the dots, until Jesus himself gave personal evidence to groups of his disciples that he had risen from the dead. Faith grows with time, deepens with fresh experience, solidifies under close scrutiny, and opens the future with new freedom to walk the Jesus’ road.

Seeing the possibility that the future need not resemble the past lies at the center of genuine faith. At every turn in the journey, a fresh word of the Lord emerges from the new encounters we have with the risen Jesus, like glistening dew on the morning grass which proclaims, “This is a new day, unlike the ones gone before.” What we believe about Jesus, the risen one, and how we proceed to live our lives are closely woven threads in the fabric of the Gospel. It is, after all, Good News *for us!* Central to this faith is the answer to a crucial question: “Who is God?” He becomes more than Supreme Being or Divine Providence or Powerful Presence in the Sky. None of these abstractions will suffice for the person looking to enter a different future, rooted in better promises, and kept alive by hope. To say “God raised Jesus from the dead” forms center of God’s own character. We do not say merely that “God is good or loving or powerful,” for those ascriptions must become verbs that have God as their subject. If God raised Jesus from the dead, we have every reason to believe that He is able to raise us up also.

For two millennia now, the community that gathers around Jesus offer daily evidence by the witness of their own experience that God raised Jesus from the dead. The church affirms its faith, rooted in that conviction. Faith rests in *the God who chooses who He will be*, precisely through His mighty works in Jesus the risen one. Without question, the Christian journey, the Freedom Road, lives or dies by the testimony of the *witnesses*.

Paul the apostle made certain that the witness of faith by Christian disciples anchored what he called *the Gospel*:
Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you-- unless you have come to believe in vain. ³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I

in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15:1-8).

Faith lives through the “reminders” of this Good News — the Gospel. Through the “proclamation” that we “receive” the story of God becomes for others the true object of faith. It proves itself trustworthy by being the ground on which we “stand,” and the agent by which we “are being saved.” Faith is that we “hold firmly” as the message of this Gospel proclamation. The role of the written word is to make possible the faithful “handing” on of the Gospel. The message is concise: Jesus “died for our sins,” “was buried,” “was raised on the third day,” and “appeared” to a variety of *witnesses*. Each of these tangible events correspond to the written “scriptures” which the Christian community receives from their faithful forebears, the people of Israel. These witnesses bore both individual and collective testimony to the “appearances” of the risen Jesus. And they had names, like Peter (Cephas) and James and Paul.

No Gospel took root on the soil of the first century except the one marked by the concrete experience of the witnesses. Faith requires witnesses to be living faith, actual faith, and certified faith. The statement, “Jesus is risen having been raised up from the dead by God,” wears the flesh-and-blood bodies of persons directly impacted by what it testifies. The Bible we hold in our hands is the collection of human witnesses to the word of God spoken in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. And the invitation of that book to its readers is that we must decide whether or not we believe these witnesses.

Freedom Road is the journey we travel, rooted in the acceptance of the resurrection story. That is why Paul’s affirmation above includes the sidebar comment, “unless you have come to believe in vain.” It is this “unless” that provokes our reply, urges our response, and implores our acceptance. “Unless” is the road not taken for the trembling heart that pauses before the testimony without decision. “Unless” calls for serious consideration and teases with the promise that we might just miss the most important truth of all. Paul is saying, “You can’t afford to let this Good News slip from your grasp — from the grip of faith — that might well change your life.”

In our study this week we explore the direction of saving faith along Freedom Road. We begin with the provocative encounter of the disciples, especially Thomas, who met behind closed doors in a face-to-face encounter with the risen Jesus. There, for the first time, a gathering of followers must decide on the truth of their own testimony. And, in company with them, we are challenged to choose also. Will Freedom Road be the road not taken or will it be the path of life, filled with fullness of joy, and pleasures at the right hand of God (see Psalm 16:11)?

Behind Closed Doors: The Place Where Faith Begins (John 20:19-20, 24-31).

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ... ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:19-20, 24-31).

We are either prisoners of fear or prisoners of hope. The poetry of the prophets give us that last phrase: “Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you” (Zechariah 9:12). It is an odd expression, “prisoners of hope,” but it captures the sharp contrast between life behind bars and

life out in the open. Hope implies freedom, and the days following the resurrection of Jesus breathe the air of real freedom, real *recovery*.

John 20 imagines death as a prison, and the fear of death as locked doors. Ever so gradually, the early followers of Jesus come to terms with the resurrection of Jesus during the forty days until his ascension. At first they were trapped in a place of legitimate fear, following the crucifixion of Jesus by the authorities. Later, they would begin to interpret the events bursting around them as signs that God was fulfilling His ancient promises to His people Israel. Then, when the fiery assaults of persecution stressed their faith, they once more discovered that the risen Jesus gave them “living hope” in exchange for locked-up fear.

The reading from John 20:19-31 continues the thought begun in John 20:1-18. In that passage is the encounter of Jesus with Mary Magdalene, and the hasty retreat of the male apostles after a brief visit to the tomb. Their inexplicable return to their homes is picked up by the setting of John 20:19-31. It is still the same day, Easter Sunday, and the fearful disciples hide from possible arrest by the authorities. The writer describes them as “together” but “with *the doors locked* for fear...” (19). It is a good thing that they are *together*. Fellowship offers protection against a common enemy. We cannot fault the disciples for attending to their natural instincts to be together at such a time as this

But huddling behind locked doors is no way to live. After 9/11 Americans struggled with the constant reminder that they were under “orange alert.” How were they supposed to act? What kind of life can we have in a post 9/11 world? Avoiding fear in the face of real threats and not losing human freedom — that dilemma still affects us. For the apostles, the time after Jesus’ crucifixion (their 9/11) swarmed with questions, doubts, and fears. The locked doors symbolized — embodied — this ambiguous time. Recent signs that something had happened at the tomb added to their consternation. We might argue that the empty tomb created fresh problems for the disciples. What if the authorities suspected that the followers of Jesus had stolen the body? That fear had foundation in the rumors planted by the High Priest (Matthew 28:13). Something had to give. Events careened out of control, and locked doors seemed like practical measures under the circumstances.

Yet, Jesus did not allow fear to fester into paralysis. Using simple verbs, the writer of John 20 tells us that Jesus came, stood, and spoke (19b). He came “among them” even though the doors were locked. As if to parallel the circumstances of the resurrection itself, the text depicts Jesus as simply passing through the closed entrance to the place of fear, much as he passed out of the tomb at the place of death. He literally passes in and out of those places which are otherwise shut up to ordinary human experience. One would have thought that large tomb stones would adequately contain the dead with no assistance from the living. One would have thought that closed doors would keep visitors out.

The greeting of the unexpected visitor appears three times in the reading: “Peace be with you!” (19, 21, and 26). When people experienced fear in the presence of God, the usual response was “fear not.” Here, a much richer rejoinder meets the disciples. “Peace” is *shalom*, a term which encompasses more than a simple, “Don’t fight!” Wishing *shalom* on a person meant a blessing of health, spiritual life, wholeness, reconciliation, and freedom from debt. The word comes close to our idea of “well-being.” The verb form means “to restore” what has been taken away or lost. Life behind closed doors because of fear is a broken, fractured, and incomplete life. It’s no life at all, but a diminished, shrunken, and destitute existence. Christianity could not thrive as a prisoner of fear.

“Peace” announces freedom to prisoners of hope. Locked doors mean nothing to the risen Jesus. We have here a glimpse into his resurrection body — able to pass through solid objects while yet retaining substance and visibility. The text says he “showed them” his hands and side. From the Greek verb *deiknumi*, this word means “show, point out, reveal, explain, or prove.” Jesus intended the disciples to see him as truly and palpably alive. His act of “showing” amounted to a confirmation that he was, in fact, the Jesus they knew who had died but was now alive. The wounds on his hands and in his side remain as “signs.” Three times the writer mentions them in this reading (20, 25, and 27). Three times reference is made to the disciples “seeing” Jesus (20, 25, and 29).

What they see is “the Lord” (*ho kurios*). He is Lord over death and he is Lord in newly found life — God’s life. Jesus has passed from death to life and is no longer its prisoner. He passes into a room with locked doors so that those on the inside might cease from being prisoners. He is *their* Lord so that fear might no longer be *their* master. “Overjoyed” is how the writer describes their reaction to seeing Jesus. The Greek word in this case is the verb *chairō* used in the aorist tense, suggesting that they began a new experience of joy (the inceptive aorist).

What follows in 20:21-23 looks like an interlude in the narrative. On first reading, Jesus’ instructions seem to break up the flow of thought leading to the account of Thomas (24-29). On closer examination, the instructions fit nicely into the total account. Once more he greets them with “Peace be with you!” and proceeds to commission them for their future work. He wastes no time doing so. Once prisoners are set free, they need constructive work to occupy their time and help them rebuild their lives. Several points about this commission come to the forefront:

1. **As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (21).** Jesus tells his followers, “My work must become your work.” One important fruit of Jesus’ resurrection is the multiplication of his efforts through the lives of his disciples. Let us remember that the word “Christian” actually means “a little Christ.” Hints of this appear earlier in John’s Gospel in the following text:

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me (John 12:23-26).

Because Jesus has risen from the dead, he has become many seeds through those who follow and serve him at the Father’s behest. By appearing to his followers after his resurrection, Jesus confirms the validity of his mission and commissions those who will carry it out. He is saying, in effect, “What I have been to you, you must be to the world.” *This verse is the Great Commission in John’s Gospel.*

2. **He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (22).** The ideas of wind, breath, and Spirit are very much related in the Bible. In this case, the verb “to breathe” is *emphusaō*, a compound form meaning “to breathe *on* (or *in*).” There is similar language in Genesis 2:7, “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” The breath of Jesus corresponds to the breath of God at the creation of human beings. New creation breath replaces old creation breath. Jesus, the resurrected Lord, acts as Creator, breathing his life into the fearful hearts of the disciples. Along with the breath come the words (they are hardly distinguishable), “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Once again, the writer chose the aorist tense, this time in the form of a command. “Start receiving the Holy Spirit,” he seems to be telling them. They are called to become persons of the Spirit and not prisoners of fear. “Spirit” (like “wind” and “breathe”) is *pneuma* in Greek, used along with the familiar adjective “holy” (from *hagios*). Holiness in relationship to the Spirit is both *who he is*, the holy one, and *what he does*: makes those holy who come under his influence. *This verse is the Pentecost of John’s Gospel.*

3. **Forgive anyone his sins... (23).** The third main idea found in Jesus instructions has to do with handling the sins of others. The central term is “forgive” which is from the Greek verb *aphiēmi*, meaning “cancel, forgive, remit a debt, allow, let be, leave behind, forsake, dismiss, or divorce.” Because the object of this verb is “sins,” we are led to the meaning “forgive.” Literally, the verb means simply *to let something go*. Luke’s Gospel (23:34) records Jesus’ word from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus does not claim to deal with the injustice of his tormentors but lets go of that offence and places it in the hands of his Father. Forgiveness means letting go out something; it means canceling a debt and allowing the whole matter to be handled by God. Thus, when Jesus entrusts the acts of forgiveness to his disciples, he is teaching them the importance of *leaving* the prison of unforgiven sins and uncanceled debts.

This verse is controversial and has been a painful divide in Protestant-Catholic relations over the years. When the Reformation began in Europe, the Council of Trent convened to address several consequential

issues. Among them was the authority of ordained priests in the Sacrament of Penance. But was this the understanding of the early apostles?¹ To what extent does the church have *power* to forgive sins? Whatever this act of forgiveness means for the disciples, it requires the Holy Spirit breathed on them by Jesus. This is not *their work* but the Spirit's work through them. Further, the verb tenses used in this passage reveal the *order* in which the forgiveness takes place. "You forgive..." and "You retain" both use the aorist tense, whereas "they are forgiven" and "they are retained" use the perfect tense. What does this difference in tenses mean? One answer is that the matter of sin and forgiveness *has already been settled* by God through the sacrificial work of the cross, so that the activity of the disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit, simply involves the announcement of forgiveness on that basis.

Within the immediate context, Jesus has authorized the disciples to carry on his work, and he has instructed them to receive the Holy Spirit. The instruction to announce forgiveness follows naturally from those two commissions. When the community comes together for worship, it confesses its sins and hears the word of pardon. The Gospel announces the forgiveness of sins to the world, and the community practices forgiveness among its members. Nothing in the immediate context requires a sacrament of penance for these things to happen. What the church decided to do *later* in implementing these instructions *institutionally* is a separate matter. We are concerned in this case with what Jesus told his followers, behind locked doors, immediately after his resurrection.

The instruction "to forgive" is present in the "Our Father" (Lord's Prayer), and it is found throughout the letters of the New Testament. Paul, in one of his extraordinary pastoral actions, encourages the Corinthian community to forgive and bring back a wayward member — one he himself had disciplined in the previous letter (2 Corinthians 2:5-11; see also Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32). Jesus taught the connection between forgiving others and being forgiven ourselves (e.g. Luke 6:37; 11:4). When asked how often one should forgive another, Jesus exceeds the customary requirement by saying, "Seventy times seven" (17:3-4)! Christ's forgiveness of us is always the foundation for our forgiveness of others, as these passages teach.

In what follows, the need for forgiveness emerges in the Thomas story which we will discuss more fully below. He was not present for the first encounter (24), but the disciples enthusiastically tell him how they had seen the Lord. His response was incredulous, demanding to see evidence he could touch. Jesus faithfully reveals himself to Thomas, and no doubt expects the rest of the disciples to accept Thomas' new found faith (28). Forgiveness is essential. Later, in John 21, a further test of community forgiveness follows the example of Jesus as he seeks the reconciliation of Peter after his denial.

The risen Jesus challenges his followers to imitate his example in forgiving others who have wronged them. God was faithful to His people, willing to set aside sins, in His commitment to forgive them through the cross. By raising Jesus from the dead, he confirmed that commitment. Locked doors symbolize unforgiven sins, in this case, while the appearance of Jesus among his disciples reveals the power to set free.

We turn, then, to the Thomas incident in 20:24-29. Thomas was absent from Jesus' first appearance to the disciples behind locked doors. Our knowledge of Thomas in John's Gospel comes from these passages: 11:16; 14:5, and here. In these accounts, he is a man with a dour demeanor and skeptical soul. The sickness of Lazarus in John 11 provokes Thomas' suggestion, "let us go and die with him." Listening to Jesus talk about going away and coming back, Thomas replies "we don't know where you are going or the way..." No doubt the flurry of events since Good Friday had left him further convinced that the Jesus story had reached a dead-end. Had we talked with Thomas, his response would likely have been, "I always thought it would turn out this way." And so, he is not among the disciples on the first occasion of Jesus' appearance.

¹ Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic scholar, offers a balanced treatment of this issue in his commentary on John's Gospel: Brown, Raymond E.. *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 29A. Ed. William Albright and David Freedman. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970.

After seeing Jesus, they seek out their old companion, Thomas, and update him about recent events. He is not impressed, demanding hard proof before accepting their testimony. He simply doesn't believe them. The writer phrases his response with the emphatic negative: *ou mē*, "by no means." Yet Thomas is present one week later in the house *again (palin)*. As if to set up the circumstances again with exactitude, the disciples assemble behind locked doors with Thomas. "Let it be as it was a week ago when Jesus came," they seem to be saying by this arrangement. Their willingness to have Thomas present shows their acceptance of him in spite of his doubt, and their eagerness to have him see the Lord also. The church must be open to all kinds of questions; faith begins in doubt and is nurtured in doubt. Had the disciples shunned Thomas or had they allowed his doubt to influence them, they would have lost an opportunity for faith.

Although the doors are locked as before, the writer omits the phrase "for fear of the Jews." The disciples are no longer afraid for they have "seen the Lord." Jesus appears as he did before and gives the same greeting: "Peace be with you," the third time he has done so in this passage. What Thomas hears from Jesus are words echoing his original demand for faith: finger in Jesus' hands; hand in Jesus' side. But then Jesus adds his own invitation: "Stop doubting and believe." The Greek has *kai mē ginou apistos alla pistos*; "and do not become unfaithful but faithful." That is, do not become a person without faith, but a person with faith. Thomas was a man at risk. His own temperament bent him toward skepticism. To this Jesus responds with life-giving words so that Thomas might move beyond his natural propensities into the wonder of resurrection hope.

"My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaims. No time for complete sentences and proper grammar, just *ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou*: "The Lord of me and the God of me!" It's pure exclamation! We don't even know if Thomas took Jesus up on his offer to allow the probing of his wounds. That is left unsaid in the text. The focus remains on "seeing," as Jesus continues to explore the implications of what just happened.

We say, "Seeing is believing," and certainly Thomas required a healthy dose of both! But that's not a biblical aphorism. Jesus analyzes Thomas' experience this way: "Because you have seen, you have believed" (29). Some translations parse this statement as a question, not a declaration: "Have you believed because you have seen me?" (NAB, NRSV). The editors of the critical Greek text punctuate the sentence this way, as a question. That reading is quite possible. I'm inclined to follow it. Jesus wants to provoke Thomas to re-think his road to faith in relationship to the faith of future Christians. Visual evidence of the sort Thomas demanded and discovered would be limited to a narrow time and place in the history of the world. The high standard of proof ("see and believe") would need to be replaced with a more demanding standard of faith: "Not seeing and believing." In the first instance, "see" is in the perfect tense, as is the word "believe." Thomas was blessed with a fully completed act of *seeing*, and then he embraces a fully completed act of *believing*.

By contrast, the vast majority of human beings, in the future after Thomas, would come to faith in the absence of the sort of "seeing" once made available to Thomas. Tempting though it might be to say, "If only I could have been there to see for myself..." we are told by Jesus that a greater blessedness comes to those who *do not see* in that way and yet believe. The writer switches from the perfect tense and uses aorist tense participles instead: "Blessed the ones who do not see and yet believe." *Faith* under this seemingly limited circumstance might appear deficient in some way. Jesus tells us it is not, but rather makes possible a state of blessedness which vision alone cannot give. We who live in later generations rely on the act of seeing found amidst the skepticism of Thomas. Thank God for doubting Thomas! His experience grounds his testimony and makes it deeper for us. All sorts of people "saw" the risen Jesus, as we noted last week, and each one contributes to that fuller, richer, and deeper "vision."

The decision of the writer at this juncture to comment on the "signs" which brought persons to faith is no doubt wise. In 20:30-31, he reminds his audience that just as there is faith nurtured by "the unseen," so there are also "Jesus signs" which never made it into the Bible. We are tempted to be like Thomas at this point and demand to see *all the evidence*, but much of it is "not recorded in this book" (30). Can we accept that and still believe? Are we able to allow the first witnesses to the risen Jesus to bask in the warmth of those initial appearances and relish

their fellowship with Jesus? Might it simply be that only they would have access to *certain* signs? What we observe is how profoundly those signs impacted their lives. Even if we do not read about all those signs, the disciples remain the living embodiments of those signs — little incarnations of them. The written witnesses to those signs survive to our own time and so are available for us to *believe*.

The words “But these are written” remind us of the importance of the written word. The word “Scripture” comes from the Latin verb meaning “to write.” When the writer says *tauta de gegraptai* (“But these have been written”), he emphasizes both the *selectivity* of Scripture and also its *preservation*. Not everything was written down (see 21:25 for the issues involved!), but some things have been recorded in this fashion — in written form for a distinctive purpose. It is that purpose which sheds light on the earlier comment to Thomas about how future generations of Christians would come to believe *without seeing*. Though they would not *see*, they would nonetheless *read* what has been written. Through the act of *reading* they would come to *believe* that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God...” (31). Such words would become for *future* readers, words of *life* rooted in the person of Jesus (his *name*).

Words are exceedingly important to the faith community. By means of words, the reliable *witness* of Jesus comes to future generations. However, these words are the faithful work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of *faithful writers*, like the one who gave us John’s Gospel. Words are themselves “signs” which point to the reality of the risen Jesus. Thus, in the *book* known as John’s Gospel, we have “*signs* about the *signs*” which point to Jesus! Reprising Jesus’ words to Thomas: those who do not *see*, can yet *read*. When they read, they do not touch the hands and side of Jesus, but they learn of those who did — and who witnessed many more wonderful words and deeds of Jesus. Through the power of the *word*, we join the community of faith assembled behind locked doors long ago. Through the *words of the book* that community becomes our contemporary. We are invited to read the book and to re-imagine for ourselves in the portrait of the risen Jesus found there. Like Thomas, the first time Jesus appeared, we were not present with the other disciples to see Jesus alive for the first time. Like Thomas, we’ve had to wait for a later time; we’ve had to wait for *our time*, centuries later to read the story and believe.

Perhaps we resist the act of faith for lack of evidence. We demand first-hand proof. We want to touch and believe on those terms. But Jesus says we need not do that. There remains for us a blessed faith beyond the immediate act of touching and seeing. In the presence of the *written word* and *together* with other Christians, we experience the living word. Or, as the hymn writer phrased it: “Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee Lord...”² As Paul once put it, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). The word awakens faith, nurtures faith, and births faith. Not everyone interacts with the word in the same way. Scripture is filled with many *words* which bear testimony to this *Word* which we hear.

A wonderful mystery coheres between the living *Word* who is the resurrected Jesus and the written *words* that bear testimony to him. We encounter the risen Jesus in those written words. Though we do not *see* him, we *hear* him, and in hearing do see him “beyond the sacred page.” It was Karl Barth, perhaps more than many others, who gave voice to this existential meeting of the Word in the words. Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus reminds his audience that “searching the Scriptures” as an end in itself does not give us eternal life. However, inasmuch as we seek Christ in the Scriptures, the Word of God truly comes to us as saving life (John 5:39).

Faith as Possibility: Opening the Future (Mark 9:14-29)

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” ¹⁹ He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground

² Mary Lathbury, “Break Thou the Bread of Life.”

and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, "If you are able!-- All things can be done for the one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" ²⁶ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer" (Mark 9:14-29).

Just prior to the events of this passage, Peter, James, and John had been privy to a remarkable vision of Jesus, commonly called the *Transfiguration* because Jesus appeared to the three witnesses as a transformed, glorified human being. The truth is that none of the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion would actually watch the body of Jesus take on its new form. They would see him alive afterwards, but would observe nothing of the process that made him that way. It is this writer's conviction that the Transfiguration narrative is a special glimpse of the future, given to the three named disciples in advance of Jesus' death and resurrection. What they saw, as recorded in Mark 9:1-13, was a foreshadowing of what might be, but had not yet taken shape. In that sense the whole scene was prophetic of the resurrection, of how things might possibly turn out for Jesus. As such the Transfiguration was an "aid to faith," the tangible sign of the coming kingdom even before it happened. Thus, Jesus introduced the incident with the words:

And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1).

In the words of the old hymn-writer, they saw "a foretaste of glory divine..." (*Frances J. Crosby*, "Blessed Assurance," 1873). Faith often begins in foreshadowings, where a prior word is followed by a fulfillment. It is God's way of saying, "Here's what's possible, where the future isn't just the repetition of the past. Newness can happen."

Immediately on the heels of the Jesus-vision, as the "Three" rejoin the rest of the disciples, they encounter a new challenge to faith. A disruptive event embroils the crowd and their scholars in serious debate. A father brought his disturbed son for Jesus to heal, but Jesus wasn't available, so he turned to the remaining disciples to heal him, which they were unable to do (9:17-18). When the disciples of a rabbi are found deficient in skills they ought to have acquired in the course of their study, they reflect badly on their Master. No doubt the "scribes" identified in 9:14 were arguing about the inadequacy of Jesus' followers, and in turn about the authority of Jesus. Given those circumstances, how will Jesus respond to the apparent failure? How will he address the disciples' *crisis of faith*?

To be fair, the obstacle facing the disciples involved demonic powers *residing in the boy's body*. That is how the audience would have imagined them, and so *Mark* speaks of "a spirit" impairing the son's speech, controlling his movements, and paralyzing his whole body. The father requested that the disciples "cast out" this evil possessive spirit. During the time of Jesus, a variety of aberrant human behaviors were lumped together under the rubric of "demon possessions," a short-hand way of speaking about dark powers in the universe that did not submit to ordinary means of correction or control. Within the two centuries prior to the coming of Jesus, Jews speculated about such powers and attributed them to entities called *demons* — "dwellers," spiritual beings that took up residence in bodies in order to accomplish their intentions. In one form of this explanation, the demon was a fallen angel, part of the rebellion incited by Lucifer or Satan in the distant past. Stories about that rebellion grew into full-scale narratives about the battle of good and evil which ensnared God's people Israel. These stories became explanations for a variety of national disasters which befell God's people and included the idea that foreign nations each had their own demons, deployed for the purpose of harming the chosen nation. The source of evil in any epoch lay with demonic influence. Defeat the demon and thereby defeat the evil. Elaborate theories of angels and demons developed into books with apocalyptic scenarios of how the world would end, on the last day when God would at last send the spirits to their deserved doom. God' Messiah would come at last to alter the course of human history "at the end of days." The Jewish community living down by the Dead Sea (known as the Essenes) imagined a final battle of "the sons of light and the sons of darkness."

Against the background of such stories, we need to read the accounts of demonic activity in the Gospels. The proliferation of demon activity when Jesus entered a town suggested to some that he was in league with the evil spirits. That conception played into the hands of Jesus' enemies who sought to discredit him. Or, the awakening of the demons worked in the opposite direction, namely, that they saw him as their enemy with whom they would now need to do battle "in the last days." The Gospels favor the second interpretation of demon activity. In the example from our text in 9:20, the mere presence of Jesus in proximity to the son provoked "convulsing" so that "he fell to the ground," manifesting the full range of his symptoms. We are to infer from this that Jesus disturbed the possessing spirits so that they roused themselves, posturing in defiance of Jesus, prepared for battle through the body of the son. We learn from the text that the son's condition dates from "childhood," manifested in self-destructive actions involving water and fire over which he had no control. He was powerless to resist the spirit and the disciples were powerless to help him. Why?

In his commentary on the disciples' apparent *inability* to help the son, Jesus uses the phrase "faithless generation." The Greek in this case is *genea 'apistos*, "generation (family, age of time, period, contemporaries) without faith." Mark's perspective examines the "crowds" that swarm around Jesus during the incident. With so many people standing around, Jesus must have thought, surely there must be *somebody* here to exercise faith for the son's deliverance even if the disciples lacked faith themselves to do it. In those crowds stood the "scribes" who were the presumed experts in all matters concerning God, life, death, demons, and the like. Would not such distinguished leaders have sufficient faith to send away the evil spirit? But they, too, were strong in theory yet weak in experience. Faith means more than intellectual assent to a body of truth. Faith depends on its *Object*, the agency for accomplishing "signs and wonders" in the face of hostile powers. Faith is a verb which trusts, believes, leans on, or receives from the *Subject* of all worthwhile action. Alas, says Jesus, although *I*, the object of your faith, and *I* the subject of your faith "am among you" and "endure you," yet there is no faith to heal this troubled son.

From what Jesus says about the people's lack of faith, we discover the essence of Christian faith; that it comes from close relationship with Jesus, from the "I" he identifies with himself. They knew the cause of the man's condition and the tight hold it had on his body, but they did not know the experiential power of Jesus and that it was available for them to bring healing to the father's son. By the time the narrative ends in 9:29, the disciples learn that "this kind can come out only through prayer." And in turn they learn that prayer deepens faith, engenders the further reach of faith, and surrounds the believer with power to defeat the enemies of God that destroy human beings.

Between the diagnosis of unbelief and the remedy of prayer lies the Freedom Road of faith where the plaintive appeal of the desperate father utters the simplest of prayers: "Have pity on us and help us!" A parent's grief over the sickness of a child is fertile ground for the receptive heart of faith. From a later context we draw a close parallel, "Except you become as a little child you will never enter the kingdom of God..." (Mark 10:15). What parent, sensitive to the needs of her own child, does not feel the pain, sickness, fear, and the empathy of being small and utterly dependent on adult society? Children teach faith by identifying with that *original trust* in their parents, what some call *natal faith*, known by the infant at its mother's breast. In reply to the father's plea, Jesus makes the offer of Freedom Road: "If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes!" (9:23). The word "able" is a verb in the Greek text, from *dunamai*, a reflexive verb that can mean either "be powerful" or "be able" which express an action performed in the interest of the subject. The subject is "you," and Jesus extends the simple invitation: "It's up to you, dear father, what happens next." He adds, "All things for the one who believes..." All things for your son's deliverance from his demon have been made ready. Nothing in God's world hinders a favorable outcome. "Believe!" Looked at in this way faith means opening the heart and lifting the face to the future: free to believe and free to imagine a different future. Things do not need to be *this* way; they can be *that* way! Faith re-orientes the gaze of the heart.

How will the struggling father respond the directness of Jesus' reply? The father has heard the Word of the Lord and through this Word may take first steps on Freedom Road. "Immediately" (9:24) the father cries out. Mark

follows his narrative practice of using the Greek word *euthus*, an adverb of immediacy, urgency, and even haste. There's no time to be lost, no reason for further reflection or delay. The father's child is on the line, his future in doubt, and his life at the crisis point. Help is at hand, mercy is on offer from Jesus. What more does the father need to prompt his faith? He is on the spear-tip of decision, and the whole matter of filial love hangs in the balance. Jesus the giver of life and hope stands before him. The father *must not* remain neutral. Everything remains in the balance until he decides. *No decision is a decision.* As the philosopher Kierkegaard once wrote, "choice...does not depend so much upon deliberation as on the baptism of the will..."³ From his work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he commented further about *faith*:

Sitting calmly on a ship in fair weather is not a metaphor for having faith; but when the ship has sprung a leak, then enthusiastically to keep the ship afloat by pumping and not to seek the harbor—that is the metaphor for having faith.

Elsewhere⁴, Kierkegaard wrote that the heart of human existence rests with the power of *choice*, of *will*, while a person keeps himself on the spear tip of the moment of choice — the content of his personality and the importance of life itself. He framed this in terms of the words "Either/Or."

Imagine a captain of a ship the moment a shift of direction must be made; then he may be able to say: I can either this or that. But if he is not a mediocre captain he will also be aware that during all this the ship is ploughing ahead with its ordinary speed, and so there is but a single moment when it is inconsequential whether he does this or does that. So also with a person — if he forgets to take into account the speed — there eventually comes a moment where it is no longer a matter of an Either/Or, not because he has chosen, but because he has refrained from it, which also can be expressed by saying: Because others have chosen for him — or because he has lost himself.⁵

In simple anguished speech, the father manages his reply: "I believe; help my unbelief" (9:24b). The verbs are all in the present tense; the first describes the father's own action ("I am believing"); the second is an appeal to Jesus to "come to my aid, support me" (Greek: *boēthei*) in battling what is lacking in my faith. His "lack" is the future which he cannot imagine, one where his son no longer writhes in agony from the evil spirit, where his will is no longer a slave to an occupying force beyond his control. His son has been like this for so long that another way of being seems impossible. Yet, *the father believes in Jesus*, and that is what matters. High drama follows as the crowd rushes "together," language which may well convey both the curiosity of onlookers but also the power of community to unite against evil for the sake of the son. In any case Jesus "sees" this action of the crowd and proceeds to finish his miracle of deliverance. Once more he speaks, this time to the evil spirit, using language indicative of a prosecutor laying out the charges against the offender: "You keep this boy from speaking and hearing. The proof is here for everyone to see, and *they do see* your evil." Jesus then utters the liberating words, "I command you: come out of him; never enter him again" (9:25).

Invited by the father's faith, our Lord exercises his authority over the evil spirit which binds the young boy. The results are dramatic though initially terrifying, marked by physical symptoms and ending with what appears to be the end of life, for the boy seems to enter a death-like state, witnessed by the crowds with the words, "He is dead" (9:26). Freedom Road often passes through the valley of death's shadow, where the old world of demonic existence reigns, where the old bondage holds captive, where the old life writhes in the dust. Mark adds his own commentary, "The boy was like a corpse." Faith faces the reality of death, the expected crisis before newness begins. It is a hard reality, "convulsing him terribly" (9:26a), turning his world on its head. But the last leg of the journey to freedom is not automatic, merely one more stage in the process. No, "Jesus took him by the hand, lifted him up, so that he was able to stand" (9:27). In that moment, faith embraced the giver of life, the companion for the journey, and the support needed to stand.

The language of 9:27 is thick with resurrection verbs: "lifted him up" (Greek: *egeirō*, "cause to stand up") and "raised up" (Greek: *anistēmi*, "cause to stand, raise to life"). Even before Jesus himself undergoes resurrection

³ In this regard, Soren Kierkegaard offered helpful counsel in his *Either/Or*, vol. II, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp.163-164, 166-169. Also see his *Fear and Trembling* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. II, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp.157-164.

⁵ Summarized by Denise, Peterfreund, and White, in *Great Traditions in Ethics, Eighth Edition*, "Soren Kierkegaard: Leap of Faith," (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 1996), p.225.

on Easter, he channels the power of that future event into the present for the healing of the tormented son. When asked by his followers why they were unable to “cast it out,” Jesus instructs them in the necessity of prayer to resource the great challenges of ministry like this one. Prayer becomes the divinely appointed means for tapping into the life of God for the sake of the world. Faith operates through the liturgy of prayer, so that *James* can declare:

¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven (James 5:14-15).

“Prayer of faith” echoes the narrative of Mark 9 which joins together the trusting cry of the father with the need for prayer in the future work of the disciples. Faith for them, faith for us. Freedom for them, freedom for us.

Legacy of Faith (Hebrews 11, selections)

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (Hebrews 11:1-3).

The Greek begins *estin de pistis*: “Now faith is ...” In this case, faith appears as a *noun*, and the speaker behind the text of *Hebrews* is offering what looks like a definition of faith, or at least he attempts to clarify its meaning for those might be confused or for whom the concept of faith is a weak idea. Certainly among the classical Greek thinkers, such as Plato, *belief* was not the highest form of knowledge, and, in fact, fell far short into the realm of *opinion*. The speaker no doubt knew the history of Greek ideas and wanted to correct false notions for anyone who might mistake Christian faith for mere opinion. What makes this passage interesting is the way he achieves that.

First, let's take an inventory of the key terms:

1. *being sure*. The Greek word is *hypostasis* which literally means “set under.” Uses of the term include the sediment that settles at the bottom, anything set under, subject matter (of speech or poem), foundation or ground, confidence, assurance, substance, the real nature of a thing. Faith is the support, the basis, the reliable ground, the firm foundation. If we follow the idea of faith as *trust* (see on John 3:16 above), then our rock-solid basis is God's love for us, revealed in Jesus, to which we confidently respond by faith. Our grounded relationship with God through Jesus Christ is that ground.
2. *hope for*. *Hope* generally has to do with the future; it is about what we expect will happen in the future, or what we consider possible in the future. Hope refuses to accept a closed-off future, one that has no new possibilities. Hope keeps human beings moving forward without despair, without giving up. Hope lifts up our eyes to the person who helps us. And faith, as trust, is the solid ground for doing all of these hopeful things. Based on the ongoing, growing trust-relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ, we can look at the future as a new creation and not just more of the old one.
3. *certain*. Parallel with *hypostasis* is the additional term *elenchos* which can mean “cross-examining, testing, accounting, convicting, evidence, assurance, proof.” Whereas the first term has to do with *time* (hope about the future), the second term has to do with *space* (visible vs. invisible). Just as the future is not immediately accessible to us, so the reality of God, heaven, and heavenly beings are not immediately accessible to us in *visible* terms. The example used is the created world, itself visible, yet comes from what is invisible. Viewing creation, we witness regularity, reliability, and consistency — all evidences of God's faithfulness. Every day that the sun brightens the sky or that we see the constellations at night, we increase our confidence in a coherent universe that we can count on. Such confidence has its roots in the trustworthy, faithful God.
4. *understand*. Perhaps the most common misconception about faith is that it is somehow in contradiction to *reason*. People might think that we are believers because we don't understand things with our minds, that we chuck our minds under the pew when we get to church! But the Bible doesn't dissect human thought and human trust in that way. It has been the unfortunate legacy of the Enlightenment and rationalism that we drive a wedge between believing and thinking. When the speaker says that we “understand that the universe was formed ...” he uses the Greek expression *noeō* which can mean: to “perceive by the eyes,

observe, notice, think, suppose, devise, purpose, intend, conceive, deem, mean.” Knowing what we do about the trustworthy nature of God, we can make sense out of what we actually observe in the world around us. There are intangibles in our thought process that help us confer meaning on the universe. This is not thought divorced from sight, but sight given sense through the faculty of faith. *It would not be wrong to say that faith is a form of understanding — of knowing.* I know the world, just as I know God, through an act of understanding that is rooted in trust.

The relationship of faith and knowledge is a tricky one, to be sure. Yet human experience begins with *trust*, long before it has *understanding*. A newborn baby, drawing nourishment from her mother’s breast, begins life with the most intimate of human relationships, and it has almost nothing to do with knowledge in the intellectual sense. Merleau-Ponty, a ground-breaking philosopher of the 20th century, referred to our immediate relationship with the world as a “natal pact” — a relationship formed from birth by which we relate to the world directly, even before we *know* anything about the world. Can we not say that human beings *believe* before they *know*? Indeed, the Medieval philosopher, Anselm, declared (in the footsteps of Augustine), *Credo ut intelligam*: “I believe in order that I might know.” *At the core of our understanding of the world is our trust in the reliability of that world because a trustworthy God made it.*

5. *God’s command/Word.* To a Jewish audience, familiar with the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the idea that God gives commands would not be new information! After all, we have the Ten Commandments (or literally, the Ten *Words* in Hebrew)! Furthermore, Genesis 1 depicts the creation of the world as the result of several speech acts in which God commanded the existence of light and all other created things, including human beings. The speaker in Hebrews 11 uses the Greek term *hrēma*, meaning “word.” The Word of God arises out of and moves within the invisible world and yet gives rise to and moves around the visible world. Ultimately, what grounds the faith of the believer is the “Word of God,” whether as the agent of Creation or the author of Salvation. What the text seems to observe is the unity of hope and of creation. God makes the world, and He moves the world forward through time and space. His Words make this happen, and the regularity with which we observe His Word and His world reveals the reality of our faith. Regularity, revelation, and reality are united in the concept of trusting faith in a faithful God, who has met us in Jesus Christ.

Further, the writer of the *Hebrews* joins faith with “pleasing God,” the invitation to *relationship*. And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

There is a twin concept at work in faith: 1) faith embraces the existence of God; 2) faith engages relationship with God. On the one hand the believer begins with the reality of God as the active agent in the world, personal, out and beyond, and “not far from every one of us” (see Acts 17:27). In Paul’s words to the sophisticated Athenians,

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things (Acts 17:24-25).

The *being* of God is transcendent, sovereign, and Lord of all creation, but also immanent, indwelling the world that He has made, giving it life. He is both beyond and within. He is independent of creation while remaining ever in touch with what He has made. The God of the Biblical story makes the world possible and yet acts within the world, the constant partner of His creatures through love and covenant. God is not an abstraction whose existence is mere static fact, but He is the living God, ever involved, ever moving, ever creating. To say that God exists is to affirm that His existence is dynamic, animated, and open to the future of endless possibility.

Moreover, God is also *engaged* with everything He makes, and invests creation with His own image so that His creatures might “reach out, seek, wonder, and find Him.” As *Hebrews* declares, “He is the rewarder of those who seek Him.” Likewise Paul to the Athenians:

²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

Creation is endowed by God with purpose “so that they would *search*.” Human curiosity about creation is the sign of purpose, and that by God’s design. There is freedom in that search, the intentional engagement of creature with Creator, rooted in hopeful expectation that life is always better when experienced in the presence of the Other. In discovering God, human beings love Him and come to know in a relational sense *Who He is* for them, and they for Him. When *Hebrews* says that God “rewards,” it implies that there is goodness in God which desires the well-being and flourishing of persons. The enrichment of the world is possible for each of God’s creatures through the capacity of their faith to receive His gifts. And experience with God proves the living truth that life is best lived *within the grace He gives*. When the biblical story tells us that we are “saved by grace through faith” (Ephesians 2:8-9), it also affirms that through those gifts we become “His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, ordained for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). There is great freedom in “grace through faith” for it places no limitations on what that grace may accomplish in human life. Grace is the gift that keeps on giving, and God is the generous agent who funds His creation.

To illustrate the lived reality of such “grace through faith,” the writer to the *Hebrews* unfolds the great “Hall of Faith” taken from the biblical stories of the ancient ancestors. These are persons who confirm both the truth and the meaning of “living by faith.” The reader is encouraged to trace those stories in Hebrews 11, noting the names and the signs of that life, the concrete examples that such a life is *possible*. In the “Hall of Faith” we hear about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and others. They are all *named*, for they are all persons with identities formed by hearts of faith through the gift of grace. They are all *unique*, having encountered the living God under a variety of circumstances and through distinct personalities with both strengths and weakness. To read their stories is to re-imagine our own. They are different from each other, and yet through faith they engage with One God who made His presence felt through faith and promise, life and death, fear and hope. Each shared the rough-and-tumble world of uneven fortunes, marked by unpredictability, and met the living God who is the rewarder of those who seek Him.

Faith partners with hope in the promises of God. Hope waits, not always receiving in the moment what God promised. They live by faith in hope. In an elegant paragraph, the *Hebrews* writer summarizes the manner in which faith operated for these heroes of the faith:

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16).

From this poetic description, we discover that faith is not only that *by* which we live, but also *in* which we die. Death acquires fresh meaning under this perspective. Death is not only the end of life, lived under the present circumstances, it is also the divine signature on life. We ask, “How did they die?” Was there despair in the end, the symptoms of regret, disappointment, and failure? Or, did faith invest the heroes of these stories with a new future where death lays no final claim? Here are persons who did not linger long over what was “left behind,” did not remain bound to a past where they were “strangers and foreigners on the earth.” Instead, they “looked for” and “desired” a “better country,” a different world that would one day come down “from heaven.” For them, opportunity did not mean only the life they now lived, but the life that continues to thrive in the “city” God prepares for them.

By connecting hopeful faith with “the city” the biblical writer reminds his readers of the persistent longing of humankind for a new society where persons share the blessings of the gracious God *together*. Earlier in *Hebrews*, we read about Abraham, the quintessential “father of faith,”

For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).

In the ancient world, the “city” came to represent the uniting of humanity under a common rule and a shared future. Not all such urban projects succeeded, and often degenerated into destructive contests for national superiority, where war produced winners and losers, and the earth was filled with violence (Genesis 6:11). The loss of national hope prepared the way for covenant faith instead, and Abraham began that long journey down Freedom Road, where faith, hope, and promise energized the higher vision of a world where the blessing of God

would come to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Into human consciousness through the Hebrew people came a new vision of society, a new city, God's gift from heaven for earth. And *that city* would be received by faith in God's gift. Faith looks "forward," for history moves forward into the future of God's making. Faith makes possible the partnering with God whose will is done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

In the biblical account about persons of faith (Hebrews 11), we have the living evidence that *such a city is possible*. That is why, immediately after the great roll-call of faith, the *Hebrews* writer pens these words:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

It might be tempting to drift into a dreamy-eyed admiration of past heroes, whose examples remain nothing more than relics of the past, monuments to *what once had been*. But here the writer shakes us out of our sentimental reminiscing with the abrupt "Therefore!" All of these heroes are our brothers and sisters who walk with us on Freedom Road. They are "witnesses" to worthwhile faith that appeals to us also to: lay aside, run, look, consider, and not lose heart. Jesus takes up the baton of that race begun with Abel, Noah, Abraham, and the whole "cloud" of faithful persons who ran the race before him. And he even now invites every one of us to join the journey, endure the rigors, and live by faith also. Faith needs completion, and so the writer says of Jesus that he is "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Jesus embodies the ultimate object of faith, the cross and the joy, death and resurrection. Jesus opens up the new future, beyond shame from loss, and takes his seat of honor at the "right hand of God." "Consider him" means to receive from him the new possibility of the city and make it our own.

When the "Hall of Faith" narrative ends, the writer offers one final gift that brings together the examples of the past with hope for the future:

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Hebrews 11:39-40).

With awakened hearts and eyes wide open, we are invited to see our faithful ancestors as belonging to our community also, and in fact, together with us, they at last are complete. That is how faith and promise work together to fulfill the purposes of God. Faith is a joint venture, not an isolated act of individuals who travel alone, but rather the "communion of saints." Freedom Road is crowded with persons, from every generation, who travel in unison toward the city of God. Faith experiences the promises through the community of faith, the resurrection community, buoyed by the Easter story, and gathered around the Risen Lord. Promises fulfilled are promises shared, with Jesus in the midst. This is the meaning of the church, rightly imagined. Freedom Road moves along with companions in the body of Christ, the community that lives by faith, from grace, where gifts abound in the kingdom of the generous God.

Conclusion

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

We conclude with a summary text from Paul's great letter to the Romans. This brief passage is part of a longer commentary of Paul. In it he quotes the Old Testament: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (10:13), and then proceeds to ask a series of questions that follows this chain of words: call ← believed ← heard ← preaching ← sent, and each term requires yet another term to make sense out of the chain. This leads Paul to then declare what we find in 10:17 that *faith* becomes *faith* when a person hears "the word of Christ." Just as creation (see comments on Hebrews 11 above) requires the Word of God (the *hrēma*) in order to exist, so faith itself rises out of the speech-event of preaching the Word. We believe that the power of faith derives, at its inception, not from the force of the will or from positive thinking, but from *hearing the Word*. The Word *creates faith* in the heart of the hearer. Everywhere Paul went, he preached the Word, and remained in awe that through what he called "the foolishness of preaching" people came to saving faith (see 1 Corinthians 1:21).

At the core of our values is trusting faith arising from hearing the Word of God. There is no substitute for faith except the reading, hearing, and receiving of the Word. *We believe that the Bible is God's authorized witness, in human language, to the Word of God, and that when read, the Word will be faithful to its human witnesses and speak again to us as it did to them.* When this happens — for the Word of God *happens* to those who read the Bible — faith is made possible for open and receptive hearts.

Thankfully, faith is both a noun and a verb. On the one hand, faith is a reliable foundation and a faithful relationship that brings together the God who loves the world with those who believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. On the other hand, faith is a realized community and a neighborly practice that brings together the faith community with the communities all around us, where honestly seeking persons might love God and each other. From the inner dynamics of faith come these rich dimensions that remain in constant conversation with each other: God keeping faith with human beings, human beings keeping faith with God, and human beings keeping faith with each other.

At the beginning of his remarkable exploration of the Christian faith, Paul writes these words:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed *through faith for faith*; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17, NRSV).

We have chosen the NRSV because of the way it translates the Greek phrase, *ek pisteōs eis pistin*, literally, "out of/from faith for faith." Two difference prepositions (*ek* and *eis*) animate the activity of *faith* in this passage. There is a two-fold movement of faith: 1) faith flows from God (*ek* is about source or origin) in the form of *faithfulness*, His supreme reliability and trustworthiness as revealed in His love for the world through Jesus Christ. As the Old Testament often spoke of it, this is God's steadfast love — *hesed* — for His people, and ultimately toward the world. 2) The faithfulness of God flows toward human beings, calling them to responsive faith. Faithfulness from (*ek*) God has as its purpose to awaken faith in human beings, and thus His faithfulness is reaching out to (*eis*) them.

And so, "through faith" and "for faith" are the indispensable partners in the recovery journey on Freedom Road. The Gospel, Paul tells us, proclaims this message so that persons might exercise faith. The goal is God unleashing His righteousness in the lives of human beings, making right what is wrong, and forming communities of righteousness where everyone is welcome. This God does not play favorites, but in choosing His people, both Jew and Gentile are eligible, and the membership requirement is "by grace through faith" without the added burden of anything else. Returning to John 3:16, we might simply say that, in Jesus Christ, the love of God awakens the faith of human beings, and that the love of God does not discriminate but issues the universal invitation, "whosoever will." Freedom Road invites travelers with the faithful words, "Enter here."

Glory to God! Amen.