

Angel Gear
April 20, 2014

John 20:1-18

As I have noted before, some years ago I served churches in the mountains, around Asheville.

In those days, I did a lot of motorcycle riding. One of my churches dubbed me, “Holy Knevel”

I enjoyed riding up on the Blue Ridge Parkway and around the scenic areas up there.

If you’ve been there, you know how beautiful it can be, especially in the fall and winter. Cold, particularly on a motorcycle, but beautiful nonetheless.

I would carry my daughter Michelle, who was in kindergarten at the time, to her school on the back of my motorcycle, and she would always wave like a beauty queen in a parade as we pulled in to the school.

One thing I didn’t like, though, was coming down the mountain when I would ride down to visit my parents, who were living here in Greensboro at the time.

I’m sure most of you are aware of the big mountain climb up I-40, beginning at Old Fort and on up to Asheville. Not terribly bad going up.

But coming down that mountain, on a motorcycle – big tractor/trailer rigs would come up right on my tail. I thought many a time that if they ever lost it, I was a goner.

Fortunately, no incidents. But I often rode with a very uneasy feeling until I got down that mountain.

Well, it was because of those experiences in the mountains that this little story caught my attention.

A fellow named Claude Martin had an uncle, Ed Lusk, who bought and sold produce. They lived down in Columbia, SC.

When apples were in season, Claude and Ed would drive a truck up into the mountains, buy a load of apples, and bring them down to Columbia to sell.

Ed let the teen-aged Claude drive the truck, but Ed was, to be polite, a very thrifty person. To be impolite, he was one of the stingiest people in the history of the human species.

For lunch, he would give Claude something from the produce that he could not sell—a rotten cantaloupe or apple.

And on the way down the mountain, with a truckload of apples, he would have Claude turn off the engine and coast—to save gas.

Now this was 1939. All the mountain roads were narrow, full of “S” curves, and two-lane.

But Uncle Ed was trying to save every penny so he told Claude to cut off the engine, put the gearshift in neutral, and use the brakes to get them down the mountain.

Truckers call that “angel gear,” because if you do that often enough you are probably going to wind up singing with the angels.

But on Easter Morning, we put ourselves in a kind of spiritual “angel gear.” We turn off all our mechanistic doubts. We refuse to put the brakes on the faith. We cling to the steering wheel of Easter.

Most non-Christians have no problem agreeing that Jesus of Nazareth was a gifted leader and teacher, but on this morning, Christians part company with this worldly opinion of Jesus.

This morning we celebrate a mystery and a miracle - the greatest miracle and mystery ever known: Christ is Risen!

But we hesitate to launch out fully in faith. Indeed, our society seems to doubt the usefulness of faith.

Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard psychologist John E. Mack protests the exclusion of spiritual elements from our approach to the world. Listen to what he says:

"By and large, we in the West have rejected the language and experience of the sacred, the divine and the animation of nature. Our psychology is predominantly a psychology of mechanisms, parts, and linear relationships. We have grown suspicious of experiences, no matter how powerful, that cannot be quantified, and we distrust the language of reverence, spirit, and mystical connection, recalling perhaps with fear the superstitiousness and holy wars of earlier periods."

In other words, the language of faith is suspect in our society.

Many people place a great deal of faith in the sound reasoning of doctors, scientists and judges. Years are spent in education to teach people to rely on the wisdom of experts.

But believing things 'on authority' only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think trustworthy. A huge percentage of the things we believe is believed on authority.

I believe there is such a place as the Sahara desert. I could not prove by abstract reasoning that there is such a place. I've never been there. I believe it because reliable people have told me so and have put it on maps.

The ordinary person believes in the solar system, atoms, and the circulation of the blood on authority--because the scientists say so.

Every historical statement is believed on authority. None of us has seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

But we believe them simply because people who did see them have left writings that tell us about them; in fact, on authority.

A person who balked at authority in other things, as some people do in religion, would have to be content to know nothing all his life.

Other things we accept because our reasoning ability tells us they make sense. Some things we say are just plain common sense. Fair enough.

Yet, sound reasoning has its limits. Human sensibility and common sense will only take a person so far.

There are some things that we are asked to accept that defy common sense, that don't seem reasonable, that just don't seem to make any sense at all. That's when faith has to kick in.

What is faith anyway? Well first, let me tell you what faith is not. Faith is not anti-reason. There is no division between faith and reason. Think about it.

I am using reason right now to talk about faith. I am reasoning with you about faith. Faith is not anti-reason, not anti-science, and not anti-technology.

Those of you who were here for our Bible School last summer will remember the Mennonite couple, Aaron and Ruth Martin who talked with us. They have sung in my choral group for years, and we have had some very interesting discussions throughout those years.

Now Mennonites are not the same as Amish, although many people confuse the two or equate them in their thinking. But Aaron and Ruth know a great deal about the Amish and I've learned a lot from them.

The Amish people are a Christian sect that rejects almost all technology. They do not drive cars or tractors. They do not use telephones or own TVs. They do not go to school much. And I have often thought that if this were Christianity, I wouldn't want any.

For years, I have heard Fundamentalist preachers railing against science. I'm sure you have heard them also.

You get the idea that these folks are more anti-science than pro-Jesus. They are preaching not faith in Jesus but their own anti-intellectual bias.

But my conviction is that faith is not anti-technology and it's not anti-intellectualism.

What then is faith? The French philosopher and Jesuit Priest Teilhard de Chardin says that an "act of faith is to perceive as possible, and accept as more probable, a conclusion which ...cannot be contained in any analytical premises."

In simpler words, faith is believing something to be true even though you can't prove it.

One of my favorite theologians, Paul Tillich, goes a step further. He writes in his book, "The Dynamics of Faith," that faith is the state of being ultimately concerned.

And I don't want to put you to sleep this morning with theological, philosophical stuff, but I hope I can help you see the relevance of this.

All living creatures have many concerns, especially about those things which have a direct bearing on their existence and survival – food, shelter, things like that.

But human beings, created as we believe in the image of God, have other concerns as well – social, economic, political, and spiritual - and each one of these is capable of becoming the most important thing in life to us.

We know that's true. We see people for whom the only real important thing in life is making money or economic status, or accomplishment and success in the political realm. These things become their ultimate concern.

It is when faith becomes our ultimate concern – when our faith and what it means for our life is the most important thing to us – that we are able to achieve the fullness of life that Jesus talked about.

Faith is the way we make sense of the universe. Faith is not opposed to reason, but faith goes beyond reason. It "cannot be contained in any analytical premises."

Reason by itself can never make sense of the universe. We need to put faith and reason together, and sometimes faith has to outrun reason.

When it comes to Easter, faith launches into angel gear and goes where reason and science cannot go. Such is the case with resurrection.

But let us not fool ourselves - the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was just as hard to believe in the first century as it is for us.

First-century folks probably knew death better than we do. They saw it up close in all its ugliness more than we do.

We deny death. We closet the sick in hospitals. When they die, we have quick funerals and shovel them quickly under the dirt or cremate them.

We envy those who actually saw the resurrected Jesus. We imagine it was easier for them to believe.

But while it is true that none of us has actually seen Jesus in the flesh; it is also true that none of us helped pull his lifeless body off the cross on Friday evening.

None of us carried his limp, blood-stained form into a barren tomb and wrapped it in a shroud.

For those who had known the living Jesus, there was no doubt that he was dead. Believing that he could be truly alive again was an astonishing act of faith for the first disciples.

It is still an astonishing act of faith. For many people it is too astonishing. For lots of people, even in church, an actual resurrection is just too outlandish to take literally.

We expect life and death to follow a certain set of rules and to meet certain rational criteria.

None of us has even see a person we knew to be dead walk around and eat and interact with others.

Therefore, we scramble around trying to find alternative explanations for the empty tomb.

Maybe the guards did fall asleep and the disciples did steal the body.

Maybe Jesus was not really dead - only drugged, or in a coma, or hypnotized - and he came out of it and escaped the tomb.

Nonsense. Let all that go. Shift into angel gear and let your faith soar.

The resurrection was a miracle. When we come to Easter, we must experience it as a miracle without trying to make it fit our expectations and our limitations.

When we refuse to let the miracle be miraculous, when we try to crimp it and cramp it to fit our style, we find ourselves distorting everything that made up Jesus' life and ministry on earth.

It is time to let the mystery shine.

Without Easter, we live in a bleak universe, which does not hold much love or hope for us.

Easter helps us to make sense of the universe. Christ on the cross revealed God's love for us.

The resurrected Lord Jesus reveals that God loves us so much that even death cannot separate us from God.

So the only way the universe makes sense is through the Risen Lord.

Shift into angel gear. Reach out in faith. Christ is Risen! Alleluia!.