Easter Sunday, April 12, 1998
BELIEVING BUT NOT UNDERSTANDING
John 20:1-18

There's a remarkable statement in the Gospel of John's version of the Easter story that I never noticed until I was reading it again this past week. Here's the background. When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early on Sunday morning and saw that the stone had been rolled away from the opening, she assumed that someone had moved the body to another place. So she ran to find Simon Peter and John to tell them that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb. They returned with her, looked inside, and saw nothing but emptiness and absence, and on that basis, the Gospel of John says, "one of them believed although neither of them understood."

Believing but not understanding. That phrase has been on my mind all week, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that not only is it true of Easter, but it's true in many of the important things in life. There are forces in our lives we all believe in even though we do not fully understand them. That does not mean that we should not try to understand and learn as much as we can. In other words, I am not talking here about blind belief or never questioning what we believe. What I'm saying is that there are times when belief comes first and then is followed by understanding.

For example, I believe in love but do not fully understand it.

I believe the power of love is stronger than the power of hate, but I do not fully understand it.

I believe in electricity, but do not understand it.

I believe in atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, quarks, and other such things but do not understand them.

I believe in the law of gravity, but do not understand it.

I believe the world is round but do not understand why those on the bottom do not fall off.

I believe in computers but do not understand how they work.

I believe that we human beings have put satellites in orbit circling the earth, which make communications possible all over the world, but do not understand them. I believe in space travel but do not understand it.

I believe in bacteria, viruses, and other microbes but do not understand them.

I believe in God but do not understand God to the extent I would prefer, and that's what makes the life of Jesus so important — it reveals more about God and increases my understanding of God. I also believe that all of us need to do our best to increase our understanding of God and that we will never understand God completely.

I believe that all of us are created in the image of God but do not fully understand all the implications of that.

I believe the Spirit of God dwells in me and in you, but I do not understand exactly how that works.

I believe God loves all of us unconditionally, but I cannot fully comprehend unconditional love and its power.

I believe in forgiveness but do not fully understand its power.

In many areas of life on this earth, belief comes before understanding. I believe these things because I have experienced them. We all have experiences that we know are true but which we do not fully understand.

There's another factor about believing but not understanding. It is this: Often in human history, the most significant events when they happen are not noticed by many and may not be seen as being very important at the time. Their true significance is only understood later. And that's because there have always been those few who believed even though they did not understand. That is true of Easter.

When you think about it, our Christian faith had a very fragile beginning, yet it has now lasted for more than 2000 years. And that's because the early followers believed and acted on what they believed even though they didn't fully understand.

Our faith had its earliest beginnings in the experience of the Hebrew people with the one God. It continued through the law and the prophets as remembered in the Old Testament. It found a fresh embodiment when a young carpenter from Galilee began to live and teach an ever-expanding vision of God and how God works in creation. His teachings stirred people as they had not been stirred before. People who came into contact with him and listened to his words began to believe they did have worth and could make a difference with their lives as they collaborated with a dynamic and loving God.

At the same time, of course, the hope and dynamism of the young carpenter offended those who wanted things to stay as they were. Change is always difficult. New visions of reality offend people who think they are in control. They turned against Jesus in a swift succession of events one Thursday night, had him arrested, put on trial, and before the sun went down on Friday afternoon, he was dead and put in a tomb.

But then the absolutely unexpected occurred. The new vision of reality which Jesus taught and lived was vindicated in the resurrection.

But even then, this expanding vision of God and God's unconditional love was not easily accepted. As the Apostles began to tell the story of what had happened, they got into trouble because of it. In the book of Acts in the New Testament, we are told that the government authorities were angry because the Apostles were proclaiming to people that God had raised Jesus from the dead. They were arrested and put in jail.

But why should the Apostles be arrested for preaching the Easter message? Because of the fear of change that is in all of us. Easter proclaims that new life and change are always possible.

This fear of change has been with us human beings for a long time.

In a new book with the title The Gifts of the Jews, the author, Thomas Cahill, shows that ancient civilizations before the Jews came on the scene saw life as being part of an endless cycle of birth and death. Time was perceived as a wheel, spinning ceaselessly, never altering its course. It was repetition over and over again — no change — until the ancient Jews dramatically changed that perception.

When Abraham and Sarah heard the call of God telling them to "go forth," the concept of an unknown future took hold, and Western civilization was born. From this insight, the Jews evolved a new vision of men and women with unique destinies — a vision that thousands of years later Jesus expanded — all of it based on the belief that we are created in the image of God and that we, therefore, are also creators and can mold the future. Not only is change inevitable, but we can manage and direct the change. It is this vision that inspired the Declaration of Independence and our hopeful belief in progress and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today.

It's the message of Easter, and it's a vision that needs to be renewed all the time. Although we are created in the image of God and are filled with creative energy, we human beings also have within us a built-in resistance to change and new life.

Paul Tillich, in a book entitled The Courage to Be, claims that Christianity in the time of the early church had only one strong rival, and that was the spirit and philosophy of Stoicism.

Of course, there were many competing religious systems in the Greek-Roman world, but in terms of basic views of reality, Stoicism was the opposite of Christianity. The essence of Stoicism is a spirit of resignation toward all things. Reality is regarded as fixed and static, and human beings are felt to have little real power to alter or modify anything. Reality is not going to change on its own, and no one has the power to change it — not even God. Therefore, the appropriate human stance is one of accepting, resisting, and trying to live with things as they are. That kind of attitude is still alive in the world.

Time and time again, I hear people say, "I don't like change."

I was visiting with an older man the other night, and he said, "I don't like change." I knew him quite well, so I asked him, "Why is it then that you buy a new car every other year? How come you don't live in the same house where you grew up? It had no running water and no inside bathroom. And why do you seek the latest medical treatments with CAT-SCANS and other modern technology? What you mean is you don't like change in some areas of your life. Only the 'old-order Amish' are consistent in trying to avoid any change in every part of their lives."

Christianity, with its Hebrew heritage, unlike earlier religions and philosophies and some later philosophies, has a dynamic view of reality. It affirms that reality is dynamic and not static, and because we human beings are made in the image of this dynamism, we too possess the power to make things happen.

Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible bear witness to a God "who can and does make all things new." The future is open, not fixed. This means that creativity, which includes change, is built into the creation and into us.

Believing but not understanding. There's still a great deal we don't understand about Easter. Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth.

No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen on that first Easter morning either.

The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God. But they believed not because of the empty tomb but because they experienced the power of the risen Christ in their lives, and every time they experienced him, they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him.

I believe Easter happens over and over again in our world and in the lives of individuals if you let it. Easter says: do not be afraid of death and also do not be afraid of infinite possibilities in this life. There is no limit to what the love of God can do. Amen.