Easter Sunday, April 15, 2001
TOO GOOD TO BELIEVE
Luke 24:1-12

You've heard the statement and have perhaps said it yourself, "It's too good to be true." Does this statement imply that goodness and truth cannot go together? Can something really be too good to be true? I don't think so. I believe that authentic goodness is always true. What you really mean by this statement is that an offer or promise is too fraudulent to be true. I also believe that there are some things of which it can be said, "They are so good they have to be true."

When something unexpected and wonderful has happened, your initial response might be, "It's too good to believe." That's because what has taken place is so surprising that you cannot assimilate it quickly in your mind. You are stunned and don't know how to respond. This past February, when Rowena and I were at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, we had that experience. We were expecting and had accepted the fact that Rowena would have kidney surgery after a few more tests. We were also prepared for the fact that the tumor was probably malignant. Then, the day before the surgery was to take place, we had what we thought was going to be a pre-operation meeting with the surgeon, and he told us it was not a malignant tumor, and in fact, surgery was not necessary. Our first response was that it was too good to believe. It took us a bit of time to readjust our thinking.

Too good to believe! That's what the early morning visitors to the tomb experienced that first Easter Sunday morning. They had come to the tomb expecting death and were surprised by life. It was a total and complete turnaround. It took some time for the good news to soak in and be assimilated. It was too overwhelming to believe at first hearing.

Therefore, it should not surprise us that when the women came back and told the disciples, Luke says, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

Many years ago, a friend told me that his young son was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same program. Every morning the boy would ask, "Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?" Finally, the great day arrived, and there they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, got up and wandered from the room.

Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, "What is it, son? Is anything wrong?" "It's too good," the boy replied, "It's just too good." Maybe that's it. Maybe the news of the resurrection, the news of Jesus' victory over death, is just too good to believe, too good to assimilate all at once. It's too extraordinary. You can't get your mind around it. It takes time to get used to it.

The first step in getting your mind around it is to be awestruck and filled with wonder and amazement. That was the case with the women who went to the tomb early Sunday morning. The Easter story invites you to a kind of "holy wonder," the only possible human response to the presence of the holiness and mystery of God. When, in the midst of the ordinary, everyday things of your living, something extraordinary and unexpected appears, how can you receive it except in wonder? Wonder is not the same as faith, but it can be the servant of faith, ushering

you into the very presence of God. Wonder has to do with awe and joy and even fear. It signals the approach of something too marvelous to receive in any other way.

But wonder cannot easily be accommodated into the normal, reasonable categories you live by. Management expert Peter Drucker has called people today, “the knowledge workers.” Most of you do not make your living by the strength of your backs or by the skill of your hands, but by the keenness of your minds, processing and analyzing new information and hypotheses. You’re good at it. You know what is possible and impossible. You know how things are. Knowledge is power, and you possess a lot of knowledge. You grasp difficult concepts and manipulate them as tools.

But what happens when you are faced with information that doesn’t fit your reasonable categories? What are you to make of an event you cannot grasp or possess? The news, “Christ is risen!” doesn’t fit anything you know. It is too big to get your mind around. What are you going to do with that?

One answer is quite simple: you dismiss it. It doesn’t fit your categories. It doesn’t make sense. It is an idle tale. That was the first response of the disciples when the women told them the story of the resurrection.

But if you attempt to assimilate it, there’s another response. You can begin to believe, even though you don’t fully understand.

There’s a remarkable statement in the Gospel of John’s story of the resurrection that’s easy to miss. In his version of the Easter story, Mary Magdalene came alone 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 on that basis, the Gospel of John says, “One of them believed, although neither of them understood.”

That’s not only true of Easter but of many of the important things in life. There are forces and experiences in your life you believe in even though you do not fully understand them. That does not mean that you should not try to understand them and learn as much as you can. I’m not talking here about blind belief or never questioning what you believe. What I’m saying is 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 fully understand it.

I believe the physicists when they tell me about atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, quarks, and other such things, but I 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 people do not fall off. I believe in computers. I use them, but I do not understand them.

I believe we human beings have put satellites in orbit that circle the earth and make communications possible all around the world, but I do not understand them. I believe in space travel, 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. His life, teachings, death, and resurrection reveal more about God and increase 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 each human being is created in the image of God, but I do not fully understand all the implications of that. I believe that the Spirit of God dwells in me and in you but do not fully understand exactly how that Spirit works.

I believe that God loves each one of us unconditionally, but I cannot completely comprehend the power and mystery of unconditional love. I believe in the power of prayer but do not understand how it works. I believe in the power of forgiveness but do not fully understand that power.

In many areas of life on this earth, belief comes before understanding. I believe in many things because I have experienced them. We all have.

There's another factor about believing and not understanding. It is this: often in human history, the most significant events, when they happen, are not noticed by very many and may not be seen as being very important at the time. Their true significance is only understood later. That's true of Easter.

When you think about it, our Christian faith had a very fragile beginning, yet it has now lasted for more than 2,000 years. That's because the early followers believed and acted on what they believed.

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 fresh embodiment when a young carpenter from Nazareth began to live and teach an ever-expanding vision of God and how God works in the 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. They also believed that tomorrow can be better than today and that God wants us to improve life on this earth. In that sense, we are co-creators with 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. New visions of reality always offend people who think they are in control. They turned against Jesus in a swift succession of events one Thursday night and 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 resurrection!

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 and its implications, they got into trouble because of it. In the book of Acts in the New Testament, we are told that the people in charge were angry because the Apostles were proclaiming to people that God had raised Jesus from the dead and that the Spirit of Jesus was alive and at work through them. They were arrested and put in jail. But that didn't stop the story of the good news of God's unconditional love from being spread.

Too good to believe, followed by believing but not understanding — that's the story of Easter. There's still a great deal we don't understand about the Easter event. It does not fit with anything else we know about 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. The early followers 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 that power, they became stronger, wiser, more loving, and more daring. Before Easter, Jesus was only in one place at a time. Now he was everywhere.

Too good to believe? Maybe at first, but not when you allow the experience to enter your life. I believe that 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 do not be afraid of infinite possibilities in your life. There is no limit to what the love of God can do. Amen.