

Sermon: "I believe and it makes a difference." By Pastor Kit Greaves Pray

I love the story of an unlikely hero of the Calgary Winter Olympics named Eddy the Eagle. Remember that British Ski Jumper, 5 ft, 8 inch be-speckled Michael David Edwards, who had never previously competed internationally in ski jumping and yet represented his country and could have killed himself on the 90-meter tall ski jump? Somehow, Eddy the Eagle and his coach believed that Eddy could do it and he did do it. Not successfully, he came in last, unless you measure success by simply not dying!

What is it to believe? Is it irrational? What is it to believe and act on that belief, even if you're tired, frustrated, hungry, sick and you feel tempted to say to Jesus, pick someone else?

In the book *Why People Don't Believe*, Paul Chamberlaine quotes an American neuropsychiatrist and outspoken atheist Sam Harris who wrote that religion is an irrational phenomenon that, "floats free of reason and evidence." Because of the lack of evidence, Harris claims, people are free to make up anything they want to believe, do anything they want in the name of religion, including, in today's context, the blockade of the downtown of the city of Ottawa with their big trucks, some protestors declaring they believe in freedom, but their words and actions display little knowledge of Canada's political system, or the provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Young people: pay attention in Grade 10 Civics it could save you from foolish choices.

But when you're feeling tired and frustrated, powerless and fearful of a virus you can't see, desperate because no one seems to be listening, we too might latch on to any hope, as dark and misguided as that hope may be, and end up doing and saying things that our rational, better selves wouldn't dream of.

Let's explore what it is to say "I believe" and what a difference it makes to join the first disciples when they say "I believe in Jesus" and conclude with a unique and moving true story of a Black woman's bravery that emulates the miracle of the catch of fish.

The Gospel scene opens with a bit of resourcefulness on Jesus' part. It seems that he'd begun to teach a group by the shore but the crowd grew bigger and bigger and there simply wasn't room. So, he improvised. Along the lakeshore close to Capernaum there is a sequence of steep inlets, as NT Wright describes, a 'zigzagging shoreline with each inlet forming a natural amphitheatre.' To this day, if you get in a boat and push out a little from the shore, you can talk in a natural speaking voice, and your voice carries like on a flat lake at night. Jesus was simply exploiting the geography of the area and the ready availability of the boat, Simon's boat.

The crowds press in to hear because Jesus speaks with authority. When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon Peter, put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch. Common sense, reason and fisherman's lore said, after he and his companion's long-night's work catching nothing, as the sun rises you clean the nets and go home to bed.

As Jesus tells him to let down their nets, he is infringing on the fisherman's area of expertise. Simon Peter, after all, is the one with the experience and understanding when it comes to fishing. Why should he waste his energy that goes against his knowledge? Let down their nets, when they've fished all night and are tired, tired yet stayed awake long enough to listen to Jesus' teaching.

Have you ever worked a night shift and came home and had to do more work, getting the family organized, fed, clothed, out the door or online school? 'Tired' doesn't begin to explain it; you and Simon Peter are in the same boat. Simon grumbles under his breath, perhaps thinking 'pick someone else' but then he obeys because it's

Jesus...and we do that sometimes, we do what someone we trust tells us to do, even when we're tired and can barely lift our head, and though it may not make sense to us at the time; because of who said it, we do it. Then having acted on it, more often than not, it did make sense.

Simon Peter's openness to the suggestion from someone who is clearly not an expert in the field is, well, almost miraculous. Maybe it's those very practical considerations, when we feel nudged to act in faith, that we believe the Spirit is speaking. That is discipleship, training in righteousness. Keep praying, even when you're tired and though not much seems to be happening, it's who we are becoming as we believe, that matters. To believe makes a difference.

Seen through the lens of contemporary cultural norms and habits, Simon's response to the catch of fish is more miraculous still. The nets from his boat and a second boat are nearly tearing because there were so many fish! Having listened to the teaching of Jesus, and now seeing this abundance, it won Peter's heart and soul. Simon Peter falls to his feet and says to Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." In other words, "I misjudged you, Jesus. I was wrong." It's like hearing the skeptical judge on the panel on America's Got Talent, who shares the same name Simon Cowell saying, "I was wrong. You DO have talent."

The point of this story is Jesus' miraculous influence with dispirited men, wearied by a night of profitless work. These were the people Jesus needed as his disciples, disciplined by labour and hardship, but with the impetuous loyalty to say, "If you give the order, I will do it." Peter's instant reaction was to see himself in light of God's sheer goodness and to draw the necessary conclusions; a miracle crafted by Jesus just for Simon Peter and his fellow fishermen. And it's a miracle for Simon Peter to admit he was wrong and acknowledge Jesus is not just master, or friend, but he calls him 'Lord,' a blasphemous statement when believing in One God was all they had known.

To say I believe is not a party for one.

Discipleship is not a solitary calling. As we see in Luke's Gospel reading, Simon is not working as a fisherman on his own. We imagine going fishing as a solo activity but fishing in the first century Galilee was a cooperative business. Fishing organizations existed in what we would call a business cooperative, that functioned on the macro-level - banding together their resources and labour in order to achieve the greatest profit and at the micro-level at which multiple fishermen would work in a single boat to cast their nets and help one another when there was a big haul of fish, as in the case in today's Gospel reading. This cooperation extended across socio-economic levels, incorporating both owners and day labourers as well as across generations, with tasks assigned as they were most fit, a concept with strong resonances to Paul's image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians.

As we continue to read from 1 Corinthians and consider the internal conflicts within that congregation, this model of cooperation and mutual support becomes particularly striking. Here Paul reminds the Corinthians of the community to whom Jesus revealed himself following the resurrection, including not only Simon Peter and himself, but also many other apostles and believers. As we hear in the call of the first disciples and wrestle with how God is calling us to service today, this reminder that service of God does not occur in a siloed or solitary manner is an important one to hear. There are countless millions who say together, "I believe."

The most important thing we can say to the assertion that Christian truth claims "float free of reason and evidence" is that that is simply false. In fact, it is so flagrantly false one wonders what the critics are reading or researching when they make such an assertion. As many of them know, Christian philosophers and theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas, Blaise Pascal, C.S. Lewis, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, WL Craig and a host of others throughout the history of Christianity have piled up thousands of pages of evidence for the truth claims Christianity presents to the world.

To say I believe in God, a living God I can trust, is backed up by massive and reliable sources of evidence and that makes a difference.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, Paul uses a tried and true method for testing the evidence he presents that Jesus has been physically resurrected from the dead. Paul mentions several people to whom Jesus appeared alive and well after Jesus was publicly crucified. The accepted method used by Greek historians of his day such as Herodotus in proving historical events, listing the witnesses by name, people still alive at the time of his writing, are available to be questioned. Real people with real evidence to back up the claim, Jesus is alive. Confidence to say I believe is based on the evidence.

As we begin Black History Month, a fitting illustration to the miracle of the nets full of fish rescuing Simon and the dispirited fishermen from potential poverty and unbelief, is the story of Harriet Tubman. If you haven't seen the 2019 biopic simply called Harriet, it's on Netflix, you might watch it sometime this month. There will be opportunity to discuss the story at Zoom coffee hour on Wed at 10:30 am and at an evening discussion group later in the month.

Who was Harriet Tubman?

Harriet Tubman, 1820-1913, was born in Dorchester County, Maryland and escaped from enslavement in the southern United States in 1849. Tubman went on to become a leading abolitionist before the American Civil War leading numerous enslaved persons to freedom in the "free" Northern states and Canada through the Underground Railroad — a secret network of routes and safe houses that helped people escape enslavement.

Harriet Tubman began and ended her rescues in [St. Catharines, Canada West](#) (Ontario), where she moved in 1851, bought a house and worked and lived until 1861. St Catherine's had a settlement of about 800 Black people, 700 of whom were former slaves. Tubman later said, "I wouldn't trust Uncle Sam with my people no longer, but I brought 'em clear off to Canada." Today, the African Methodist Episcopal

(AME) church is a heritage site in St Catherine's that provided spiritual and social support to the growing free community. To mark the day of her death 10 March, 1913, March 10 was declared Harriet Tubman Day in the US, as well as in [St. Catharines](#), in 1990. In 2005, Harriet Tubman was designated a Person of National Significance by the [Government of Canada](#).

My point is simply this: we don't do discipleship alone. Harriet led the way, believing that people should be free and not enslaved. But she couldn't have done it alone. Her faith in God and the many supporters up and down the Underground Railroad made it possible for her rescue missions to succeed, catching many men and women, just like Jesus showed in that great catch of fish.

When you say I believe, and I say I believe, we are trusting in a God who has come along side us, a God who believes in us, in our ability to be more than we could be alone, a soul freed and made alive in Christ.

There is abundant evidence to believe in the risen Jesus, so we can have confidence when we say I believe. For Simon Peter, suddenly everything clicks into place, everything succeeds on a scale he'd never dream of. What do you dream of?

Let's pray. Thank you, Father, for Eddy the Eagle, for Simon Peter and the amazing catch of fish and for those first disciples' seeing Jesus' vision of catching men and women. Thank you, God for Harriet Tubman and all those who assisted her and those she rescued and all who are today inspired by her bravery. True freedom in Christ for all people has come at a great price. May this affirmation "I believe" give us renewed confidence to obey when you nudge us along and so train our souls in righteousness, for your glory, in the name of Jesus. Amen.