

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*

*<sup>19</sup> And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. <sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21)*

### Who do You Believe?

A month or so ago, we got a new internet service in our house. As part of the deal, we got several weeks of free cable TV – which is quite a rarity in our house. So of course, I have to watch it while we still have it, because I won’t pay to keep it. Well, I was watching a silly science fiction show a few weeks ago, and one character revealed to another the secret that was the premise of the show. The second character said something like, “You’ve just told me that science fiction is real!” The first character had to convince her of something impossible. Of course, it all worked out the way the writer wanted it to. But I think there’s an eerie parallel to real life here. The truth is, what the Bible teaches and what we Christians believe sounds like nonsense to unbelievers. There are many people out there who want to recast what the Scriptures teach to make it more acceptable. But in doing so, they change that impossible message. When it comes to Christ, when it comes to the miracle of Easter, **who do you believe?**

#### I.

St. Peter, who wrote the words we have before us, says, **“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”** Now, there were lots of cleverly invented stories about Jesus in his day. They were different than they are today, because the challenges we face almost always resonate with what people think and feel at any given moment. What are the challenges we face today? One kind of challenge could be called the History Channel challenge. Many of you watch the History Channel and it often has programs about the Bible. A few weeks ago, a program aired that attempted to get at the history behind the story of Moses. So, where the Bible says that God led the people to the Red Sea and then he divided the waters so they could escape, these historians concluded that Moses tricked Pharaoh into thinking he was lost and then escaped during low tide but the Egyptians chariots got stuck in the mud – and then the tide came in! Where the Bible says that God stood as a pillar of cloud and fire between the Israelites and the Egyptian army, these historians conclude that this was just a clever trick that played on the superstition of the Egyptian army. Where the Bible says that at the end of his life, God took Moses and then buried him in a secret grave, these historians figure that after forty years, people just got tired of him and somebody assassinated him and got rid of the body. The assumption is that these events were retold and embellished for centuries until somebody finally wrote them down and used Moses’ name so people would believe what they wrote.

Almost any show on the History Channel that deals with anything in the Bible will adopt this approach. We have to find the truth behind the Bible. To do that, we need scholars to tell us what really happened. Any class you take at a public university or any news report in the mainstream media about the history of Jesus will deal with Scripture in this way. Even when it comes to Easter, they’ll always try to figure out what really happened. That challenges our faith. Are we going to believe these “experts” with their university degrees?

But that’s not the only challenge we face when it comes to who we’re going to believe. Another challenge is found within the church itself. It’s seeing Jesus the way we want to see him. We can see him as an example – the What Would Jesus Do? approach. In this approach, the question is always: how can we be more like him? So, Jesus dying for us becomes just the starting point. We have to live for him to really be saved. That’s not the same as saying he died and rose and took our sins away.

Another challenge that comes from within the church is seeing Jesus in a very emotional, sentimental way. We need to feel his love and his presence, because Americans think that real truth is what you feel. Remember Obi-wan Kenobi saying, “Trust your feelings, Luke!” So it doesn’t really matter what doctrines you believe, what matters is how you experience Jesus. So we want music that moves us, but it doesn’t really have to say that much. We want to feel God directing our lives. But feelings are not truth. That road leads to the oft repeated statement, “This is what Jesus means to me.” So I decide – I make up the story.

These are just a few of the cleverly invented stories that people today follow when they want to know about Jesus. There are many more. But when God sent the apostles out to found the New Testament church, they didn’t need cleverly invented stories to get people excited about Jesus. They needed the truth. They needed the message of who Jesus is and what he came here to do.

That’s what they got. They were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ glory and they heard God the Father speak. Just before Jesus began his final trip to Jerusalem, he took three of his disciples up on a high mountain and he showed them his glory. His face and his garments shown like the sun. Moses and Elijah appeared to him from heaven. Then Peter made a stupid suggestion that they set up tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah so that they could stay there. But God said, **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** The disciples fell facedown on the ground in terror and when they looked up, the glory was gone. Jesus was alone.

But what they saw and heard told those men who Jesus really was: the Son of God. He did not need anything that we human beings want to add to his story to make him more attractive. He had the testimony his Father gave that said he was doing exactly what he came here to do. What was that? He came here to die and then to rise again. He came here to pay for our sin and take us to heaven. He came here to save us from hell and give us eternal life. Any other way of thinking about Jesus is a cleverly invented story. Who are we going to believe? The scholars of this world who don’t believe in Jesus? The famous preachers of our day who want us to see an example, who want us to feel the difference but who aren’t too worried about teaching the doctrine that Scripture teaches? No! **Who do you believe? God the Father testified to Christ.** For us, that is enough.

## II.

But maybe something’s bothering you about all this: we didn’t hear the Father’s testimony. Only three even of the disciples did. And they’ve been dead for almost two thousand years. How do we know they’re telling the truth? How are we supposed to put aside all the cleverly invented stories of our time that resonate so closely to what we think by nature and trust in the true Jesus? It does not come down to listening to your pastor. By the grace of God, you belong to a synod that trains its pastors and teachers to show you the real Jesus. But if your plan is just to trust us, what are you going to do if I go off the deep end? How will you ever know if I’m just another person bringing you my own cleverly invented stories or those of Martin Luther or the WELS?

Peter points us in another direction. He says, **“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”** You have the word of the prophets. You have the Scriptures. They’re a light shining in the darkness of this sinful world. We need to pay attention to them until the day dawns and Christ returns. If we do, the Christ of Scripture rises in our hearts. The real joy, the real excitement of the gospel will be there, because it comes from knowing Jesus and understanding all that he did for us.

Now, the Scriptures Peter grew up with were the Old Testament. They testified to Christ again and again. The Old Testament told the whole story. But in Peter’s day, God was still giving the Scriptures. Peter wrote, **“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”** Every year, I make my confirmation class memorize this passage because it tells us who to believe. It tells us to believe the Holy Spirit. All those Old Testament prophecies about Jesus were written by the Holy Spirit. Sure, he used men like Isaiah to write them down. But God told them exactly what to say. God did the same with the New Testament writers. Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. That makes these words the antidote for all the cleverly invented stories of every age.

Now, the devil is smart. He looks for things that sound plausible to us. He uses our own sinful hearts against us and he offers us things that we want to believe. Do we fall into his trap? Do we want that sentimental message we see on those cable channels and read about in the books from the Christian book

stores? Or do we want the solid food of the Scripture? Don't we have to admit that sometimes that stuff seems way more interesting and exciting? Don't we have to admit that we want to follow our feelings instead of listening to the word? Don't we have to admit that the arguments that we hear on the History Channel sound good sometimes? Sure we do. We're sinners. We face a lifelong battle against all those temptations to make Jesus into something different. And you know what? I bet some of you don't even see the difference between what I'm saying and what they're saying because you haven't taken the time to study the scriptures yourself. You don't read them at home. You don't talk about them with your children. You don't listen when you come to church. If that's you, how will you know if what I'm saying is true? How will you know if what somebody else tells you is the real Jesus or not?

You can't. That's why God commands us to study the Scriptures ourselves. He did institute the ministry to help us with that. But he did not institute the ministry to replace that. He didn't give us a school here so that we parents could delegate our responsibility to teach the gospel to our children. He didn't give us catechism class so that we could leave our children's spiritual growth up to our pastor. And he didn't give us church so that we could figure we're good if we just show up. God calls us to pay attention to the Word. That means more than a casual glance. It means that we study the Bible and we come and hear the gospel. God calls us to ask ourselves if we're guilty of the sins our pastor points out and to repent if we are and to trust in Jesus for forgiveness. Do we do all that?

Or have we been guilty of neglecting God's word? It's easy to do. We're all so busy. We didn't all get to spend eight years of college and seminary studying the word. We don't all have the same academic gifts. But all those things are excuses. God wants us to dig into his word. If after all God did for us, it's still not important enough to us for us to hear it, then we deserve to have our faith die and then go to hell.

But Jesus died even for our failure to hear his word and take it seriously. He rose to say that all that sin is paid for. He called me to tell you that you are forgiven. You are loved. You belong to him. And because you know that, he calls you to change your life. Love the one who loved you by embracing his word. **Who are you going to believe? The Holy Spirit testifies to Jesus in his Word.**

One of my closest friends and my father are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Last summer they were both at my house and, not surprisingly, they argued. Neither was completely ready to believe the "facts" that the other one brought in to support his argument. They both suspected that the other person was slanting the data to support their position. In the affairs of this life, we're far more inclined to believe "facts" that come from people who are "on our side." But what about things that are hard to believe? What about things that are impossible – like the resurrection of Jesus? There's only one source that's totally reliable: the Word of God. Blessed are we when we hear that word and trust in it. Blessed are we because God the Holy Spirit is the source of that trust. And he uses that word to sustain our trust and bring us to heaven. Amen.