

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. (Acts 16:31) I believe in Jesus Christ.

This belief makes Christianity edgy. Most Christians start to feel discomfort, when they hear people talk about God and never talk about Jesus. When you confess before God, the Church, and the world, "I believe in Jesus Christ," you are a marked person. You have declared yourself. Honor that accrues to Him spills over on you. Hatred directed at Him spills over on you.

You may sometimes ask, "How do I bear witness to Christ?" Just say, "I believe in Jesus Christ," Say it in the carpool. Say it in the locker room. Say it over coffee. Say it at the beach. Say it on a date. Say it on camera. Say it when others mock. Don't preach. Don't scold. Don't hate. Don't apologize. Just say: "I believe in Jesus Christ."

It is safe to say it here. We are among friends. It's important to say it here. It's also important here to go deeper. What do we mean when we say, "I believe in Jesus Christ?" The answer to that question always reveals much about the person who believes. That's what makes this sermon very personal. But this sermon is also rooted deeply in the New Testament. Let's have a go.

I Am a Sinful Man

Luke 5:8 is part of that New Testament root system. **When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"** I didn't become a public follower of Christ for attractive reasons. To put it bluntly, I was ashamed of myself. I felt unworthy in the presence of God. It became unbearable.

It was not just my bad behavior, which I was only too aware of. But, like Simon Peter, my disappointment took on another dimension. I had disappointed God. I had offended God, and in fleeting moments that thought became almost unbearable. Believing in Christ first made sense to me as a way to find relief from my feelings of unworthiness before God.

And, O merciful Lord, you did something else for me. I don't know if feeling unworthy in your presence caused it or only confirmed and deepened and purified something I learned from my parents. I reject the current advertising strategy that says I should buy something expensive because I deserve it. I don't feel entitled. I'm not sure I deserve the 7 feet of earth they'll need to bury me. How can I with my lawless streak defy my Lord and God and speak about deserving anything?

I do not despise my rights – my natural rights endowed by our Creator and additional rights as a citizen, conferred by the state. But my emotion is that I am grateful for them, not that I deserve them. G. K. Chesterton wrote: "With the removal of all question of merit or payment, the soul is suddenly released for incredible voyages." (*Heretics*, 69) I would add to that: with the removal of all question of merit, you begin to feel how central thanksgiving is to being fully alive.

And, O merciful Lord, you taught me all this, when you said to the mortified woman who only moments before had been in mortal danger at the hands of those who were prepared to stone her for adultery: **"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she replied. "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave our life of sin."** (John 8:10-11) That set me free to acknowledge my unworthiness before God. I didn't have to pretend anymore. I could own responsibility for my lawless streak. And I was set free,

because what Christ said to the woman was meant for all of us: **“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave our life of sin.”** I believe in Jesus Christ.

I Have Been Crucified with Christ

Galatians 2:20 is another part of that New Testament root system that nourishes faith in Jesus Christ. **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

I have been crucified with Christ. That is a violent image that pictures an irreversible change. Because (thank God!) we don't see crucifixions, we forget or never knew that a crucified man did not die right away. Jesus lived for six hours before He died. Some lingered for days. They were still alive, but their former life was over.

I don't like violent images, but this one fits in a couple of ways. First, when I say, **“I have been crucified with Christ,”** I mean that Christ so grips me that my life without Him is over. He defines who I am and what I will become. I can no more escape Him than a crucified man could undo the nails and escape death. Neither do I want to escape Him. **The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** I am not held by nails in my hands and feet. I am held by the nails in His hands and feet.

Second, the apostle wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17: **If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!** The crucifixion of Jesus Christ sounded the death knell of the old creation. When I say, **“I have been crucified with Christ,”** I mean that I have been gripped by the promise that **the old has gone and the new has come.**

I can't undo my past. But I can renounce those parts of my past of which I am ashamed, and which will have no place in the coming kingdom of God. I will not lose my identity by renouncing them. Believing in Jesus Christ means we have started over. Our best days are ahead. We are learning how to behave like citizens of heaven.

The apostle's violent image does something else good for us. There was decisiveness about crucifixion. It took away all other options. When I say, **“I have been crucified with Christ,”** I mean that I have been delivered from the present-day curse of having so many choices we find it hard to make commitments.

“The number of choices available to us becomes overwhelming, and actually makes it difficult for us to . . . have the joy of fully committing to anything or anyone. Even if we do commit, our culture then makes us feel dissatisfied with the choice we've made.” (Barry Cooper, “Imprisoned by Choice, *CT*, January/February 2013, 54) The cross says, “Choose irreversible change, and trust God with the results.” Being crucified with Christ sets us free from being tormented by the off chance that there might be something better.

I Love Him Though I Have Not Seen Him

1 Peter 1:8 is a third part of that New Testament root system that nourishes faith in Jesus Christ. **Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. Though you have not seen him, you love him.** I believe in Jesus Christ, and I miss Him. My eyes are starved, because I cannot see Him. My ears ache, because I cannot hear the sound of

His gracious words. My skin is a pauper, because it cannot feel the touch of His healing hand on my mortal body. But I love Him. You love Him. We love Him together. Is there any relief from our sensory deprivation?

There is an old hymn the Church doesn't sing much any more, and it points us to the relief we can find here and now. "I love to tell the story of unseen things above; of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true. It satisfies my longing as nothing else will do."

We have access to Him whom we have not seen and yet we love in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We have better access to Jesus Christ in the gospels than we have to the President on television. Soak yourself in the gospels.

There's another way to relieve our deprived senses. Don't miss Communion. At Communion we hold Christ in our hands. My mom died 13 years ago. I still have some of her things. Occasionally, I'll get something of hers out to look at it, and the box I take it from still smells like my mom's bedroom. It is poignant and very personal. My dad died 40 years ago, and I still have some of his things. One of them is his pipe, and it brings back memories of my dad sitting at the dining room table, smoking his pipe and working on papers of one sort or the other.

Communion can be poignant and very personal in the same way and more. The bread and wine do bring back cherished memories of Christ. They also reassure us that God is merciful toward us and that Christ is coming again.

And the promise of His return kindles our love for Him in another way. 1 John 3:2 says: **Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears – and our senses can take Him in – when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.** That will more than make up for the deprivation of our senses.

Coaching Tips

It is safe to say here: "I believed in Jesus Christ." We are among friends. It's important to say it here. It's also important here to go deeper. Let me offer you some tips on what you could do to go deeper.

A. Soak your soul in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. If you wonder where to start, I suggest Mark. It is the short-attention-span gospel. Its stories are brief, crisp, and memorable. Jesus gives only two speeches in Mark, and both can easily be read in less than 5 minutes. Sermons average about half an hour. It is also deep. It will keep you reading for a lifetime. Read with awe. The gospels introduce you to your Lord.

B. Love Christ. Adore Christ. Worship Christ. Don't hold Christ at arm's length. Don't be half-hearted or lukewarm about Christ. When you read a gospel, read it like a love letter from the person in all the world you most want to be with. When you come here each Sunday, be filled with the Spirit, singing to one another in hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to Christ and always giving thanks to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:18-20)

C. Tell people how important Jesus is to you. When you confess before God, the Church, and the world those five little words, "I believe in Jesus Christ," you are a marked

person. You have declared yourself. Honor that accrues to Him spills over on you. Hatred directed at Him spills over on you. Going public like is what it means to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ."