



MYTHBUSTERS

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Somewhere in America, somebody has a heart attack every 20 seconds. That's a lot of heart attacks – nearly 1.5 million a year. If you think you might be a likely candidate for one, here's a piece of advice: Don't have it today. Or any Sunday for that matter.

A study just came out in the New England Journal of Medicine that shows that you're much more likely to die if you come to the hospital with a heart attack on a weekend. That's because most hospitals aren't set up to offer angioplasty 24/7. There's a direct link between how long it takes to get a balloon in to open up your arteries and your chances of survival.

The study found that many hospitals only offer full cardiac care during normal business hours, Monday through Friday, and that 1 out of 100 heart patients die unnecessarily on the weekends. In light of these statistics, hospitals across the country will set up referral systems to help make sure people in bad shape can be easily rerouted to hospitals that are prepared to handle them during nights and weekends. In the meantime, if it's a Saturday or Sunday, hold off on the fatty foods and think relaxing thoughts.

When I heard that, it made me think of our text today. Because some people in the book of Mark are about to discover that Jesus' disciples are unable to provide round the clock care. A crisis is about to erupt during "off hours" – while Jesus was away from his followers. As you may recall from two weeks ago, we last left Jesus with Peter, James and John at the top of a mountain. Those three disciples had seen Jesus in his glory, talking with Moses and Elijah. We said that the vision they saw gave them a big enough picture of Jesus to get them through the rough days ahead. They needed to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was powerful and pure and beautiful enough for them to give their lives to him.

Meanwhile, down at base camp, the other disciples had their hands full. Things were getting chaotic. I'll let Mark describe it for us.

Mark 9:14-32

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

I used to have to travel to trade shows with clients, and one of our clients would often hire a magician to work in the booth and draw a crowd. He was very good. One of his signature tricks was to steal your watch. The key to it was that he would draw your attention to another trick, where he would put a coin in your hand. While you were concentrating on the coin, he would go about the business of acquiring your watch. Even though I knew how the trick worked, one time he did it to me and I didn't feel a thing as he stole my watch.

Jesus isn't performing tricks in this story, but we can find ourselves distracted by the drama and miss what's really going on because we're looking in the wrong direction. In my Bible, the heading for this story calls it, "The healing of a boy with an evil spirit."

That's the obvious action that happens in this section. But I think it should really be called, "The healing of the disciples and the dad of a boy with an evil spirit." That probably wouldn't make a very good title. But while we're all concentrating on the plight of this boy and what Jesus will do for him, Jesus is over to the side, quietly addressing another problem that's just below the surface.

That issue is unbelief. You can hear the frustration in Jesus' words when he comes down the mountain. "Oh unbelieving generation. How long will I put up with you?"

We associate unbelief with the atheist, or the person who has walked away from Christ and rejected him. But the disturbing truth is that Jesus was referring to his disciples, or at least including them in his remarks. Unbelief even affects the believers. A little later on, when the dad in this story confesses his own unbelief, it's again unexpected, because here is someone who had come to Jesus for help. You wouldn't think a person who turned to Jesus in their hour of need would need to worry about unbelief, but there it is.

We have so many examples of great faith held up for us in Scripture. Abraham, who would have gone the distance and sacrificed his son for God, he believed so much that God could raise him. The Roman centurion who believed Jesus could heal his servant from a distance by just saying the word. The woman who came to Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter, and who kept asking and believing in him even when it looked like Jesus would turn her down.

There are all these people who just exude complete confidence in God. For them, faith seemed to come so easily, while for most of the rest of us it doesn't. So I find it encouraging to also see in the Bible people like the disciples and this dad, who are less stellar examples and a bit more relatable. And they remind me that belief and unbelief sit side by side in my heart, and every day I have a choice: Will I trust Jesus or not?

I don't think the disciples were even aware of the unbelief that marked their attitude. And that makes me want to explore this further. Is it possible for you and I to fall into a pattern of unbelief without realizing it?

The dad was more in tune with his own doubts. He knew they were roadblocks to his faith. Maybe you can identify with his skepticism mixed with a desire to believe. Wherever we're at in our spiritual journeys this morning, we can all learn about unbelief from the story.

My family likes to watch Mythbusters on the Discovery Channel, where they take popular beliefs and expose them as myths that are untrue. I believe there are four myths of unbelief in this story that need to be exposed for what they are. Four assumptions that we can accept without knowing it, which can lead us toward a lack of trust in Jesus.

Let's go back and look at the scene a little more closely. Mark paints such a vivid picture for us that we can really imagine what was happening.

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

When new teachings would emerge, the religious leaders in Jerusalem would often send out official delegations to see for themselves what was going on. It's quite possible that these teachers were field inspectors on a fact finding mission to see what Jesus was about. Word had spread about this teacher and healer and they wanted to see for themselves, maybe even gather evidence to support their conviction that he was misleading people.

So when this father comes along and the disciples cannot help his son, those religious leaders seize the opportunity to make their point. Jesus' teaching must be a fraud if his followers couldn't perform miracles like he did.

The disciples start to defend themselves, and before long, the boy is forgotten. His needs are put on the backburner as the conversation deteriorates into an argument. Everyone gets so wrapped up in the debate that nobody even notices Jesus walking toward them.

When he arrives, everyone is shocked, in a good way. You can sense the relief as everyone rushes to him, hoping he can straighten this all out.

Jesus asks what all the arguing is about, and they all get a little sheepish. The disciples stay quiet. The religious leaders don't say a word. Finally, the dad speaks up.

Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.

We get a very detailed description of the boy's condition here, but we also get some details of the first seeds of unbelief that show up in this story.

You can hear the confusion in the man's words: "I brought my son to YOU... Your disciples couldn't heal him." Even though Jesus had not been present, the man said he had brought his son to him. The standard way of thinking was that a teacher's disciples were a perfect substitute. They should be perfect stand-ins for him. When they aren't, it puts belief in the teacher in jeopardy.

The first myth is this:

Myth #1: Church and God are the same.

One of people's biggest reasons for not believing in God is the church. Take a survey of your friends who don't go to church, and it won't take you long to find somebody who says, "I don't like all the hypocrites." Human failings by the Christians we know are transferred to God, and he is seen as unreliable.

Philip Yancey, the Christian author, writes this:

Sometimes in a waiting room or on an airplane I strike up conversations with strangers, during the course of which they learn that I write books on spiritual themes. Eyebrows arch, barriers spring up and often I hear yet another horror story about church. My seatmates must expect me to defend the church, because they always act surprised when I respond, "Oh it's even worse than that. Let me tell you my story." I have spent most of my life in recovery from church.

Many people in this room would say the same thing. For as much good as the church has done in the name of Jesus, it has also inflicted a great deal of suffering.

If we come to Jesus' followers with the expectations that they can meet our needs, we will always be disappointed. If we think the validity of God rests on the behavior of his people, we will be stuck in our unbelief for a very long time.

The church is a group of sinners, broken people all doing their best to live for Jesus, but falling short much of the time. If church is as far as we go with our problems, we probably won't stay long. We have to go further. We have to go to Jesus.

I love the way in this story that Jesus engages the man directly himself. He asks him all the questions and acts as if the rest of the group isn't even there. The man learned that relating to Jesus wasn't something he did through the crowd – it was one on one, directly with him.

That's always how it is. We each must deal directly with Jesus, one on one. We tend to couch our spirituality in terms of our relationship to the church. It's easy to keep Jesus at arm's length when we allow the church to be our focus instead of Christ. But he calls us closer to relate to him personally. There are no stand-ins for him.

But as I said before, Jesus' words of frustration weren't directed at strangers who didn't know him well – they were directed toward his disciples.

"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

The second lie of unbelief is one the disciples had fallen for. It was the idea that

Mythn #2: The power and the person are the same.

A few weeks ago, we looked at the time Jesus sent his twelve disciples out to preach and heal and cast out demons. He gave them power and authority to do things in his name. They had been successful at it.

Now, their assumption is that the transfer of power was a permanent thing. They can't understand why this demon won't respond to them the way others have.

Karin and I have a SoniCare toothbrush at home. We have two toothbrush heads, thankfully, a his and hers, but only one handle. Therein lies the problem. Because I have a terrible time remembering to put that handle back on the charger. I'm the last one to brush my teeth at night, but Karin's the first to use it in the morning. So quite often, I will hear the toothbrush buzzing for about 30 seconds and then stop, because it dies. The last thing you want to do is try to use a SoniCare toothbrush manually. And the last person you want to be is me when it happens to Karin one more time.

But just like there's no power in that toothbrush by itself, we have no power in ourselves apart from Christ. We have to keep being recharged and remember that there's no such thing as an independent Christian life. We have to stay constantly in tune with him, connecting with him if we expect to see his power in our lives.

That's why when the disciples asked Jesus about it later, he told them, "This kind only comes out with prayer." If we're not in communication with God, we won't be seeing his activity, and we will begin trying to conjure it up on our own.

For most of us, it won't be the power to cast out a demon or heal someone. It will be trying to find the power to conquer some sin in our life, or the power to live joyfully in the middle of a hard time, or the power to face down our fears. We become like the disciples and think that just because we've done it before we'll always have it within ourselves to do battle.

There was an Eskimo woman on TV the other night who lives in a community above the Arctic Circle. She said that their staples, like milk and bread, have to be flown in on a daily or weekly basis to their community, because they can't farm anything up there. They are totally dependent on those flights. One winter, it got down to 180 below zero – so cold that no planes could come in. Suddenly their lifeline was gone and they were running out of basic food.

That's the condition we're in when we're not connecting with Christ. We have no resources on our own. We can't make it without him. It's not something we can stock up on in bulk – it's a daily and weekly need.

So the lack of ability to heal this boy has placed some seeds of unbelief in both the dad and the disciples. You can see it in the conversation that continues between Jesus and the dad.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Now the dad isn't so sure Jesus can do anything. He's willing to give him a chance, but he's begun to buy into a third myth of unbelief, which is

Myth #3 The question is about God.

"If you can." What is that? It's not what you could call a strong belief in God's ability. It reminds me of back during the Nagano Olympics. They were doing a story about speed skater Chris Witty. She and her family were sightseeing in Nagano and they went to visit an old Buddhist temple. They weren't Buddhist, but her dad went over and rubbed the big Buddha's tummy to bring good luck to his daughter, and he said, "Hey – it can't hurt, right?"

That's kind of the attitude this father seems to have had. He was willing to try anything for the sake of his sick son. If Jesus could do it, he'd believe in him.

But he tries to make the question about Jesus. It's like when the devil tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness by saying, "If you're really the Son of God, prove it." Jesus doesn't respond to that kind of question, because it makes it look like he has something to prove, when really he doesn't.

You remember that old trust game where you're supposed to fall backwards and believe that the person behind you will catch you? Imagine if I were playing that with a much younger Arnold Schwarzenegger. I could stand there and ask him, "Are you sure you're strong enough to catch me? You know I've gained a little weight."

The problem is not whether he has the ability to catch me – it's whether I have the ability to trust. That's exactly what Jesus pointed out in his response to the boy's father. "IF I can? IF I can? There's no IF about me – the IF is about you."

We deflect and try to turn our questions around so that it puts God in the hot seat. We would believe IF God is loving...IF God is powerful...IF God is good. But when we get right down to it, the deepest question isn't about God's character. The IF is with us.

I don't mean to minimize anyone's legitimate wondering about if God is real and what he is like. But even if you answer every one of someone's questions to their satisfaction, there's still the ultimate question: What are they going to do about it? The if is with us. Jesus says, "You're the question. What are you going to do with me when I'm telling you I'm everything I claim to be?"

And that's EXACTLY who he is. Paul says in 2 Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 1:20

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

Yes I am faithful. Yes I am good. Yes I love you. Yes I am powerful enough. Yes I see your pain. Yes I hear your prayers. Yes I love your children. Yes I will complete what I

have started. Yes I am always with you. Yes, yes and yes. There is no question mark in his character – the question mark is about us. Are we ready to fall back and trust him to catch us?

That kind of trust is rooted in who God says he is, no matter what he does or doesn't do. If we believe that he answers yes to all our questions about his character, then our questions about his actions will become secondary.

In other words, it's possible to continue to trust God, even when he doesn't answer the way we want him to.

But it's hard to live in that spot, which is why I think we can all identify so well with that father's most heartfelt line:

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Older translations said he "cried out and said with tears." You can hear the agony in his words as he breaks down sobbing. He is brought to a point of despair as he sees how pitiful his own request is.

Vaclav Havel once said, "Isn't it the moment of most profound doubt that gives birth to new certainties? Perhaps hopelessness is the very soil that nourishes human hope."

Suddenly, this man had a moment of honest clarity. He recognizes that his son's need isn't the only one on the table. He identifies himself as part of the "unbelieving generation" Jesus just talked about.

It's when we reach that point that we're sometimes prone to believe the 4th myth which is this:

Myth #4: The answer is more faith.

Immediately, as soon as we recognize our lack of faith, we begin to blame it for everything. If we just had a little more faith, God would answer our prayers. If we had stronger belief, we would start to see results and get what we want from God. After all, isn't that what Jesus seems to imply when he says, "Everything is possible for him who believes?"

The trouble with that line of thinking is that it puts the responsibility back on our shoulders, when God has already taken it off. It makes the solution to our problems about what we can do, rather than what Jesus has already done.

Conference speaker Lawrence Pile once said, "The true gospel puts the burden on Christ. The false gospel puts the burden on us."

Did you hear that? Does it feel too easy? Have you become so used to earning God's love that you're always waiting for bad news, or feeling like you won't measure up?

What I think I love most about this story is that Jesus doesn't wait for this father to grow in his faith before responding to his request. Jesus leads the man to a point where he can acknowledge his unbelief and ask for help. Then Jesus acts.

It wasn't because the man had a sudden burst of strong faith. It was just because he asked for help. Then Jesus does that – he helps. Where we lack belief, he helps.

We load ourselves down with guilt, asking “Do I have enough faith?” When it isn't the amount of our faith that amounts to anything.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast.

Even our faith is a gift from God. And as we ask him for more of it, he will make it increase. He helps our unbelief.

Jim Cymbala has said,

The great battle of our spiritual lives is “Will you believe?” It is not “Will you try harder?” or “Can you make yourself worthy?” It is squarely a matter of believing that God will do what only he can do.

Will you believe? No matter what stage you're at in your relationship with Christ, that's the question. Will you believe when the situation looks hopeless? Will you believe when you have other resources you could trust? Will you believe when the stakes are high?

As you reflect on that big question, think also about the myths we've looked at today.

1. Have I mistaken church for God? Have I lost trust in Jesus because of the way his followers act? Maybe I'm keeping him at arms length by only thinking about my spirituality in terms of church. Jesus wants his relationship with each of us to be direct and individual. Church in and of itself will never be the solution to our problems.
2. Do I want a power or a person? Am I cultivating a daily relationship with Christ, refueling through prayer, reading my Bible and Christian friendships? Or am I trying to make it on my own? Have I fallen into the same mistake of the disciples, thinking I have all I need myself?
3. Am I the if? Maybe I've been trying to put God on the defensive and have avoided looking at my own reluctance to believe him. When it comes right down to it, will I trust him? Are there honestly unanswered questions about God that are holding me back, or have the questions become convenient excuses so I don't have to examine my own faith?

4. Am I believing the myth of more faith? The idea that if I just believe a little harder, have a bit more faith, God will bless me and answer my prayers. But it's not about how much we can do, how big we can grow our faith – it's simply trusting in what God can do. The whole burden has been carried by Christ. He's the author and finisher of our faith.

“I believe – help me overcome my unbelief.” I want that to be my lifelong prayer, don't you? To be honest with God about my fears and doubts, to cry out to him and be humble enough to ask for help. That's the kind of prayer he is always ready to answer.