

## The Strength of Life

(Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 11, 2019

In the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Faith is the strength of life. If a man lives he believes in something. If he did not believe that one must live for something, he would not live. If he does not see and recognize the illusory nature of the finite, he believes in the finite; if he understands the illusory nature of the finite, he must believe in the infinite. Without faith he cannot live.<sup>1</sup>*

These are not the words of a great theologian or preacher. They were not spoken by one of the early apostles, nor are they the thoughts of Martin Luther or Thomas Aquinas or Saint Augustine. No, they are the words of the Russian author Leo Tolstoy, who included them in his book *A Confession*, published in 1882 when he was 54 years old.

In this *Confession*, Tolstoy talks about his own journey and struggle with faith, of how he had it and then lost it and then discovered it once again. He discusses how his early faith was misdirected ... how as he said his “only real faith ... was a belief in perfecting myself.”<sup>2</sup> He even shares conversations with others on the topic of faith, conversations with those whose faith fell apart in a way that “was like the push of a finger on a wall that was ready to fall by its own weight.”<sup>3</sup>

Tolstoy wrote quite beautifully about the conviction and hope that are found at the very heart of what the writer of Hebrews has laid out in our New Testament passage this morning. He has touched on how his faith was at work ... and even absent from ... his own life. And as his life demonstrated, faith is not a particular moment in history that is reached, but a journey that is ongoing.

Allow me to pause here and give a bit of background on the letter to the Hebrews. First, based on a variety of clues found throughout the text, the consensus of most scholars is that this was written at some point between the 60s and 80s – roughly 30-50 years after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus – by an unknown author. It has been long accepted that Paul is not in fact the writer, as was believed in the early centuries of the church, but who exactly composed it is unknown.

Hebrews is written a style far different from other authentic Pauline letters. It is missing common Pauline expressions that appear in his other letters (such as the phrase “Christ Jesus”),

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy, from *A Confession*. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/900009-faith-is-the-strength-of-life-if-a-man-lives>

<sup>2</sup> Tolstoy, from *A Confession*. Kindle edition.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and there are no references to the resurrection – something that is central to Paul’s other work.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, we’re not even sure to whom the letter was written. The best guess we have is that it was sent to the community of believers in either Jerusalem or Rome, with the latter being most likely. All we do know, based on a phrase later in the letter, is that it includes greetings extended from “those from Italy.”<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the day, though, what is most important is not **by whom** or **for whom** Hebrews was written, but **that** it was written. What is most important for us is that we have a definitive statement of what faith is: “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”<sup>6</sup> And if not simply putting it out there was enough ... not simply saying **this** is what faith is ... the writer goes on to give concrete examples from the life of one of their patriarchs of faith being rewarded, examples that would have been very relevant and deeply personal to the audience of the day.

They heard about the faith of Abraham demonstrated through his giving up his home and job and willingly journeying off with his family, simply because God asked him. We hear of Abraham and Sarah being rewarded with a child, despite age and physical difficulties, and who were able to go through their own periods of doubt and disbelief because of their faith in God’s promise to them.

God’s promise to **them** ... and God’s continuing promise to **us**. It is a promise echoed in the words of Jesus in the final chapter of Matthew’s gospel: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>7</sup> Despite knowing that, however ... despite knowing that God is always with us ... faith can often be a difficult thing to wrap our heads around.

It can certainly feel difficult to maintain faith when things around us seem to be off-track: an illness that won’t end; an unexpected death of a friend or family member; a job that is unbearable, or a job that has been lost; chaos in our lives and turmoil in the world. But it is in those very moments of feeling weak that faith can provide our greatest strength. “Faith in God is what keeps our people going in the face of life’s challenges.”<sup>8</sup> It is in those moments that we remember there are no conditions to what we hear in Matthew. I am with you ... **always**.

Many years ago, long before seminary was even something close to being on my radar, I used to explain my own struggles with faith using the analogy of a chair. While I **knew** a chair was designed to hold someone, I couldn’t **believe** it until I saw someone walk up and actually sit down. It wasn’t enough at that point in my life to simply **know** and **believe**; I had to have **proof**.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 694

<sup>5</sup> Brown, p. 684.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:20 (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> David E. Gray, “Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 – Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, p. 328.

At that time I sounded very much like the apostle Thomas who wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen until he saw him for himself and could with his own hands touch the wounds. For him, too, it wasn't enough to hear what his fellow followers told them they had seen for themselves; he needed **proof**. Like me and my chair, Thomas had heard Jesus was risen, but he needed to see him for himself.

At that point in my journey, I essentially possessed hope without assurance. I may have had **conviction**, but I was not **convinced**. But all of that changed. Through all of my struggles against God and after going through a tunnel and coming out the other side, there was a shift. No longer was it clinging to the old adage that seeing **is** believing. When it came to the concept of faith, I had grown into a new adage: **believing is not necessarily seeing**.

As I learned, and as many others have experienced in their own journeys, faith is not present **because of proof**; it is present **despite it**. And at the center of faith is a continual feeling of hope: hope that the doctors will find a cure; hope that in our moments of grief we will be sustained by the memories of and love for the one who has died; hope that the job will improve or that a new job will appear; hope that those moments of chaos and turmoil will be relieved by people dedicated to the care of their brothers and sisters in creation.

Faith: the conviction of things not seen. Faith: the result of hearing God's promise to us. Faith: the light that lightens the path in the moments when things seem darkest. Faith: our hope for tomorrow. "Faith ... is **always** linked to hope. Faith is looking at God and trusting him for everything, while hope is look at the future and trusting God for it."<sup>9</sup>

May our faith always be strengthened; may our faith always illuminate our path; and may our faith be a reminder of God's love and faithfulness to us in every step of our journey.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> N. T. Wright. *Hebrews for Everyone*, p. 128.