

Pastor Dan Hollis

The last two years, I've ended the Middle School Youth Group Spring season with a pizza party at a rock climbing gym. It's an indoor facility where every wall is covered with handholds and footholds and different kinds of terrain, and you challenge yourself to see how high you can climb and how many different routes you can master. There are some low-ceilinged sections with big cushions on the floor that you can free-climb safely, but the really tall climbs require you to put on a harness and clip into a rope. The rope runs all the way up above the top of the climb, where it turns and comes back down to the ground, where an adult has the end of the rope running through what's called a belay device that's hooked into *their* harness.

At this particular gym the model of device they use is called an ATC, which believe it or not stands for "Air Traffic Controller." Because that's kind of what you're doing when you're on the ground in charge of the ATC. You're responsible for bringing the kid who's monkeying their way up the wall down safely when it's time for them to come in for a landing. Whether it's a scheduled landing or not. As the one at the bottom, your primary concern is to make sure that the climber doesn't *fall*.

I learned how to belay in Boy Scouts, and we did a lot of it at the summer camp I worked at while I was in college. As the climber makes their way up the wall, moving from handhold to handhold, the belayer has to keep working the rope through the belay device, taking up the slack so that the rope the climber is attached to is always a little bit taut.

The last thing you want when you're *climbing* is for the rope to be slack when your fingers slip and you drop off the wall. If the belayer has been doing their job, you can only ever "fall" a couple feet at most before the stretch of the rope stops you and you're left floating safely high above, usually within reach of the handhold you came off of. In this system, falling is okay, because somebody's always got you. The sort of

pulley-system and the mechanics of the belay device make it pretty simple for the person on the ground to keep you perfectly safe during your whole climb up to the top.

The tricky part, especially with little kids, is actually coming down. You see, you aren't actually supposed to *climb* down. The physics of downclimbing don't work with the stopping system of a belay device, and the things a belayer would have to do to give you the slack you need to *go down* would make it very unsafe in the event of a fall.

Whether you've made it to the top of the climb, or you've gotten too tired or scared to go any higher, coming down off a climb is an exercise in faith. See in order to get down, you have to do the exact opposite of what you've been trying to *do* this whole time... namely, not putting any weight on the rope. In order to safely get down, you have to put *all of your weight* on the rope. And like I said, downclimbing is *not* safe. What you have to do is lean back... and let go. *Fall*, for lack of a better term.

You let your belayer know you're ready to come down, they acknowledge that they've shifted their position and are ready to lower you... and you ease yourself off the wall and onto the mercy of gravity.

Now I mentioned that this part is especially hard to do with children. Adults are heavy enough that it doesn't take much for them to start coming down. Small *children* on the other hand are so light that if they don't put *every last ounce* of their weight onto that rope, they aren't gonna go anywhere. The friction built in to the belay device doesn't care if you're *ready* to let them down, and you really can't *push* rope in a situation like that.

I can't tell you the amount of times over the years I've been standing on the ground, rope in my hands, ready to guide them down—to slowly pay the rope through the belay device as they float gently to solid ground... and instead they're clinging for dear life to the side of the rock, just *waiting* for it to be over.

It ain't gonna work like that. I can't *make* you come down. If you can't trust me to handle your weight, *all* of it, you're not gonna get anywhere.

In the wise words of George Michael, "You gotta have faith."

Our reading today in Hebrews starts off with a description of faith. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When you're up there on a rock wall, you hope for a safe landing at the bottom, and you need to have *faith* that you will get there.

The theme of faith in Hebrews is all about what we can't see. It talks about the reality of God as not something we can sense with our eyes. There's something going on under the surface, or behind a veil, or just simply invisible, that we can't quantify or measure... but that we are called have faith in. I like to picture being able to reach out and dig my fingers into the air, and peel back the skin of the world to reveal the bright beauty of God that was hidden beneath just a thin membrane all along. But I can't do that... I just have to have faith that it's there, even though I can't see it.

But we aren't just talking about *belief* here... the "belief" in things unseen. We're talking about *faith*, which is a little more than that. Faith isn't just "assent" ...acknowledging that something is true. There's a difference between *believing* that an alarm clock will work, and actively *trusting* it to wake you up in time for an appointment you just can't miss.

Yesterday I officiated a wedding here. As a part of the choreography of before the beginning of the service, I and two of the groomsmen were supposed to go into the back room there, shortly before the *rest* of the groomsmen were to guide the parents of the happy couple to their *seats* and then *meet* us in the back. We'd say a quick prayer and file out just in time for the bridal party.

Now as I entered the back room and closed the door behind me, I looked at the two groomsmen who were waiting inside and said, "In theory, the rest of the guys

are about to start walking the family down the aisle. They should be here soon. Hopefully.”

But the door was *closed* and all we could hear was the muffled music; we had no idea what was really going on, or if everything was going the way it was supposed to. One of the groomsmen said we should have a peep-hole built into that door, and to be honest after so many weddings here I thought that was an *excellent* idea.

You see I *believed* in the choreography and the order of operations... but I really did want that peep-hole so I could look out and see whether or not the rest of the guys had started walking when they were supposed to, and were escorting the right people, and making their way back *here* when they were done. All I *knew* was that Wendell was playing the right music, but none of the guys knew what the song was supposed to sound like, and any one of a million things could have gone wrong or gotten overlooked that would have caused a traffic jam, or worse, an awkward silence while everyone waited frozen in the foyer for a cue they didn't know they had missed. The three of *us* were just standing in that dank back room, *hoping* that *something* was going on and that the rest of the groomsmen would show up before the eventual heat death of the universe... but we had no way of telling when—or if—something was actually going to happen.

All of that went through my head when Jake asked me about the peep-hole idea, but what I *said* was something along the lines of, “You know, that'd be really nice... but we just have to have faith that it's all going right out there.” Then I told him I'd put him in my sermon tomorrow because I'm talking about faith in things we can't see... and that brings us to today.

*Belief* in something isn't the same as *faith* in something. I *knew* the choreography for the wedding was set in stone, but I still had to close the door behind me and *trust* that the groomsmen remembered everything they were supposed to do and... that I

wasn't going to be sitting in the back room for the next fifteen minutes while the bride wondered why her officiant hadn't come out yet.

A ten-year-old may *believe*, when we're on the ground and I'm explaining that the physics of the rope and the belay device *won't let them fall*, and that when they're ready to come down, all they have to do is lean back and let me and gravity do all the work... They may *believe* that when they're on solid ground and the whole world makes sense... but when they're forty feet up in the air clinging *desperately* to whatever handholds they can find, and I'm way down below telling them to put all their weight on the rope and *let go of the wall*... it's a totally different story.

Our reading from Hebrews goes on to describe individuals from Scripture who put their faith in God in the same way I ask ten-year-old climbers to put their faith in me. Abraham and Sarah, for example, left their homes and all they knew to wander in a foreign land far away, trusting God to guide them to a better place to raise a family. The kind of faith in God that takes isn't something so simple as *belief*. It's easy to believe in a God who cares for you when you're safe in your own kitchen. It's something else entirely to *put your life in God's hands* and stride out into the unknown.

They knew God's promise of a Promised Land waiting for them out there, but they couldn't see it. They didn't have satellite maps or smartphone GPS directions or even a photograph of their destination, if it existed at all. They couldn't even *see* the God who *made* these promises because Christ wouldn't show up among us for more than a thousand years.

But they took that step from belief to faith. They stepped out of their door and trusted the promise of God that they would find their way to a new home, and their descendents would be as numerous as the stars. They let go of the rock wall and put all their weight on the rope, trusting God to guide them down.

The universe may not always look like it cares about us. We look around us and what do we see? We see starvation, we see oppression, we see war. We see mass shootings and hurricanes and the rich getting richer while the poor get poorer. We see good people suffering while the wicked get everything they ever wanted and more. We can't *see* the God that loves us. We can't *see* the kingdom of God that's supposed to be right within our grasp.

But Jesus promised us that it's all real. It's all there. That if we could peel back the skin of the world we could see the love that God wove into every stitch of the tapestry of Creation. Jesus *showed* us the love God has for us, Jesus *told* us to love God and our neighbor as ourself, and Jesus *promised* us that the kingdom of God—the *realm* of God is there for the taking.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things unseen. We can't see them, but we are called to do more than just believe in them. We're called to *trust* them. To put our *faith* in them.

Like Abraham and Sarah trusted God and strode forward into the unknown, like me and Jake and Anonymous Groomsman Number 3 who closed the door behind us and trusted the service would begin as it should, like all those little rock climbers over the years who had to put all their weight onto the rope or they would be up there to this day... God wants you to have *faith*. To put your faith in God, to fully and actively trust without being able to see what lies ahead... and see where it takes you. See what it makes of you.

Put your life in the hands of God, follow in the way of Jesus, open yourself to the power of the Holy Spirit, and really, really put your faith into it. Don't just believe something. *Trust* it. Trust that God can use you, and that it doesn't matter if you can't see *how* yet. Put your trust in God to guide you... and I think you'll be surprised by what you see.

Amen.