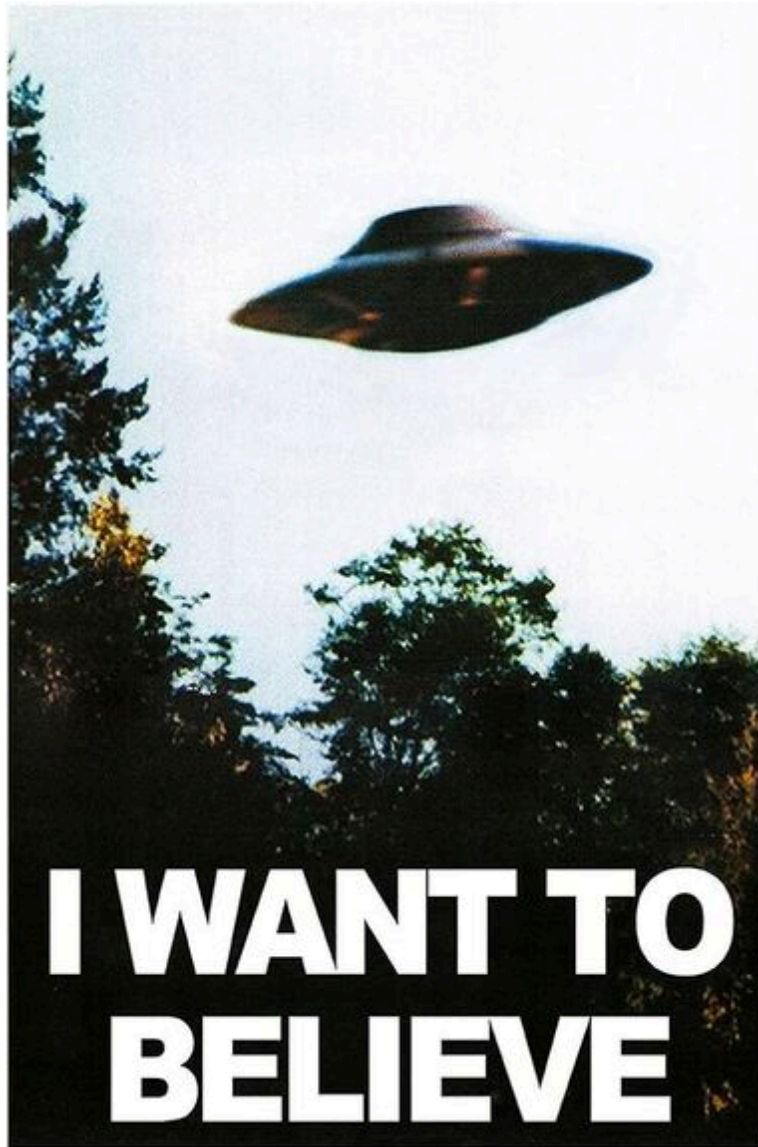


Look Up!

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Preaching on:

Mark 6:1–13

I had a great time on vacation in Italy two weeks ago. It was just Bonnie and me, no kids, so there was plenty of time to really unwind. I swam in the Mediterranean for the first time. I practiced my Italiano. I ate lots of pasta. I discovered the joys of ice-cold limoncello on a hot evening after eating too much pasta. And I saw a UFO—believe it or not, while eating an absolutely delicious pasta.

It was a seven-course wedding banquet, outside, right by the beach on the night of the full moon.

Beautiful. When suddenly up over the horizon comes something in the sky like nothing I've ever seen before. There were some low fluffy clouds that night and this thing, all lit up, flew up through the clouds and was lighting the clouds up from inside. It was completely silent and looked like just a little dot in the sky. But it was very visible because it had an enormous, bright cone of white light coming out of the front of it and an identical cone of white light coming out the back of it. The two cones of light basically touching in the middle. And flying along next to it was a separate, very thin, bluish light. It looked like a flying snippet of blue laser light, just off to its left.

Through a mouthful of delicious pasta I shouted to the table, "UFO! UFO! Look at that! There's a UFO! I've never seen anything like it!" Of the twelve of us at the table, only about half of us looked up. It came out of the clouds and moved across the open sky towards the sea. "What is that?" I asked everyone. "Has anyone ever seen anything like that before?" A couple people were intrigued and began discussing it at the table. Some were dismissive saying it was just a plane—it was not a plane. But still, even as it moved across the sky and out of view, about half the table didn't even look up at all! Which shocked me. Even if you're doubtful about UFOs, wouldn't it have just been so easy to look up and see for yourself?

So, for the rest of the night, I was thinking about that reaction or lack of reaction. And I began to realize, I was naïve to feel shocked at people's lack of interest. Much of my life can be characterized by being deeply interested and excited by things that other people think are just make believe. I'm interested—in whatever form it comes in—in the reality that lies at the very edges of our perception. And I have said to that reality—in whatever form it shows up—that when it shows up, I will pay attention, I will be led, I will believe.

If there's ever been a word that I've struggled with in my life, it's the word belief. It's really like a contronym—a word that contains its own opposite. Like "fast" means both speedy and stuck; "original" means both the very first and the very latest; "forged" means both to make something and to fake something; "antique" means valuable and obsolete; "refrain" means stop and repeat. I could keep going like this because for a few years I became a little obsessive about noticing and keeping a list of contronyms. I had no idea why I was doing it. I just knew that I had to keep going and if I kept going with it, the reality at the edge of my perception would in time reveal itself to me. Eventually, I realized that I was obsessed with contronyms because I needed to work out my relationship with this one word that had so bedeviled me: belief.

Just like the word "cleave" can mean adhere closely to something or split something open, the word "belief" contains this same contradiction. Belief can mean both strict adherence to a particular worldview that is dismissive toward any new or unexpected possibility that is trying to reveal itself, and it can mean an opening up of a person beyond all preconceived notions to allow an authentic encounter with something truly new and unexpected. Belief can mean (at a linguistic level) both strict close-mindedness and intentional open-mindedness. Linguistically speaking, everybody sitting at my banquet table was a believer. Some of us were "look up!" believers and some of us were "don't look

up” believers.

Jesus in his life and ministry makes it clear that God is not a worldview of limitation trying to keep out the new. God is rather the new possibility breaking wildly and silently into the world. There is so much potential in God and God’s potential is so easily overlooked.

An important component of Christian theology is that God is omnipotent—all powerful. I’ve more or less said this to you all before, but maybe not this directly: I don’t think that God is omnipotent. Or I think it’s slightly the wrong emphasis. Instead, I believe that God is “omnipotentiate”: God contains all possibility. Being all powerful means that God can snap her fingers and move any mountain. Containing all potential means that in God there is no unmovable mountain. But actually moving the mountain, if it is moved, will unfold through the possibilities and potentials at play in creation. In other words, God won’t or can’t override us, instead God is working through us.

Jesus makes this clear in our scripture reading this morning. The hometown crowd apparently see his great deeds and hear his wisdom, but neither the deeds nor the wisdom fit their limiting belief that Jesus is just some hometown schmuck. And the text says, “he could do no deed of power there.” The potential for power existed, but the power itself was in short supply because there was no openness to it among the people. It wasn’t that Jesus chose not to perform miracles there to punish them. He was trying his best, but God’s power was limited by our beliefs. All sorts of theological attempts have been made to rescue God’s omnipotence from this reality, but none of them really work. They cleave to God’s power where they should be cleaving open our understanding of the power of our own beliefs. We’re all believers. The question is “what kind?” Are we open to the possibilities? Or closed?

Jesus’ response to his hometown reception tells us a lot about the difference between the two kinds of belief—limited and open. Encountering stuckness at home, Jesus decides to send his disciples out into the world for an opening experience. He sends them out two by two on what seems like an unnecessarily risky journey. The disciples will be sent out with basically no supplies—no bread, no bag, no money, no extra clothes. They will have to rely entirely on the hospitality of other people. Now, if you really just wanted to ensure that they would be successful in spreading their message, you would certainly send them out with a care package of things that would help them along the way. Help them get through the tough times. But that is not what Jesus does because it’s not necessarily about them being successful in that sort of worldly way. It’s about the inner transformation that they will experience on this particular journey. Jesus understands a psychological reality—that leaving all our comforts and securities behind forces us into an attitude of openness. When we make reservations for a hotel a month in advance, we’re very discriminating. We’ll get the place that suits us best. When we’re rolling into town with no money and have no idea where we’ll be staying or how we’ll be eating, we’re suddenly open to anything.

As you all know by now, my last Sunday as your senior minister will be September 8. What comes after that for me is not yet entirely clear. And that’s scary. And I’m really looking forward to it. Because I

know that God is calling me on to something new and the possibility will only reveal itself through me, through my belief, my openness, my willing to look up and to be led and to receive. While this is happening for me, something similar will be happening for all of you—the transition period between settled ministers. There may be pulpit supply, there may be a bridge minister, there may be an interim minister. Almost always in churches there's a desire to rush through the transition zone and get back to what is known and what can be relied upon. That of course is only natural. And there are real concerns, of course. What if people disengage, stop coming, stop giving? What if we can't sustain this program or that initiative? We want to continue to give our very best. But every once in a while, the very best we can give is an openness to possibilities. My prayer for you all is that there is some appetite to "look up" in the coming season of transition, that there is some room made for dreaming and visioning. When we open ourselves up to the God's potential, that's when God enters in. When we very well-meaningly try to rush past possibility to get back to security, we may sometimes close a door that God was trying to enter in through in a new and unexpected way.