

“Believe WHAT!”

1 John 1:1-4

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Two weeks ago, the United States' CIA—our Central Intelligence Agency--finally opened up to the public five decades of super-secret UFO files compiled under the title “Project Blue Book”- Project Blue Book being the official US operation that investigated unexplained sightings reported by Americans from the 1940s to the early 1990s. Persons can now go online and read them for themselves if they are so inclined. However, it remains unclear as to whether the agency has released ALL its files as it has yet to comment on that question.

One letter written to the government during that period concerns an event that took place on the night of May 26, 1964. It was composed by a young minister named Curt Shaw who was then pastoring a Presbyterian church a little over a hundred miles north of here- a church I would pastor MYSELF some years later. That evening almost sixty years ago, he and another member of the church--Walter MacDonald--had been painting the sanctuary when around 10:30, they dropped their brushes and drove to Walter's house to grab a crowbar and a quick cup of coffee. On their way back, Walter noticed a large glowing sphere suspended about twenty feet off the ground alongside the church's bell tower. Attracted by this strange object, Walter exclaimed, "Curt, what's that beside the church?" Clearly illuminated by the floodlights situated at the base of the church's bell tower, Curt described it to me as an orb of silver-white light approximately three feet in diameter and as bright as a lightning flash. After four seconds, it suddenly disappeared only to reappear again on the OPPOSITE side of the street where it remained even with the second floor window of the house as though studying it. Neither of them could believe their eyes. After fifteen seconds, the unidentified object then floated away from the house, settling in front of their vehicle, just above the car's hood. Walter was so scared that he kept imploring Curt to get the heck out of there, but Curt was completely transfixed by it- it was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Suddenly, the orb, now assuming a yellowish color about the brightness of the moon, took off. It traveled through the center of Pleasantville and proceeded down the hill in the direction of the city of Titusville. Suspended only a couple of feet off the ground, it seemed to follow the dips and contours of the road where major construction had been going on. This led Curt to believe that whatever it was, some consciousness was definitely directing it. Over the objections of Walter, he began to race through the center of town in an effort to keep up with it. About two miles away, in a stretch of road known locally as "Fieldmore Hill," Curt saw it again, off to the right in the middle of the field. He parked his car, got out, and slowly approached the object- a bright pulsating sphere of some kind. He estimates that for about twenty minutes, he stood there completely mesmerized while also feeling that somehow, it was observing him. Then, unexpectedly, it shot off to the west into the night sky at an incredible rate of speed.

By this time, it was almost midnight. Returning to Walter's, the two men spent a couple of hours reflecting upon what they both had seen. Glancing at his watch, Curt noticed that it had stopped and he couldn't get it going again. The next morning, he went into town to find out what

the matter with it was and the jeweler asked whether he had been around heavy machinery recently, that his watch had become magnetized causing it to stop.

Today, Curt is 87 years old and he lives part of the time in the family home in Tidioute--also just north of here--and the rest in Florida. I've known him now for more than 35 years during which we've enjoyed many golf outings and dinner engagements together; he was even present at Rose and my wedding fifteen years ago. The last time I saw him, he asked if I would do his funeral when he dies, which I assured him I would never miss. I've heard this story from his own lips many times and I'm positive it's not a tale he would ever make up, even after a night of imbibing his favorite adult beverage which he was known to do. Furthermore, the other person in the car with him that night, Walter McDonald, confirmed the same. He said he was never more scared in all his life than he was the night he and Curt encountered that "UFO" so many years ago. Now deceased, Walter was also a very close friend as well as a member of my congregation. He swore up and down to me that everything Curt related was true. He had INDEED seen the object with his own eyes and was as sure of its reality as he was of my own presence right in front of him. Until the day he passed on about thirty years ago (and I did his funeral), he never wavered in his conviction about this.

In the almost six decades that have passed, Curt has devoted a large part of his life still trying to make sense of what he and Walter saw that night. He had been a complete skeptic before their experience but afterwards, he had no doubt that UFOs were REAL- he became what you might call "a genuine convert." He has discussed his experience with countless scientists and investigators, has poured over hundreds of books, journals, and articles, and attended dozens of conferences to learn of OTHERS who may have had SIMILAR encounters with unidentified flying objects. On one occasion, Curt was interviewed at length by Dr. J. Allen Hynek, the Director of the Dearborn Observatory at Northwestern University, who served as a major consultant to Project Blue Book and his account even found its way into several books and journals. Curt is what you would call a genuine and sincere believer, and till the day he joins Walter in heaven, he will CONTINUE to believe- with a conviction that goes well beyond his head to his heart and the rest of his being. And this is because he finds it impossible to deny something he had PERSONALLY experienced, an event that radically reshaped his life.

However, having heard their account many times over the years, there is a huge difference between how I believe and how Curt and Walter believe. When I say that I believe their story, I mean I believe THEY believe whatever it was they saw. Every time Curt related that story, it was with a fervency and a depth of conviction that left you convinced that it had actually occurred just as he reported it; and every time I mentioned the subject to Walter, I could once again sense the fear he experienced that same night. Besides, knowing what rational and intelligent men they both are, I've personally never had any reason to DISBELIEVE them. Recently, Ellen Stofan--NASA's chief scientist--predicted that within ten years we'll find signs of alien life with even STRONGER evidence for extraterrestrials in the years that follow. It's not a question of "if" but of "when." But then, she wasn't talking about little green MEN as she was little MICROBES that could open the door to our understanding even LARGER and more COMPLEX forms of life in the universe. Pope Francis has even addressed the possibility of life beyond our earth TOO, saying that should Martians ever visit earth that he would welcome them to be baptized AS WELL. "Who are we to close the doors to the Holy Spirit?" he asked.

As for the story itself, that is, as to whether what they saw was an ACTUAL UFO, I'm still left scratching my head because I've never had such an encounter MYSELF. I've never been privy to the same reality, the same encounter THEY had over a half century ago. If I DID, then I'd probably end up just as much a fanatic about it as they became. They are what you would call TRUE believers as, over the many decades, they have staked their ENTIRE BEING AND REPUTATION on a personal experience that completely changed them and their perception of the world. That one night altered both their lives for good, and afterwards, they could NEVER AGAIN be the same. Such is the difference between belief as "knowledge" and belief as "trust." Where one is based in the head, the other is rooted in the heart; where one is rational assent, the other involves a commitment and a trust involving our ENTIRE LIVES. Though they did not COMPLETELY understand what it was they experienced, they had absolutely no doubt that the object they encountered was REAL and not a part of everyday life. They knew that the usual government explanations could not account for it- that it was NOT a wayward weather balloon, NOT a build-up of swamp gas, and certainly NOT some super-secret experimental spacecraft. I once asked Curt whether he believed they came from outside our solar system to visit us and he said he was convinced they have always BEEN HERE, that this is THEIR home AS WELL, but that they exist in another dimension we only catch glimpses of.

I relate this story because the difficulty of believing a report so incredible and beyond our OWN experience is every bit as problematic as believing that twenty centuries ago, a man named JESUS, who claimed to be the Son of God, died for the sins of the world and, three days later, was raised back to life. Then over the next fifty days, we are told he appeared repeatedly to his followers- to assuage their fears, to charge their faith, and to restore their hope until he left for good, leaving the Holy Spirit—his personal presence in spirit form—in his place. The historical death and resurrection of Christ has been the defining story of our faith for the past two thousand years, and as our civilization continues to progress, growing increasingly RATIONAL and more SECULAR, the story also becomes HARDER for many people to believe. After all, gods don't die and human beings certainly don't come back to life after having been expired for three days- DO they?

Now let's try to draw an analogy between Curt and Walter's experience with the UFO, and the CHURCH'S experience with the risen Christ. For both the women and the disciples, belief does not come ANY EASIER, any more than it would have been for US had WE been present at that time. Jesus was dead- he had laid in the tomb for three days and decay had already set in. No amount of CPR could have brought him back to life. With his death, their dreams of a new kingdom were gone as well. They had to finally admit to themselves that he was not who they THOUGHT he was. It was now time to return home, resume their old jobs, and to leave the search for the Messiah to OTHER people.

But as we know, it didn't end that way, that before they even had the chance to pack their bags, something happened to them to change their lives for good- JESUS SUDDENLY APPEARED TO THEM. They beheld his face and heard his voice; they saw the holes in his hands, his feet, his side. It was their Lord and of that, they had no doubt. Nothing would dissuade them for how could they deny an experience SO PERSONAL and SO REAL. With his return, the old hopes and dreams were revived; the adventure would again resume! As John would later write in the beginning of his first epistle:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life- the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us- that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you..."(1 John 1:1-4)

Here we see the difference between a belief rooted in the head and a belief based in the heart, a belief that captivates the **WHOLE** person. It was only when they encountered Christ **PERSONALLY** that their faith became cemented and they finally evolved into a unified group capable of "turning the world upside down." Likewise, when I look at the church--Presbyterian or otherwise--I see the two kinds of belief represented. I see those members who have been raised within its walls, who have learned the lessons and memorized the creeds and can faithfully mouth the prayers. It is a faith which for many has been inherited, a faith that is second-hand, a faith that is rooted in the head. Such faith often **BEGINS** in one's theology and Christian traditions which **THEN** become the basis for interpreting one's own experience. What I mean by that is our faith was first acquired at the knees of our parents and the local church. Through regular attendance, we were baptized and eventually confirmed, and over time, we studied her creeds and learned her theology. In worship and the sacraments, the scriptures were preached and the promise of God's love proclaimed with the result that eventually, that germ of faith we were initially born with gradually took root and grew. For **MOST** of us, that's how faith often **STARTS**- we **INHERITED** the faith of our parents and by becoming thoroughly **INDOCTRINATED** in it, it eventually becomes the **BASIS** or the **REALITY** by which we **UNDERSTAND LIFE** and **ENGAGE THE WORLD AROUND US**.

But then there are those for whom faith takes on a much **DEEPER** dimension. It is rooted not just in the church's lessons and creeds, in her hymns and prayers but solidly in one's **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**. They've had a personal encounter with the living God through the Son Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit- of that, there could be no denying. The scriptures are not the source of that faith but rather, they **TESTIFY** or **VALIDATE** that encounter. Such Christians regularly take comfort in his presence throughout the day; they speak to him as freely as they would a best friend; they are keenly sensitive that amidst all their normal routines and hum-drum existence, their lives are punctuated by yet **ANOTHER** reality that mysteriously breaks in from time to time- what are moments or intimations of God's transcendence. This other reality is **VASTLY** more powerful, and once it is glimpsed and experienced, life can never again be the same. Faith becomes for them the adherence or trust in God's **PERSONAL PRESENCE** in such moments.

In contrast to the **FORMER**, this **SECOND** type of faith first begins in one's **EXPERIENCE** and **THEN** seeks to fit those experiences within the **THEOLOGIES** and **TRADITIONS** of the church. This is a faith that can't be discounted, a faith that can't be denied, a faith that changes our lives so fundamentally that we can never again be the same. This is the faith Curt and Walter had in their extraordinary confrontation with that UFO, the faith of the disciples exhibited after the personal appearance of the risen Christ, and a description of **OUR** faith once we have encountered God through his Holy Spirit at significant and strategic junctures in our lives- moments in which we **KNEW THAT WE KNEW** that God was real and that he was seeking to draw us near to himself.

The fact is that NO theology, NO Bible in and of itself, NO pride in our church's traditions, and NO amount of proofs can ever convince a person of the veracity, the truthfulness, the authenticity of Jesus Christ. He must be met and experienced PERSONALLY to know that he carries with him an authority that claims our devotion unlike any other. As Martin Luther once said, "I don't know WHAT I believe, but I know WHOM I believe." What he meant is that it is only upon meeting Christ in a genuine encounter that the heart says, "I surrender all," and humbly bows in reverence before him. ONLY THEN do the scriptures make sense to us; ONLY THEN do any of the creeds and prayers and history of the church become something deeply meaningful to us; ONLY THEN are our lives changed to such an extent that we can never again be the same.

If we are to trust the polls, they tell us we are living in an era of unprecedented doubt, that while belief in God remains HIGH, public confidence in religious institutions is now at its LOWEST. In 1975, Gallup found that nearly 70% of Americans expressed either a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in organized religion. By LAST YEAR, that figure stood at just 42%. Regular church attendance is ALSO at a modern low. Even BEFORE covid-19, the Pew Research Center found that the percentage of Americans who report attending a religious service at least once a month FELL over the past decade from 52% to about 42%.

However, there is a class of Christians who once they have made a commitment to follow Jesus, will NEVER go back on it, NEVER allow its power and significance to LAPSE or ERODE in their lives. On the CONTRARY, their faith gains GREATER meaning and power with each passing year. These are those who have had an AUTHENTIC ENCOUNTER with the Risen Lord and responded to his summons to follow him through an act of SELF-SURRENDER. Having received him by faith, they CONTINUED to trust in him, convinced that what they had just experienced was INDEED real and could not be denied. They became increasingly confident that through this encounter, God was revealing himself to them with the result they were finding themselves transformed, being profoundly changed at their core and NEVER AGAIN would they be the same!

And so the \$64,000 question is THIS: What type of belief do WE possess this morning? Is it all in the HEAD or has it taken over our HEARTS, AS WELL? Is it SECOND-HAND or is it FIRST-HAND? Is it INHERITED or is it EXPERIENCED? because the answer to this question will determine whether WE will be able to say, like John, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life- the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us- that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you..." Let us pray...

Gracious God, help us to see and experience the risen Christ even as those first disciples did on that first Easter day. And then may the power of that encounter so fill our heads and especially our hearts that we can do nothing BUT follow you wherever you lead us and to do whatever you desire. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.