

April 2006
Walking in Faith
Deacon Matt Rhodes
Following His Plan...
After A Marathon of Doubt...

My faith journey is not one you'd want your kids to follow. I was a skeptic for almost 30 years. Growing up, my family went to a Baptist church 2-3 times a week. When I was in high school, my stepmother divorced my father, because of his alcoholism. After that Mom and I never went to church together again. In college, I studied science. My classes were about forming hypotheses & finding ways to test your ideas. Didn't leave much room for faith. I just assumed that I would be asking for a fight if I asked a pastor how they really knew God existed and I sure wasn't brave enough to ask anyone how we could really know what happened to Jesus after 2000 years.

As the years went by, my doubts didn't go away, but I found one thing puzzling. I could see the positive effects Christianity had on my father's life. After becoming an alcoholic, faith and AA had helped Dad get sober and stay that way the rest of his life. Why would it be good for a person if it wasn't based on the truth? The only thing I could figure was that it was like a placebo effect, but it didn't seem like a great answer.

Sept. 12, 1997 was a big day. That was the day I went running in Mercer County Park to see if I really could do a marathon. I'd been training all summer long. I had extra time because I was unemployed. I was motivated to do it then, because my wife Nancy and I were in the process of applying to adopt a baby girl from China. It would be almost another year before we got her. I suspected I would have to give up my running, so it was now or never.

It was a beautiful day with temperatures in the 70's. I needed to do 4 laps to do a marathon. The run went very well, till I got to that 4th lap around mile 20-21. My sweat made sores I'd developed sting. I was getting very tired & thirsty. Through my own willpower I made it down to the last half lap, but then the pain was almost unbearable. I thought about giving up. I just did not see how I could make it the whole way.

Growing up, I was taught that it was wrong to ask God for things for ourselves. In a sense, I still believe that. Asking for winning lottery tickets is not the way to heaven. I was really hesitant to ask for help, but I started talking to God as a way to keep going. At that point in my life, I wasn't even sure whether or not I believed there was a God. I didn't ask for help directly, but I got to the point where I asked God to please let me finish what I'd set out to do. I just wanted to conquer the pain long enough to finish that last 3-4 miles.

I'd probably only gone another 5-10 steps, when an amazing thing happened. It was a crystal clear sunny day, but it rained. Not a big huge storm. Just one little cloud that drifted over me. It sprinkled enough water on me to rinse off some of the sweat and keep me going. I managed to finish, but I didn't tell Nancy or anyone else this part of the story for years for fear they'd say I was nuts and that it was just a coincidence. It might well have been, but the timing of it is so hard to deny. It didn't rain a downpour all over NJ. It just rained on one small patch of the park I was running in just after I'd asked God for help.

In the fall of '98, Nancy & I got our daughter Jennifer from China. I was still a twice a year Christmas & Easter Christian. Maybe God existed, but I still had my doubts about Jesus and the resurrection. As Jenny got older, Nancy wanted to start taking her to church. She took Jenny and I stayed home. I just couldn't teach Jen to believe what I couldn't believe myself. What I didn't count on was Jenny. She loved going to church and pretty soon she was asking why Daddy never came. I started going to just to please her. My doubts made me feel like a liar in church, but it made Jenny so happy when I came along that I couldn't bear to disappoint her. Now I wonder if that wasn't always part of God's plan.

Easter 2004 was so typical. I used to listen to the sermons & wonder how anyone could know if the resurrection story was true. What if 2000 years of worship by all those zillions of people was just one big cosmic joke? It's a wonder I wasn't just struck down by lightning and left a smoking lump of charcoal. 2004 was a little different, though. My niece Meghan had just sent me a book to read. I wondered if it was worth it.

My niece is a college biochemistry major and I was originally a chemist, so I was trying to keep in touch. We shared an interest in philosophy, so our email discussions ranged far and wide. She was always a believer, but one day she asked if I thought it was possible for a scientist to believe in God. Tough one. Yes. Always thought it possible, but inwardly I thought "but not me." She surely knew anyway. When we discussed science, I stressed how important open-mindedness was. How important it was to dispassionately consider facts without prejudice.

The book she wanted me to read was *Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel. (It's in the church library!) Because of my comment about the importance of being open-minded, I felt I had to read it, but that didn't mean I was looking forward to it. Finally started it in May 2004 and I was totally amazed. It read like a mystery. I had a hard time putting it down. It dealt with all kinds of questions I'd never dared ask anyone. Did Jesus really exist? Was the resurrection a myth? How accurate is the Bible after all those translations? I finished it on a Friday night in June at just after 3 in the morning. I can remember it, because it was 6/5/04 3:21 a.m. Like a countdown to a rebirth of my faith.

Strobel made many good points that I won't go into here. The book is definitely worth reading, if you have doubts. There were 2 key points that changed my mind about the resurrection after all those years. The first point was the deaths that the disciples suffered. Before reading Strobel, I don't recall having ever heard anyone discuss the fates of the disciples except that Judas killed himself. Except for John, the rest died violent, gruesome deaths for continually telling the story of Jesus and the resurrection. Strobel points out that no one would die for a lie. It also occurred to me that many would back off or lie to avoid death. These men didn't do that, because they absolutely knew Christ had come back from the grave. That gave them absolute faith in life after death, so their deaths didn't matter.

The second key point was really a whole chapter on a question that bothered me for years. How do we know Jesus didn't just pass out near death on the cross, get taken down & then revive in the tomb? Strobel in graphic language points out how unlikely survival was, but he also went further. After 3 days in a tomb without medical attention, food or even water,

someone near death would be more likely to die than to be in good enough shape to inspire people to go to their graves proclaiming the person had conquered death.

I've been over this time & time again. The disciples were willing to die for the story, so they weren't lying. Jesus couldn't have survived and inspired them. In the beginning, I went over this practically on a daily basis and I always come back to the same conclusion. Jesus really must have risen from the dead.

These arguments may not convince you. If you have questions or comments, feel free to email me at matrhodes@cranburypres.org. When I read *Case for Christ*, my initial reaction was more that it made me doubt my doubts and want to learn more. With time and further reflection that became faith.

It should be obvious that I credit Strobel for my change of heart, but I also credit my niece for giving me his book, Jenny for coaxing me back to church and Nancy for talking me into adopting Jenny. There's also that rain cloud and my father's recovery from alcoholism that inspired me to think about it all. In the end, the ultimate credit must belong to God for bringing it all together in my life when I needed it. For many years, I've thought of Nancy and Jenny as the 2 best things that ever happened to me. Now I feel I need to add that they are the 2 best gifts I ever got from God. Thank you, Lord, for the gifts and for not giving up on me.

May the Lord always bless you with help for your doubts.