* Thanks for opportunity to be with you today
* Fourth time I’ve shared a message in 2016, but first time here
* This has been a season of study and discovery for me regarding the Gospel of John.
  + Read Hamilton’s *John The Gospel of Light*
  + Pastor Doug led a study of the Hamilton book on the Gospel of John, though I was in choir practice and missed the study
  + Preached in January, using Lectionary reading from John on Baptism of Jesus (learned a lot as I prepared for that)
  + Then 3 weeks ago, again using Lectionary reading for the day, learned a lot about Mary anointing the feet of Jesus
  + Now today, first week of new series and this reading from John is also the Lectionary Gospel reading
* So, do we need to see something, to believe it?
* Are there elements of life that you simply have to see to believe?
* If you hear of something kinda goofy or incredible, are we doubtful until we see it on Youtube?
* Is seeing really believing?
* Let’s try US history
* Did Thomas Jefferson write US Declaration of Independence?
  + (show Declaration of Independence slide)
  + How do we know this is true?
  + Why do we so blindly accept this?
  + Have you seen a copy in person?
  + National Archives on National Mall
    - And no, to my sister, the National Mall does not have a Gap store
  + When did that first congress declare US Independence?
    - July 2, 1776
  + So why July 4?
    - Is when Declaration of Independence was finalized, approved and adopted the Declaration of Independence
    - First draft written by Thomas Jefferson, modified by Congressional action
      * Can you imagine that today?
    - John Adams and a few others modified Jefferson’s draft
    - But how do we know this? 240 years ago
* Do we believe US history because it has been taught to us?
* Or because we have seen evidence?
* Or is it based on some hope for our future
* Or maybe all of those?
* Beliefs and faith….
* Jim Valvano and referee Joe Forte. I’ve improved the original language for this time, place
  + 30-ish years ago, ACC basketball game. Joe Forte was refereeing, Jim Valvano was coaching North Caroline State
  + During heat of the battle, Valvano calls Forte over during time out
  + “Hey Joe, can you give me a T for what I believe?”
  + “No Jimmy, I can’t touch your beliefs”
  + “then I believe you are the worst basketball referee”
  + Forte laughed so much, he failed to give Valvano the deserved technical foul
* What did Jesus say about beliefs
* (show mustard seed slide)
* I really like this image – I am a very bad speller. Carol makes fun of my poor spelling
  + Among my most consistent bad spelling is to use 2 L’s in any word ending in ful, like beautiful, evenful, handful….
* Jesus, the master teacher, used a very visual and understandable image when teaching about faith
* If you have this much faith, it can grow and grow
* If we can just believe this much, that faith can grow to the size of one of the largest shrubs
* We used Matthew 13: 31 in VBS two years ago
  + The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all of the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree
  + I had a mustard seed that I passed around the room to the kids so they could see how small the seed.
  + From that teeny size to a great shrub
  + Our faith can grow that much as we grow and learn and believe
  + This seed of faith is planted by God, I believe
  + It is nurtured, just as with your gardens, by a loving hand
  + In the case of our budding faith, it is nurtured by family, teachers, pastors
* So where is the source of Christian faith?
* Where does it come from?
* Paul tells us very clearly in his letter to the Ephesians
  + Ephesians 2: 8-For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works so that no one may boast
  + Not earned
  + Not earned
  + But a gift, given generously
  + Received gratefully
* How many us struggle with misguided notion that have to earn salvation, to earn God’s love?
* Works are important and faith without works is dead – as James taught us
* But works alone is a pathway to failure
* Works alone is recipe for pain and suffering
* Among the gifts that John Wesley gave the organized church is the emphasis on receiving salvation by faith.
* Let’s review Wesley’s story – you’ve heard it frequently and may hear it again in May as Aldersgate Day arrives
* English colony in Georgia was relatively new in 1732
* Wesley was recruited to serve a missionary to the new land
* John convinced brother Charles and a couple other friends to accompany him to new world
* John Wesley, terrified of the sea, sailed on a small ship across the Atlantic ocean
  + Sea travel and travel in general much tougher in times of Wesley
  + Took 3 months to cross the Atlantic
  + Living conditions had to be tough
  + Small ship tossed by the Atlantic
  + Especially during storms
  + Show storm slide now
  + It was during storms that sea-sick and sea-weary Wesley, afraid of the sea noticed the Moravians, a Christian sect
    - amazed by faith of Moravians on board during storms
    - Singing during worst of the storms
* How do we handle storms?
* Our storms? Maybe not litteral weather storms, but just as terrifying
  + Do we cower in face of our storms
  + Do we run to the symbolic basement to ride out the storms, hiding in fear
  + Or do we face our storms like the Moravians on the ship?
  + We live and show our faith in times of trial
  + Think of those who came through storms
    - Noah, Jonah, Peter, Paul
* So anyway, John Wesley came to Georgia
* To warm up to the people in Georgia and on board the ship, among the first things he did upon arrival in Charleston was to destroy the shipment of rum on the ship
* His ministry in Georgia was mixed. He was devout
* But he failed in some ways. Didn’t want to ask John what he thought of Miss Sophia.
* Anyway, he was kind of chased out of Georgia
* Back to England
* And back to trying to earn his salvation
* Wesley was discouraged, his faith weakened
* But since his faith was at least partially centered on how good he was for God, and felt he needed to earn God’s grace, this should be expected
* He remembered the Moravians and sought out leader he knew, Peter Boehler
* Moravian pastor Peter Boehler, who served as missionary to England prior to being sent to the Americas, told Wesley,
  + “Preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith”
  + Most Methodist pastors can quote this though some attribute the words to Wesley. Words said by the German Boehler to Wesley
* Then on May 24, 1738, Wesley discovered faith. A very personal faith.
* He knew faith intellectually
* He taught and preached faith
* And was miserable as he pushed himself and his flock to EARN EARN EARN salvation
* Then this entry from him journal May 24 1738
  + In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that **he had taken away my sins, even mine,** and saved me from the law of sin and death. …
* This grace is given, not earned
* This grace is a gift given to those who believe
* He had taken away my sins
* Even mine
* Even mine
* So very personal to say EVEN MINE
* Try that with me now
* EVEN MINE
* EVEN MINE
* It’s one thing to tell others that Jesus died to save him or her
* But to feel it – EVEN MINE
* So Wesley knew grace, received through faith
* Living our Beliefs class a month ago, highlight for me was when we went around the room and all 17 of us told of our own “strangely warmed heart” moment. So moving. Tears all around the room. Took 75 minutes for all of us to share
* How do you answer the question “has your heart been strangely warmed?”
* If you have 5 minutes some time, ask me and I’ll share mine
* Now what of today’s scripture?
* After the Resurrection of Easter morning,
  + Jesus appeared to many people
  + Accompanied two on walk to Emmaus
  + Today’s Emmaus walk based on that
  + Then he appeared with Disciples, while Thomas was absent
* But Thomas would not believe
* Thomas makes an earlier appearance in John, back in chapter 11 where he seems to have a sarcastic tone when Jesus went to raise Lazarus from the dead
* So Thomas may have struggled with doubt for a while
* Doubt is not fatal
* Alfred Tennyson wrote
  + There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds
* So doubt is not fatal…
  + Remember the mustard seed
* Doubt of Thomas was changed dramatically by Jesus
  + But our doubt and doubt of others can be changed by less incredible acts
  + And by less incredible people
  + We can help our own doubt
  + Remember Peter Boehler
  + Preach faith until you have it
  + We can help others and ourselves by our service to others
  + Care for the sick
  + Care for the lonely
  + Care for the aging
  + When we visit the residents at Otterbein Avalon, who benefits?
    - Sure, we bring a little joy to Starr, Carolyn, Gail, Irene, Roger and my buddy Joan
    - Those who visit with me can tell you about these dear folks
    - How Irene plays bingo to win
    - How Gail mourns for her lost mother
    - How Carolyn is so sharp
    - And how Starr is so sweet
    - And my buddy Joan told a joke a few weeks ago and winked at me as she told it
      * I attest that those who are most blessed by our Otterbein visits are us, the visitors
      * I am convinced that such activity is a tremendous avenue to increased faith
      * Next visit is April 13. Join us and be blessed
  + Something else we can do to help us overcome doubt
    - Serve the Least of These
  + I recall so clearly, and ask Gene McCormick for his thoughts, the wrap-up worship at Union UMC when we visited Tylerton MD last November on our Smith Island Mission Trip
    - Residents praised us and thanked us for coming
    - And told us how we blessed them
    - But we, the visitors, knew very well who received the greatest blessing – it was us, the simple believers who came to do common labor
    - I will always remember the singing and the testimony of that closing worship service
    - Next trip in August, watch for details
    - Join us and have your faith strengthened
* Faith is a gift from God
* Paul is very clear on this
* Ephesians 2: 8 - For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works so that no one may boast
* Our Faith and our salvation is not earned, but given, so that we may not boast of our accomplishment
* God plants the mustard seed
* I believe that seed of God-given faith, is then nurtured by the Holy Spirit, prayer and by believers
* Think of those who have helped you on your spiritual journey
* Sweet Grandma’s
* parents
* Gifted preachers
* Dedicated Sunday School leaders and teachers
* Youth Leaders
* Small Group leaders
* I invite you now to close your eyes and picture in your mind those who have helped your faith grow
* See those faces
* Feel that faith
* Include these people in your prayers
* If you have the great fortune that some of these survive today, call them today to thank them
* Just wanted to call to chat and to thank you for the gift you helped grow in me
* I live a life of faith because of you
* Next slide to family
* This is 25 years old maybe, three of the women in my life
  + Carol took this picture
  + And Caroline wouldn’t be born for another 20 years
  + So this is daughter Leah in front, my mom, Olive Bell on right as we look
  + And on the left is my sweet grandma Hildreth, a few years before her death
  + I’ve spoken about her many times
  + Clearly a source for spiritual nurturing for me
  + There is no doubt that the most profound nurture of the mustard seed of faith in me has been from my Grandma Hildreth
* When I last spoke here, it was on All-Saints day and included in my usual blend of jokes and sports references was the request that we consider and thank those who are Saints for us
  + And to consider for whom are sent to serve as saints
* Now 5 months later, very different scripture, I come to same observation.
* We remember and thank those who helped us
* And what is best way to thank them?
* Yes, to serve another in the same way
* For whom are you sent to help spiritually?
* Who can you bless by helping the mustard seed of faith grow?
* How can you do this?
* Live the example
* Show the way, don’t tell the way
* Let them see faith in action in you
* Let them hear faith in action by your prayers
* Let them know of faith by your faith
* The writer of Hebrews may have said it best
* Hebrews 11:1 Now Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
* Most of all, Faith is a gift of God for his beloved people