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The Earth is flat.

We know that's not a true statement, but if you lived thousands of years ago, you might have agreed that *the earth is flat* was a true statement.

But there were some who would have disagreed. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras suggested 500 years before Jesus was born that the Earth was round.

Several centuries later the Roman philosopher Lucretius believed the Earth was flat, for "he thought the idea of animals walking around topsy-turvy under the Earth was absurd."¹

Regarding the shape of our planet, what is truth?

We've been taught that many people during Christopher Columbus' day thought the Earth was flat and that he might fall off the edge while sailing, but by that time most people already knew the Earth was round. So why did we grow up learning that people in Columbus' day thought he would fall off the earth? The myth came from storyteller Washington Irving who published in 1828 *The Life*

and Voyages of Christopher Columbus. To make the story more suspenseful, Irving added the notion that many believed the Earth was flat.²

What is truth?

Everyone today knows the Earth is round, right? The Flat Earth Society would disagree, which was established in 1956 to try and convince children that the earth was flat.

Even recently rapper B.o.B posted on Twitter that the Earth is flat, and last year he started a GoFundMe campaign to raise money to send satellites into orbit to prove it.³

What is truth?

You can select almost any topic and find reason to argue for it or against it: from global warming, to the effectiveness of vaccinations, to having one high school or two, to health care, to immigration. In all these issues, we may find reasons for and against, which may lead us to the question once again: What is truth?

Even when it comes to religious questions, when we think we know everything there is to know,

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there's always another side to the issue, as Disciples preacher Fred Craddock explains:

I had a debate in the state of Missouri some years ago about a passage of scripture: Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved. This preacher, redheaded, red beard, and ferocious, said to me, "Do you believe in the Bible?"

"Yeah."

"What does it say? Read it." I read it to the people gathered. He said, "Do you believe that?"

I said, "Well, of course, I believe that. But if you have a case of a child who dies on the seventh day of its life, or the ninth day of its life, it had no chance to believe or be baptized"

"Does it say 'except'?"

I said, "But what about people that don't have all their mental faculties?"

"Does it say 'except'?"

And we went at it, back and forth. I wound up as the bleeding-heart liberal who didn't believe the Bible, and he came off looking like

the stone statue of truth, holding up the word of Christ.⁴

What is truth? That's a question many of us may still ask today as we hear different opinions being argued back and forth. Centuries ago the church measured truth by statements in creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed, but the early leaders of our Disciples movement rejected the use of creeds as tests of "fellowship" within the church, suggesting that we instead place our trust in Christ alone.

John Wesley, who began the Methodist Church movement, suggested we use four criteria to determine truth: scripture (what does the Bible say?); tradition (what does the history of the church say); reason (what sounds believable and reasonable?); and our experience (how does the Spirit move in our lives to reveal truth?). Any one of these taken by itself can be dangerous, for Wesley believed all four must be considered. It's not as easy as quoting a scripture to prove your point, or

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saying “that’s how we always believed,” for truth is much more complex.

We’re not the first ones to search for truth, for even those who encountered Jesus and had to make decisions about truth. One person in particular had to decide whether to free Jesus or sentence him to death as he struggled with the question about truth. But rather than me telling you his story, listen to him firsthand.

I imagine many of you are surprised that I’m here today. I’m amazed you let me in the door, for not many Christians are interested in listening to me. You know me as Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. Even though the land of Judea was named after Judah, a son of Jacob and Leah, we Romans had conquered the land and ruled it. We weren’t the first ones to take control of the land, for the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks had ruled before us. The Jewish people living in the land were restless—frustrated that so many foreign powers had invaded their land and ruled over them.

I was just doing my job of trying to maintain order through our military strength, but some citizens resented our Roman control. Part of my job

was also the collection of taxes, which of course, no one liked.

I didn’t understand the Jewish customs, so many times I made decisions that the religious community did not like. One time I set up shields to honor our Emperor, but the Jewish leaders felt I was creating an idol of worship. Another time I needed funds to build an aqueduct for water, and I took funds from the temple treasury. It was a project to benefit our community, so I felt the temple should contribute too. A large crowd gathered to protest, and I gave the signal for the soldiers to gain control of the situation, which resulted in the death of many people.

Due to these events, I was not well liked, so I was surprised when the high priest brought to me a man that some called the king of the Jews. I had heard about this Jesus, for he was gaining quite a following. I asked the crowd, “What charges do you bring against him?”

They yelled, “He’s a criminal!”

I didn’t really want to get involved, and I suggested they deal with the matter themselves, but they insisted I talk with him. When I asked Jesus whether he was a king, he replied with a question to me, “Are you asking on your own, or did someone tell you this information?”

I replied, “Your people brought you to me. What have you done?”

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He explained that his kingdom doesn't belong to this world, so I asked, "So you admit you're a king?"

He replied with a slight smile, "If you say so. I am here to speak truth."

His response made me wonder, "What *is* truth?"

Since I couldn't find anything illegal about this man named Jesus, I went back outside to the crowd. It was customary to release one prisoner during the Jewish festival of Passover, so I told the crowd I would free Jesus, their king.

I was surprised when they instead yelled out, "Not him. We want Barabbas." I was reluctant to free Barabbas, for I knew he was a troublemaker who led violent protests against our Roman government. I

would have much preferred to release Jesus, who seemed much less violent, but to keep the peace I did as the crowd requested.

Things did not go well for Jesus after that, and I continued to wonder, "What is truth?" Have you ever struggled with that question after hearing many sides of the same story? Sometimes it's hard to sort out the facts, to discern what is the truth. I realize *you* already know what happened to Jesus, so I hope that gives you courage to keep searching.

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¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flat_Earth

² www.history.com/news/christopher-columbus-never-set-out-to-prove-the-earth-was-round

³ www.cnn.com/2017/09/25/us/b-o-b-flat-earth-gofundme-trnd/index.html

⁴ Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories* (Kindle Locations 1457-1462). Kindle Edition.