

**6. Jesus' Victory Over Doubt**  
**John 20:24-29; Matt 28:17; Luke 24:9-12 and 36-43**  
**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Good morning. We continue our series exploring the benefits of Jesus' resurrection today with a look at his victory over *doubt*. Let's start by reading from John 20:24-29

**[Read John 20:24-29]**

*24Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"*

*But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."*

*26A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

*28Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*29Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

**[Pray]**

1) The difficulty for the disciples in processing the resurrection

"Doubt (verb): to be undecided in opinion; ... to question; ... to incline to believe only with fear or hesitation; to distrust; ... (noun): ... uncertainty of opinion; a suspicion." Thus The Chambers Dictionary defines doubt. And for many Christians, doubt is synonymous with a single name: Thomas. Thomas, the disciple who refused to believe in Jesus' resurrection until he had seen him and touched his physical body for himself. Stories of a resurrection were just so far outside Thomas' expectations that he needed empirical proof to persuade him of their truthfulness. Doubting Thomas.

Personally, I think Thomas gets a bad press. For a start, I'm convinced that I would have been exactly the same in his shoes. But also, I don't think he was any different from most, if not all, of the other disciples – at least not the male disciples whom we term the apostles. As far as I can see, Thomas differs from them in only two respects: firstly, in not being present when Jesus met with them the first time; and secondly, in his *courage* to articulate his inner doubts for others to hear. Why do I say that? Well, listen, for instance, to Luke's account of the disciple's reaction when *they* first heard of Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:9-12):

**[Read Luke 24:9-12]**

*9When they [the women] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.*

When the other disciples heard the report of the resurrection, they no more believed it than Thomas did. Indeed, only Peter – and, in John's Gospel we discover, John also – bothered to do anything to check out the truth of the women's claims. Even then, Peter is left "wondering to himself what had happened." Hadn't the women already explained what happened? Why then is he still wondering, unless because he doubts? And in the account at the end of Mark that we read last week, it says that Jesus "rebuked them for their *lack of faith* and their *stubborn refusal to believe* those who had seen him after he had risen" (Mark 16:14). Is that so different from Thomas?

Have you ever thought to yourself that it would be so much easier to believe in Jesus if you'd actually seen him, like the apostles did? I know I have. And maybe, it would be! Seeing Jesus resurrected certainly seemed to make a big difference to Thomas! But even seeing Jesus did not eradicate all doubt immediately for the disciples.

Luke 24:36-43 records Jesus' first appearance to his disciples in that locked upper room. Having heard the reports of his resurrection from first the women, then from Peter, then from Cleopas and his friend returning from Emmaus, when Jesus actually turns up ... they still fear that he must be a ghost! No wonder Jesus said to them (v.38), "Why are you troubled, and why do *doubts* rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." And Luke continues: "When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they *still did not believe it* because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence." Similarly, in Matt 28:16-17, we read, "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some *doubted*." Even though they could see him face to face in front of them clearly resurrected, they were not immune from doubt. I don't know about you, but I find that fact quite encouraging!

But it is a different *sort* of doubt from before they encountered his resurrection. There is a big difference between the doubt that is a "stubborn refusal to believe" (Mark 16:14), that says, "I will not believe" (John 20:25), and the doubt that is struggling to take in the enormity of the resurrection "because of joy and amazement" (Luke 24:41), a doubt that exists in the midst of worship (Matt 28:17). The first, might be described as "to distrust," and elicits a rebuke from Jesus; whereas the second might be described as "to question, to hesitate," and elicits no recorded rebuke, just a gentle reassurance from Jesus, and provision of the evidence they needed to truly take in this universe-transforming event. The first is an expression of faithlessness; the second merely a struggle to fully comprehend, within the context of faith. What causes this shift from faithlessness to tentative faith? Simply, the truth of the resurrection beginning to sink in.

2) The deepening of faith that doubt can produce (and how we can benefit from their doubts, as well as our own)

I believe it was George Verwer – the founder of Operation Mobilisation – who asserted, "there is a ministry of doubt." What he meant was that doubt – the sort of doubt that wrestles with questions from within a context of faith – such doubt can actually deepen our faith in God, as we search for greater understanding. Indeed, if you have never found yourself, even for a moment, in joy and amazement questioning if the gospel can really be true, I might wonder if you have really taken in the enormity of the grace that God has shown you in Jesus Christ.

And in those moments when it all seems too good to be true, I find the disciples' doubt about the resurrection an enormous help. Firstly, because of the simple fact that they came to believe in the resurrection wholeheartedly, having begun so sceptical. That gives me confidence in the authenticity of these Gospel accounts. And it encourages me that what we see in them is authentically the work of *God*, not a product of their own imagination or desires. Which, in turn encourages me that my own conversion is authentically the work of God and not something I have just chosen to believe in.

Secondly, my faith benefits from the evidence to the resurrection that their doubt prompted. Because they doubted, Jesus proved the physical nature of his resurrected body by eating fish in their presence, and by encouraging them to put their hands into the nail marks in his hands and the spear hole in his side. Not only does that prove that his body was a real physical one; it also proves that it was truly Jesus, who was crucified, standing before them resurrected. Those scars could not fail to remind them that he had truly died on that cross. Yet here he was physically alive again.

The authenticity of these resurrection details is one of the things that holds me in my Christian faith when I find myself doubting because of joy and amazement. Jesus said, "blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed." I can honestly say that I would struggle with doubt far more were it not for the evidence that

Jesus provided to counteract the unbelief of those first disciples. Like Thomas, more than anything, for me it is this evidence of the resurrection that causes me to declare of Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

3) The depth of conviction that Jesus did rise from the dead (and how that affects our beliefs and priorities)

And for all the disciples this was the beginning of a *journey* of faith – a faith to which they held steadfastly, in the face of great opposition, to the day of their death. It would not be long before they were boldly proclaiming this gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected – wherever they went, as the book of Acts testifies! There is only one explanation for that transformation: clearly their doubts were overcome by encountering Jesus resurrected from the dead!

For instance, listen to Peter, on the day of Pentecost boldly declaring to the crowds (Acts 2:32): “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.” Or again, hear his courage and conviction before the Jewish ruling council (Acts 4:9-12): “If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom *God raised from the dead*, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in *no one else*, for there is *no* other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” For a Jew to say that is incredible! But that is the conviction that comes from recognising the resurrection for the truth that it is. Doubt is swallowed up in faith.

Christian tradition tells us that, of the twelve apostles, perhaps only John escaped martyrdom for his faith – and he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos! Some of the accounts are more reliable than others, but we know from Acts 12:2 that *James* was martyred by Herod, probably around AD44. Jesus himself predicted that *Peter* would glorify him through martyrdom (John 20:18-19), and there is reasonably strong evidence that he was crucified upside down under Nero, around AD64. And there is reasonably credible evidence that Thomas – yes, “doubting Thomas” – may have been stabbed to death in India in AD72, for preaching the gospel. It was the evidence of the resurrection that brought about this transformation in the apostles.

So, what of us? There may be many reasons to look at the world today and question Christian faith. There are many unexplained mysteries or worries that may cause us to doubt. Alternatively, as we catch afresh the wonder of the grace of God that wipes away all our sin and gifts us Jesus’ righteousness in its place, we might question, “Can God *really* be that good?” But to all these doubts, God has given a categorical answer: Christ is risen from the dead! Jesus’ resurrection has won the victory over doubt. And the only truly appropriate response is to fall on our knees and declare afresh, “My Lord and my God!” Amen?