

John 20:19-31 – Believing Jesus is risen

Last week was Easter Sunday and we were celebrating Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And what a glorious morning it was with those joyful Easter Hymns:

Jesus Christ is Risen today ... Hallelujah

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.

But what must it have been like for those first disciples? They had been with Jesus for three years, listening to his teaching, watching him heal the sick and even raise the dead. They had been with him when he was welcomed into Jerusalem with loud cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" They had been with him when he was arrested and they had seen him crucified. Now the tomb where his body had been placed was empty.

This morning we have read the story of Thomas – "Doubting Thomas". When the other disciples told him that they had seen the risen Lord, he refused to believe it unless he saw Jesus with his own eyes and felt the reality of his crucified and risen body with his own hands.

But I think that Thomas, so often called "Doubting Thomas," gets a bad press. I think that it's all too easy for us to judge him when we read this passage. Jesus warns us against a judgmental spirit – take care to remove the plank from your own eye before expressing concern about the speck in someone else's eye. Do we never suffer from doubts? Do we never ask ourselves, "Can this really be true?"

This morning I want us to look at the doubts not only of Thomas but of *all* of Jesus' disciples and, through their doubt, be encouraged in our own faith.

His disciples could not believe Jesus was going to die

Jesus told his disciples on many occasions that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, but that on the third day he would rise again from the dead. But his disciples found it difficult to believe what Jesus was saying – how could Jesus be crucified?

Do you remember the occasion when Jesus asked his disciples what the crowds were saying about him? "Who do they say I am?", he asked. They answered him that some thought he was John the Baptist come back from the dead, others thought he was Elijah or another of the prophets. "Who do *you* say I am?" asked Jesus. Peter immediately answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." What a wonderful moment of faith that was for Peter. But then Jesus began to explain to the disciples what this would mean, how that he must suffer and die and rise again. Peter immediately rebuked Jesus. Did you hear that? Peter *rebuked* Jesus and sought to set him straight! "No, Lord. That can never happen to you!" He cannot believe that Jesus' death is part of God's plan. He will not believe it. For this response, Peter is rebuked by Jesus in the strongest terms, "Get behind me Satan."

Peter (speaking for all the disciples), cannot believe that Jesus the Messiah must die.

And even when Jesus is hanging and dying on the cross, it is not his disciples who express their faith in him. The disciples still could not believe that this was part of God's great plan. The only ones who believed in him on that day were a dying criminal who asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom and a Roman centurion who exclaimed, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

His disciples did not believe that Jesus the Messiah must die.

After Jesus' resurrection, his disciples had difficulty believing he was alive

After Jesus had risen from the dead his disciples – not just Thomas – had difficulty believing that Jesus was alive.

In Luke chapter 24 we read of Mary Magdalene, along with other women, returning from the empty tomb having seen angels who told them Jesus was alive. They reported these things to the eleven apostles and Luke records the apostles' reaction: "They did not believe the women, because their words seemed like nonsense" (24:11). They did not believe that Jesus could be alive.

Then later in Luke 24 we have the story of the risen Jesus walking with a couple along the road to Emmaus. They do not recognise Jesus, but tell this stranger that they *had hoped* that Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel but all their hopes had been dashed when he was taken and crucified. Now they have heard reports that some of the women have seen the empty tomb and have talked with angels, and the apostles also went and looked in the tomb and found it empty. They just don't know what to make of it all. Then Jesus says to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). Did you hear those words of the Lord Jesus? He calls them, "slow to believe."

And again, later in that same chapter of Luke, we have his record of the same incident as we have read from John 20. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples as they were huddled together and said, "Peace be with you" (24:36). He showed them his hands and his side and then Luke records, "while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?'" (24:41). Even when the risen Christ was standing before them, the disciples found it difficult to believe that he had risen from the dead. It was easier to believe it was a ghost.

But that's not the end of this story of doubt and uncertainty. After his resurrection, Jesus "presented himself to [his disciples] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). At the end of this period, he met with them one last time before his ascension into heaven. Matthew records that, "the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:16-17). Did you hear that? "some doubted", even after 40 days in which Jesus had appeared to them, spoken to them and taught them!

We see from these passages of Scripture that it was not just Thomas who doubted. The fact that Jesus had been crucified but was now risen from the dead was difficult for the disciples to believe even when the risen Christ stood before them. And in many ways that's not surprising. Dead men don't come back to life.

How then shall we believe?

Do you sometimes have doubts? Do you sometimes find it difficult to believe? That's not surprising either.

But look with me at the passage we have read this morning so that we can be encouraged by it.

The passage, and others we have touched on from the Gospels, record how these disciples saw the risen Lord. He ate and drank with them. He spoke with them and taught them the meaning of his death and his resurrection and how his kingdom would be extended throughout the earth.

And his disciples recorded what they had seen and heard and touched. These things, says John, "are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." They have left their testimony that we might believe. The opposite

of doubt is not certainty ... Certainty is what Peter had when he said he would never desert Christ, he would be prepared to die for him. Certainty was what he had when he said that he would never deny Christ. Our certainties can be most uncertain. The opposite of doubt is not certainty but faith. It is placing our trust in the one who can alone give us hope and life.

But this is not the whole story. In John 20 we read of Jesus giving his Spirit to his disciples: "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (vv.21-22). Without the Holy Spirit the disciples could never have been effective witnesses to what they have seen and heard; they could never have written these testimonies that we can read today.

Think of Peter who, along with the other disciples, was hiding out in a room in Jerusalem for fear of the Jews. After the Holy Spirit was poured out on these disciples on the Day of Pentecost, this simple fisherman was preaching with power to the crowds assembled to celebrate Pentecost.

And in the same way, the written testimony of these eye-witnesses is vital to our believing that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. It is vital, but it is not enough. We believe not just because we have read the accounts and weighed the evidence. We believe because we too have encountered the risen Christ through the power of the Spirit. We too "see and believe", having seen with the eye of faith. As the Spirit who inspired these testimonies breathes upon and through the Scriptures, we see and understand at last the purposes of God that centre in Christ's death and resurrection. And we encounter the risen Christ and see something of his glory.

Jesus gave the Spirit to his disciples that they might bear witness to this incredible truth: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." He tells them that as the Father sent him into the world, so now he is sending them out into the world with this message.

And now we too have been given the Spirit of the risen Saviour that we, in our turn, might now bear testimony to the crucified and risen Christ – bearing testimony with conviction to this truth which alone makes sense of our world, the Scriptures and ourselves. There is no other hope for the world. We bear witness to this truth which the world finds difficult to believe but which we believe because we have encountered the risen Saviour – or perhaps, more correctly, he has made himself known to us.

This witness has changed the world and continues to change the world. And now it is entrusted to us. Jesus calls us to believe in him – to trust him and to know him. He calls us to live the transformed resurrection life through the power of his Spirit. He calls us to tell this good news to the world, a world that needs to know him and his transforming power.

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