

John 20:19-31 – Not seeing but believing

I am a member of U3A – the University of the Third Age. It sounds rather grand, but it's really only people of retirement years meeting together to enjoy a shared activity or learn something new. They have art groups, music groups, reading groups and all sorts of other activities. On Thursday mornings, once a fortnight, I go to the philosophy group where we discuss all sorts of issues.

Philosophy is all about reasoning. By careful reasoning one can, it is suggested, come to a sensible view of things and an accurate view of the world. Several of those who attend the group are atheists. They do not believe that there is a God and can see no logical reason to believe in God. In this they reflect something of the sceptical spirit of our age. Question everything. Don't believe something just because others believe it; reason it out for yourself.

We have, as you may imagine, some interesting discussions.

Do you sometimes have doubts? Do you sometimes ask yourself, "Is it really true?" "What evidence is there that it is true?" "Why should I believe something just because others have told me it is true?" "I need to work this out for myself."

Thomas, the disciple who is often, perhaps unfairly, called 'doubting Thomas', was a man like that.

Thomas had been with Jesus for 3 years. He had seen his miracles and listened to his teaching. He had learned from Jesus and had called him Lord. But, in the days before the incident recorded in our reading, he had seen Jesus being seized by the soldiers, taken prisoner and handed over to the Roman authorities. He knew that Jesus had been crucified – that his hands had been pierced with nails and his side with a Roman spear. Perhaps Thomas had stood afar off and watched as Jesus died on that cross. He knew that Jesus was dead, the Roman authorities had made sure of that before they handed his body over to Joseph from Arimathea, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He knew that Jesus' body had had been buried and sealed up in a hastily borrowed tomb.

But now others of the disciples were telling him that Jesus was alive. They even said that they had seen him and he had spoken with them.

But that did not make sense to Thomas. Dead people don't just come back to life – well, maybe one or two had been brought back to life; Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. But dead people don't come back to life and walk through locked doors. This was just a day-dream spun out of hope and longing. Thomas was a realist; he just could not believe what he was being told. So he said to the other disciples,

‘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.’ (John 20:25)

Thomas is insistent that he must see it for himself.

And Jesus is gentle and patient with Thomas's unbelief. He appears again to the disciples, this time when Thomas is present and says,

‘Peace be with you!’ Then 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.’ (John 20:27-28)

Thomas does not need to put his finger into the holes in Jesus' hands made by the nails or put his hand into the gaping wound in Jesus' side. He has seen the risen Lord and he immediately cries out, 'My Lord and my God'. He believes and there is no more room for any doubt with him.

But here is the punch-line as Jesus says to Thomas,

‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ (John 20:29)

Last Sunday morning we had a wonderful time celebrating Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But why do we believe that Jesus rose from the dead when we have not seen the risen Lord Jesus as those first disciples saw him?

Well let me ask you another question. Why do you believe that W G Grace was born here in Downend and became a first class cricketer? He died in 1915 so not one of you ever saw him play, though some of you may have been lucky enough to have been regaled with stories told by much older relatives who witnessed the remarkable talents of the famous W. G.

Why then do you believe in the cricketing prowess of this one of Downend's greatest sons? You believe because others witnessed it and they wrote of what they had seen – they bear testimony to us and their testimony can still read today.

And in the same way we have written testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the testimony of eyewitnesses. He appeared to the disciples. When he appeared to Mary Magdalene she told the other disciples, but they were slow to believe. When Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples (without Thomas) they quickly told Thomas but he was slow to believe. When he appeared to Thomas, Thomas immediately believed.

And John concludes this chapter by saying to his readers – to us,

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. *But these 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.* (John 20:30-31)

John is saying, "I know that you cannot see the risen Lord Jesus as we saw him. He is now returned to glory. But we want to share with you what *we* saw and heard so that you can believe on the basis of *our* testimony and share with us in the blessing of possessing life – eternal life – through him."

Just as you believe things about W G Grace because *others* saw the things he did and bear testimony to his cricketing prowess, so we may believe that Jesus rose from the dead because of others who saw him raised and bear witness to us of these things.

There is plenty of evidence that Jesus rose from the dead – even though dead people don't normally come back to life – that was the whole point, this was not something normal.

- There was the empty tomb and the inability of the authorities to produce the body.
- There is the testimony of many eyewitnesses who saw the risen Christ. Later, when Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth to remind them of the central importance to their faith of Christ's resurrection from the dead he says that Christ appeared at one time to more than 500 people, most of whom are still alive. In other words he is saying to them, if you don't believe me, go and talk to some of them. Believe on their testimony.
- Then there is the remarkable change in the disciples, from hiding away in locked rooms to preaching openly on the streets; from silence for fear of the Jews to telling the Jewish leaders that nothing will keep them silent – they *must* speak of what they had seen and heard. What can explain this change other than that Jesus is risen from the dead and his risen power is with his disciples?

There is plenty of credible evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. It is not foolish or gullible to believe that he is risen; it is borne out by the evidence.

And so we have a solid ground for our faith. Jesus resurrection is God's own confirmation that he is pleased with all that Jesus did in going to the cross for us. In the words of the Apostle Paul Jesus "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25). His death paid the penalty for our sin and his resurrection demonstrates that it was paid in full. God raised him up, as it were, with the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." His death and resurrection are the solid foundation for our faith and for our assurance that we are accepted by God.

The testimony of the eyewitnesses recorded in the New Testament is enough to convince the person who considers them carefully that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. But there is much, much more to the Christian faith. Since Jesus rose from the dead he is alive today. Faith is therefore more than assent to a set of propositions – Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again – wonderful though these truths are. Living faith means knowing and experiencing for ourselves something of his risen presence and power.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians in his second letter, says that the Bible may appear to as just a dusty old book. But when someone turns to the Lord, when they come to know Christ by faith, the whole thing comes alive. It's as if a veil falls away from our eyes and we see clearly; we see with the eye of faith something of the glory of the risen Saviour. Paul writes,

We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The Spirit of the risen Christ, shining into our hearts, enables us to 'see' something of the glory of the risen Saviour and know his risen power at work within us.

And it is this that makes all the difference. We know that Jesus rose from the dead not just because there is good solid evidence from those who saw him said bore witness to what happened. We know he is risen and alive because we know his risen life for ourselves. So, in addition to the testimony of eyewitnesses to his resurrection, we may say,

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me and talks with me
Along life's narrow way
He lives, He lives, Salvation to impart
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart .

In this way, the risen Lord Jesus enables us to become witnesses to others of what we too have seen and heard – witnesses to the love of God and to the forgiveness that streams to us from Christ's atoning death. Witnesses to the life and hope we possess in him – and which others may also possess in him.

We are not among those who saw the risen Christ as did Mary Magdalene, Peter, John and Thomas yet we *are* among those of whom Peter wrote,

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

We enjoy the blessings of those who have not yet seen Jesus with physical eyes, yet, through the power of the Spirit, we have seen his risen glory with the eye of faith and we have believed.

Do you believe that Jesus rose again from the dead?

Do you believe that he has all power in heaven and earth?

Do you love him, trust in him and worship him?

Do you know the reality of his resurrection power at work in you?

Will you bear witness to others of what you have seen and heard?

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