

Believing and Seeing

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Date: 12 April 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, our custom on Easter Sunday, well, many churches have this custom actually, is when the leader says Christ is risen, the congregation responds, he is risen indeed.
- So let's have a go, it's on the slide. Christ is risen. I'm sorry, I couldn't hear any of you. No, let's try it again, let's try it again, here we go. Christ is risen.
- I think I might have heard someone, even from Eltham then, that's terrific. He is risen indeed. But here's the question, how do we know?
- How do we know it's not he is risen perhaps, or he is risen I think, but he is risen indeed. How do we know?
- Well, this morning as we look at John chapter 20, we've been working our way through John's gospel, we're at the second last chapter. John gives us some reasons for why we can know. He's given us some eyewitness evidence.
- [1 : 0 9] And the first piece of evidence he gives us is that they saw an empty tomb. So we're at point one in your outlines, the points are on the slide. I should say that each week there will also be a PDF outline of the sermon, which you can download from the website.
- It's usually a link just under the live stream heading. Obviously, if you do it now, you'll lose the live stream, so do it later. But point one, they saw the empty tomb.
- And as I read verses 1 to 7, have a listen for the repetition of the words saw and tomb. So early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went by the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.
- So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him. So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.
- Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen, lying there, but did not go in.
- [2 : 2 3] Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.
- The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. You notice the repetition of the word tomb, and a little bit less often the word saw.
- John's point is, these people saw the empty tomb. That's what John wants us to know. Mary saw it first, and we know from the other gospel accounts that there are other women with her.
- That's why in verse 2, after she runs to tell the disciples, it says, We don't know where they have put him. It's Mary and the other women. And it seems at this point, Mary perhaps runs back to tell the disciples by herself, because the other accounts tell us that the women saw some angels and even met Jesus on their way.
- But either way, Mary saw an empty tomb, and so does Peter and this other disciple whom Jesus loved. And I think most scholars think that that other disciple is John himself, who's writing this account.

[3 : 38] Of course, when he describes himself as the one Jesus loved, it could sound a bit full of himself, a bit arrogant, as though he's trying to get the attention. But it's actually not what John is doing.

It's actually the opposite. John avoids using his name to remain anonymous in his book. And the phrase is really more like the disciple Jesus actually loved.

John is amazed that Jesus would love him. But the point here is these two men also saw an empty tomb, which according to Jewish law is exactly what you needed for reliable testimony.

The law required two eyewitnesses. And here they are. And what's more, did you notice the detail of their testimony? Like about who ran the fastest?

Typical guys, competition. And who went into the tomb first? Even verse 6 and 7, there's lots of detail about this linen. By the way, it's worth noticing that the linen is left lying in the tomb, isn't it?

[4 : 51] Unlike Lazarus, who came out of the tomb all wrapped up like a mummy. So on the next slide, you might remember from John chapter 11, that when Lazarus came out, he was still bound with the strips of linen and Jesus had to tell people to unbind him and let him go.

It's as though the grave clothes still clung to Lazarus. Because his resurrection was more like a resuscitation. Death still clung to Lazarus.

Death would still come to Lazarus, but not to Jesus. The linen is left lying in the tomb with Jesus, for death no longer has hold on him.

Christ remains risen. It's why we don't say Christ was risen, as though it happened in the past and he's since died again. No, we say Christ is risen.

And that makes all the difference, as we'll see later. But here, these details signal that what we're reading is real eyewitness testimony.

[6 : 03] I mean, did you even notice how John mentions the piece of cloth for Jesus' head, which was separate from all the other linen, which was lying in its place? In fact, the phrase lying in its place literally is folded in its place.

Why would you include such a detail? Unless that's how you remembered it, because you were there. It's kind of one of the tricks I use on my children to see if they're telling the truth.

I ask them the details, and the one who can give me the details is the one I know was there and saw what happened. They're telling the truth. I hope they're not watching this, because now they know my trick.

But even if they are listening, it's hard to fake such details, isn't it? And these details are there in our passage, because they were there at the tomb.

This is real eyewitness testimony we're reading, and what they witnessed was already enough for one to believe. Here is the first response in our passage in verse 8. Verse 8.

[7 : 13] Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. John believes that Jesus rose. Here's our first response. Despite the fact that he didn't quite understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

He didn't quite make the link with our first reading that God's chosen king, which was David at the time, his body would not see decay. And so for Jesus to truly be the chosen king, his body could not see decay.

But the point here is they really saw an empty tomb. But they also really saw the risen Jesus. And that's the second bit of evidence John gives us in our passage.

So point to on your slides and verse 11 to 18 in your Bibles. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying and she wept. She bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

[8 : 27] They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? They have taken away my Lord, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there.

But she did not realize it was Jesus. Jesus asked her, Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you're looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

Go and said to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary magnately went to the disciples with the news, I have seen the Lord.

And she told them that he had said these things to her. Here we have repetition of seeing, but also the repetition of the name Jesus comes up quite a bit in this paragraph, more than the others.

[9 : 36] She saw Jesus alive. It's interesting, though, that she doesn't recognize Jesus until Jesus says her name. Do you see that in verse 16?

Remember what Jesus said about being the good shepherd back in chapter 10? On the next slide, Jesus said that the good shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

And his sheep follow him because they know his voice. And here is Jesus calling Mary by name and at that moment, she recognizes his voice.

The voice of her teacher, her shepherd, her Lord. And understandably, she clings to Christ. I mean, can you imagine the joy and relief she would have felt?

But then in verse 17, Jesus tells her not to cling to him. This is not because Jesus has problems with public displays of affection, as I do.

[10 : 46] It was our wedding anniversary yesterday and I was reminded that on our wedding day when the minister said, you may now kiss the bride, I actually stopped and said, but everyone's looking. I couldn't cope with it.

Of course, it's completely different for Jesus. Mary is like his sister and he says, don't cling to me because he has a job for himself and her to do.

He must return to the father to rule and she must return to the disciples to tell. Here is the second response in our passage. You see verse 18 again?

She went to the disciples with the news. I have seen the Lord and she told them that he had said these things to her.

You see, having seen the risen Jesus, she now tells others about it. And just like the disciples followed in Mary's footsteps in seeing the empty tomb, so too they follow in her footsteps in seeing the risen Jesus.

[11 : 49] So I follow along in verse 19. On the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and sighed. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord and again Jesus said, Peace be with you.

So here it's Sunday evening in the Bible and just like us here on Sunday morning, the disciples are gathered together inside their home, not because of fear of spreading the virus or fear of being fined by the police, but for fear of the Jewish leaders.

And Jesus appeared before them, which was no doubt a surprise to them, though it ought not be to us. After all, if Jesus can calm the storm, if he can raise the dead, if Christ is risen indeed, then appearing in a room behind a locked door is a piece of cake, isn't it?

I realize that some people have a problem with believing in Jesus because they cannot believe in miracles, but that's actually illogical when you think about it. I mean, if he got stuck on the outside of the door and he was knocking, please guys, let me in, come on guys, then what kind of king is he really?

[13 : 20] What kind of son of God is he really? No, no, miracles like this are precisely the things you'd expect from someone who claims to be the son of God and the king of the world.

But notice he says, peace be with you. In fact, he says it three times in our passage, which means it's more than just a greeting. This is what they now have with God is what he's saying.

They have peace with God. How? Well, not so much by his resurrection, but by his death. That's why in verse 20 it says, after he said this, that is peace be with you, he showed them his hands and his side, the marks of his death, you see.

Not just so they knew it was really him and not some other person, but also so that they could connect the peace he brings with the death he died.

In fact, in verse 20 and 21 he says it twice, peace be with you, and sandwiched in the middle of those two, peace be with you, is the reason of how it's possible.

[14 : 37] His crucified hands and body, his death for us. For it's by his death that he paid for all our sins, our sins, which made us all enemies with God.

As we heard a few weeks ago at the cross, Jesus drank the bitter cup of God's wrath, God's just anger at our sin for ignoring him and effectively spitting in his face.

Jesus drunk all that judgment down in our place so that we could be reconciled to God, forgiven, have peace with God.

And this relational peace with God also brings emotional peace in life, does it not? And it works like this elsewhere. Imagine you've had an argument with someone, which is quite easy to imagine now that we're all cooped up in the same house.

But imagine we've had an argument with someone but then cleared the air with them, you know, were reconciled to them, perhaps a parent or a sibling or a spouse or colleague. But when you're reconciled with them, it not only brings relational peace but it brings this emotional sense of relief, doesn't it?

[15 : 52] a sense of peace with yourself, that you're right with that person. How much more so with God then? For Jesus cleared the air between us and God by taking all our judgment for all our sin so that we can have real relational peace with God and with it a real emotional peace in life where we know we're right with God, that he's always with us, we're one of his children, our future is secure.

But just as Mary's response was to tell others what she saw, so too must the disciples. And Jesus symbolizes this with what he says next. Have a look at verse 21 and 22.

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. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven.

If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. Now what Jesus does here is like a parable that foreshadows what will happen on the day of Pentecost.

You know, the day when the disciples do receive the Spirit and they start telling everyone the good news about Jesus. By the way, that's where their power to forgive sins is.

[17 : 12] Their power, verse 22, to forgive sins is not in themselves. It's the power they have in the gospel message they tell. The news that Jesus died and rose for us.

The news that says whoever believes in him will be forgiven. But the disciples get a practice go at telling others when Thomas appears.

So it brings us to point three, where Thomas is supposed to believe because others like these disciples have seen. So have a look at verse 24 in your Bibles. Now Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

So 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.

Like Mary, the disciples tell Thomas, almost word for word, we have seen the Lord. But Thomas gives us our third response in our passage, a negative one.

[18 : 24] He says, unless I see, I won't believe. And this response is what we also see in our world today, isn't it? People often say they won't believe unless they see for themselves.

Now at one level it's a natural response because we don't often see people rising from the dead, do we? So perhaps we might sympathise with Thomas, perhaps you can relate to him yourself.

And yet, while his response might be a natural one, it's actually not a reasonable one. It's not a rational one. He doesn't actually think through the evidence.

He doesn't think through all he'd seen Jesus do already, nor does he think through how he had dinner just a few days ago with Lazarus who has risen from the dead, nor does he think through the fact that he knows these men and this time and that it wouldn't have been a practical joke.

Instead of reasoning, he simply refuses to believe. You see, it might be a natural response, but it's not actually a reasonable one.

[19 : 36] For he had enough evidence to believe without seeing. This is the point that Jesus then makes in verses 26 to 29. A 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. 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. Thomas said to him, My Lord and my God. Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen, you have believed.

But blessed are those who have not seen, yet have believed. Here Jesus basically rebukes Thomas, doesn't he? He quotes in verse 27, Thomas' own words back at him, as if to say, I heard what you said, Thomas.

Here's my side, put your hand here. And then he tells Thomas plainly, Stop doubting and believe. And Thomas does, verse 28, with those famous words, My Lord and my God.

[20 : 44] And that's a right response. But did you notice, while it's a right response, Jesus doesn't so much praise Thomas for it, but instead pronounces a blessing on those who do what Thomas should have done.

Those like us who believe without seeing. Those like us who believe because others have seen. For their reliable eyewitness testimony is enough evidence for us to believe.

Just like eyewitness testimony is enough in a court of law for a judge to believe. For they really saw an empty tomb and they really saw the risen Jesus.

John wants us to know that we can say Christ is risen, not perhaps or not I think, but risen indeed. He wants us to know we can say that confidence evidently, as the kids say, for reals.

In fact, we have even more evidence than what John has given us here in this chapter. We have evidence like a creed that is dated within months of Jesus' death that shows Christians believed he had risen from the dead.

[21 : 54] And so it's not some legend that's grown up over time. We've also got loads of copies of the New Testament from multiple different sources so that we can see that the eyewitness testimony we have in our Bibles today is the same eyewitness testimony given back in Jesus' day.

We have the rise of the early church that continued to rise quickly despite the Romans and the Jewish authorities' best efforts to stop it. I mean, if the Romans or the Jews stole the body of Jesus, would they not have willed him out to stop the spread of Christianity?

Of course they would have. What's more, we have the disciples themselves who went from this group of scared people locked in this room for fear of the Jewish leaders to a few days later proclaiming Jesus boldly in Jerusalem.

In fact, most of them, in fact all of them were willing to die and most of them did die for their faith in Jesus. Paul went from persecutor to preacher as well and died for Jesus.

some of them died by being crucified, some beheaded, one guy was thrown off a cliff and he didn't die so they clubbed him to death to make sure. Now, do you really think they would have gone through all that if they knew they'd stolen the body and had Jesus on ice out the back?

[23 : 17] Do you think they really would have gone through all of that if they knew it was all a hoax? I mean, would you? Of course not. A couple of years ago, iTunes brought out a movie which you can still rent today actually and it's based on the book called The Case for Christ.

Here is the title slide on the next slide. And the movie is about an award-winning journalist called Lee Strobel. You may have heard of him. He was an atheist. He worked for the Chicago Tribune newspaper and he actually set out to disprove Christianity.

His wife was going to church. He didn't want a bar of that and so he wanted to prove that God is dead like on the Time magazine cover on the next slide. But as he investigated the claims of Christianity and the resurrection in particular, this was during the 80s, hence his nice hairdo there, as he investigated the claims and the evidence of the resurrection, he came to realise that it must be true.

There was too much evidence and he's since become a Christian. Even non-Christian scholars admit that the evidence makes the resurrection of Jesus the best explanation they have.

They just don't like it and so they look for another one. But they've had 2,000 years of looking and they still haven't found a better explanation. You see, we have ample evidence to say Christ is risen, not just I think or perhaps but indeed.

[24 : 47] And that makes all the difference which brings us to point four. For it means we can believe in Jesus as Lord. Do you remember John's purpose statement in writing his book?

It's in the last two verses of our passage, verse 30. Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, who are eyewitnesses, which are not recorded in this book, but these are that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

You see, John has recorded all these miraculous signs in his book, culminating in the resurrection, that we might believe in Jesus, that we might believe he really is the Messiah, God's anointed king, whose death paid for our sin and brought us peace with God and life eternal.

And so can I ask you this morning, wherever you are, do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe like John and Mary and the others?

Or are you acting a bit like Thomas, who refused to believe unless he saw himself? Remember, that response may be natural, but it's actually, in light of the evidence, not reasonable.

[26 : 14] Do you believe? And for us who do believe in Jesus, then since he is risen indeed, it means we can know three things which I've put on the next slide for you.

Firstly, it means that our faith is not futile. For despite what the world thinks, we follow not a lifeless corpse, but a living Lord.

So we're not wasting our time in being Christians and in serving Jesus as our Lord. one way we can serve him at the moment is to make sure we don't fall into the trap of becoming consumer Christians who serve ourselves.

Because, you see, many of us have lost the opportunity to serve Christ here at church. We're all stuck at home, aren't we? And we are consuming this service on our screens right now, aren't we?

And so it can be very easy to serve ourselves by tuning in when we like. Or, you know, the kids aren't really ready, then oh, forget it, we'll just skip this Sunday.

[27 : 18] Or we can serve ourselves by changing the channel like consumers do. As I said a couple of weeks ago, you can turn me off whenever you like. Or we can think what matters most is making our stream as slick as we can.

I heard of one writer who said, if your church cannot stream well, don't stream at all. Really? Is that what Jesus, our King, thinks? Or is he more concerned that we hear his word and love his people?

Now, obviously, we want to hear feedback to make things as helpful as possible, and we're working on more ways to connect you with one another and even to serve. For example, the government at the moment allows volunteers to be involved in the streaming service.

people who are not in a high-risk category and you'd like to be involved by doing a Bible reading, for example, and being pre-recorded, we'd love a few more faces up the front here.

Email me, let me know. Or if you'd like to serve Jesus by loving others, perhaps ask me or Vijay or Mark for a couple of names of people here at church that you can call each week to see how they're going.

[28 : 33] I know people are doing that already, which is terrific. If our faith is not futile because our Lord is living, then we need to keep making sure that we are living for our Lord, you see, and not falling into the trap of becoming consumer Christians.

Very easy to do at the moment, isn't it? But the second thing, though, is since Christ is risen indeed, it means our life is not helpless. He remains risen to help us.

One of the verses I've read many times, but only really hit me last year, is this next one on the next slide. It's from Romans 8, 34. It says, Christ Jesus, who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Or the one from Hebrews, Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives. He remains risen to intercede for them.

I often have forgotten that Jesus continues to work for us by praying for us that we might continue to be forgiven and sustained, that God might provide for us and help us through life's ups and downs.

[29 : 54] I don't know how you're going at the moment, whether your work has stood you down or whether they've lowered your pay or even whether you've lost your job.

I don't know how you're going coping with this in-house social distancing and so on. But do remember that because Christ is risen indeed, he remains risen to help you through this time.

He bids us come to the throne of God and find help in our time of need, as it says in Hebrews 4. So do make use of that. That Christ is risen indeed means our life is not helpless and lastly, it means our hope is not hopeless.

Our hope of life eternal with a new body in a new virus-free creation is not wishful thinking but a certainty. If God raised Jesus from the dead, he can raise us too.

Jesus' resurrection even signals the new age to come, that it's begun in him. I was talking with one of our members last week about this because her body is breaking down right now.

[31 : 07] And she said jokingly to me, oh, God's got a lot of work to do with my body. Of course, if he's raised Christ from the dead, he can raise her and your body from the dead too.

And this hope is really where the rubber hits the road, doesn't it? In fact, even this week, our Prime Minister wrote a letter to all the Christian churches and the Prime Minister said the story of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection serves as a source of strength and hope.

And it's right, isn't it? The resurrection guarantees our hope. And again, as I said, this is where the rubber hits the road, particularly when we're seeing so much death on the news in our world.

And it's always an update on how many people have died this day or that day. Or for those of us who have lost loved ones, like many in our church have, or those whose loved ones are facing death very shortly.

I know for some of our members, their loved ones have been told by the doctors that they don't have long to live, that the doctors have done all they can do.

[32 : 19] But here, the resurrection reminds us that Jesus has done everything needed to make our hope not hopeless, you see.

Christ has risen indeed so God can raise us and our loved ones too, that we can see them and be reunited with them again. That Christ is risen means our hope is not hopeless.

Well, someone emailed me a cartoon yesterday morning from the Australian newspaper by Johans Leek. By the end of the day, it had done the rounds on social media, so you've probably already seen it, and here it is on the next slide.

I quite enjoyed it. It's the police telling Jesus, don't even think about it coming outside of his home. But the problem is, it's too late, isn't it? Christ is already risen, to which we can confidently say on the next slide, he is risen indeed.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for that very first Easter Sunday. Thank you that we can know Jesus is risen indeed, and therefore our faith is not futile, our life is not helpless, and our hope is not hopeless.

[33 : 40] And so help us, then we pray, to live as those who know it. In Jesus' name, Amen.