

Believing is Seeing

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word now we pray. Write it in our hearts that we may believe it, and in believing have life in the name of Jesus. Amen.

I wonder what Victor Meldrew makes of Easter Day. You may not know Victor Meldrew, I'm not sure. He's a character in an English TV comedy called One Foot in the Grave, which I'm not sure has really made it much in Australia, but was a highlight of when I lived in England about ten years ago.

Victor Meldrew and his long-suffering wife had all sorts of odd things happen to them, and his usual expression when these things happened was, I don't believe it!

And so popular and well-known did that expression by Victor Meldrew become, he began to, Richard Wilson the actor, began to advertise some, I can't remember what the products were, but they used that line, I don't believe it!

Well, Jesus is risen, what would he say? I wonder, I don't believe it! The late Douglas Adams, who wrote Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, has a quote.

[1 : 23] I'm not sure that this refers to the resurrection of Jesus particularly, but it's a quote, I'm not sure it's context. I don't believe it, prove it to me, and I still won't believe it. Well, in the same sort of category or not, do we place Thomas?

Poor old Thomas, doubting Thomas he's called. Thomas the stubborn skeptic, some think. I think his reputation actually is a little unfair, because as we know, as this account from John's Gospel reminds us, he ends up actually being very much a believing Thomas, not a doubting Thomas.

What would it take for you to believe, as he did, that Jesus is Lord and God? Not just an intellectual acknowledgement of something, but to believe that Jesus is Lord and God, that would transform, turn around, change your life, as it did for Thomas.

Thomas, remember, had clear demands. You may like to have the Bibles open again at page 883, if you want to follow, from John chapter 20. If you remember, Thomas wasn't with the disciples on Easter night when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, but in the intervening period, the disciples had told Thomas what they'd seen, the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 25 of John 20, the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord. But Thomas had clear demands that needed to be in place before he would believe that Jesus was risen and alive.

[3 : 07] Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.

They're strong demands, but clear ones. The disciples had not just said, oh, this is what happened to us. The actual language is, they kept on telling Thomas.

And you can imagine that Thomas, some stage after that appearance of Jesus on Easter night, meets with the other 10 disciples. Judas, by this time, of course, has betrayed Jesus and gone.

And one of them says, we've seen Jesus, risen. Oh, no, no, no, no, he says. No, no, no, it's true. We've seen him. And the others, and all 10, you can imagine, badgering, trying to convince, persuade Thomas into believing that the Lord Jesus is risen and alive, and that they have seen him.

And the end result is that Thomas turns deaf ears to their words, with that strong demand, unless I see and touch, I will not believe.

[4 : 18] It's a very strong statement at the end of Thomas' words there. I will not believe. Now, it could well be that his demands, especially to see and touch, are because he thinks somehow they've got it wrong, that they've just seen a spirit or a ghost, that they've just been deluded, or an hallucination, or something like that.

Maybe he thinks it's some sort of April Fool's joke. Remember that these 10, who are trying to persuade Thomas, were not unknown to him. It's not as though he's walked down a street and bumped into some strangers, people he's never met, who said, we've seen Jesus Christ risen.

These are 10 people with whom he spent most of the last three years at least, and indeed some of them he may well have known earlier as well. They are people presumably whom he would know to be true, not to be deceived, and yet he chooses not to believe them.

So his unbelief is quite telling, because on the one hand, he's got 10 people whom he knows well, presumably he trusts them, he finds them reliable, but he refuses to believe their word, for on the other hand, dead people don't rise.

It doesn't happen. I mean, this is the unique case, Jesus, but you and I know it doesn't happen. Dead people don't rise. And so presumably Thomas has got the sort of, the known reliability of his friends, but this clear fact in his face, despite Jesus' threefold prediction, dead people don't rise.

[5 : 50] It can't be true. Well, a week later, the disciples with Thomas are gathered together in the same place it seems, in that same room, and of course Thomas' world is turned completely upside down by the events of that Sunday night a week after Easter.

A week later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, and the sense of that is locked, and they weren't opened, Jesus came and stood among them.

And yes, we might think, well, it's a ghost. I mean, how can somebody just come into a locked room like that? And yet Jesus' words, he reiterated what he said the week before to the first ten disciples, peace be with you, and then to Thomas he said, showing that he knows Thomas' demands, even though he wasn't there the week before, put your finger here, and see my hands, the hands that had been nailed to the cross.

Reach out your hand and put it in my side, the side where the spear had pierced Jesus after his death to ensure that he was dead, from which blood and water flowed.

Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe. Literally, stop unbelieving, but believe. Thomas sees, we're not told he touches, we're not told he reaches out his hand.

[7 : 20] His response is immediate. He sees, he hears Jesus' words, and he says profoundly, my Lord and my God.

From unbelief to belief, an immediate and profound change for Thomas. When Jesus rebuked him by saying, stop unbelieving, but believe, Thomas in effect, heeds that rebuke, and believes.

Don't underestimate the change in Thomas here. An adamant refusal to believe, I will not believe, he says, unless these things happen.

And in fact, in one sense, the things don't quite happen, because it seems he doesn't touch. He just sees, he just hears. From an adamant refusal to believe, to a clear declaration of profoundest faith, my Lord, and my God.

It's a massive worldview shift, especially for a Jew. For Jews would never worship anything that was in a visual form, a form of an idol. God was formless in the Old Testament.

[8 : 33] It emphasizes that. So for a Jew to actually worship a man, a human being, was an astonishing thing. Most would find that idea quite offensive, except for the fact that Jesus is Lord and God.

Thomas has experienced what we might call a volt fast tour de force, changing completely 180 degrees. What would it take for you to arrive at the same point as Thomas?

To declare and believe that Jesus is Lord and God. Not as just some statement of a hymn or a statement of a creed, but a statement that actually impacts your life day by day.

So that your life is actually changed under the supreme priority and lordship of Jesus Christ. that your life is revolutionized by Jesus.

What would it take for that to happen to you? Would it require Jesus appearing on enough rope or 60 minutes tonight or something like that?

[9 : 40] Being interviewed by Oprah or Parkinson? Come on, Jesus. Show us for all the viewers out here in TV land. Your side. Let's have a look at the scars on your hands.

Wouldn't that silence the skeptics, we might think? Or if only there was some video evidence of Jesus rising from the dead. You know, those little mobile phone videos.

What a pity that, you know, the guards didn't have a little mobile phone thing with them so that they could show Jesus coming out of the tomb and the stone rolling back. Well, of course, the technology wasn't there those days and it couldn't have happened.

But if that happened, surely that would astound the atheists, wouldn't it? If only Jesus could come back and do a few more miracles. I mean, why couldn't he just come back today and just do a few more around Melbourne or wherever, I mean, so long as there are TV cameras and surely that would persuade the world.

Remember Herod's song in Jesus Christ Superstar, Prove to me that your divine turned my water into wine? He said in a very mocking way. You see, the skeptics say that seeing is believing.

[10 : 42] You need to see in order to believe. But actually, they're wrong. Seeing is not always believing. There were plenty who saw Jesus perform miracles when he was on earth.

They didn't believe. Some of them were beneficiaries of his miracles. Not all of them believed either. You see, believing is not dependent upon seeing and seeing doesn't necessarily lead to believing either.

Jesus goes on to say to Thomas, have you believed because you've seen me? That's okay. There's nothing wrong with that, Jesus is saying. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Not more blessed. Jesus is not saying they're even better if they haven't seen and believe. But you don't have to see to believe is what Jesus is saying to Thomas in verse 29.

We might say, well, if you don't see and yet you believe, you claim to have faith, surely that's just the blind leap of faith, a giant leap in the dark. Isn't that a rather stupid thing for people in the 21st century to do?

[11 : 50] Well, that's actually not what faith is about. That's not what believing is about. Christianity is not about blind leaps in the dark. It's not about just sort of letting go and letting God.

It's not just saying, well, I don't know what to believe. I'll just close my eyes and hope. That's not what Christian faith is about. John, one of Jesus' disciples, one of the 12, who wrote this gospel, John's gospel, tells us why he wrote the book.

And he tells us that immediately after, quoting Jesus' words here to Thomas, blessed are those who've not seen and yet come to believe. Jesus, he says, did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.

When Jesus says to Thomas, blessed are those who've not seen and yet come to believe, he's not talking about blind leaps of faith. He's not talking about absolute ignorance and some superstitious trust in Jesus.

He's actually directing us to what John has written here. This is written so that you may come to believe and trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

[13 : 08] We don't see. We don't touch his scarred hands. We can't put our hand into his side. He's not here for us to do that, physically, bodily.

But we can still believe. Sufficient is given to us to believe in the scriptures recorded for us, the testimony of John in this case about Jesus' death and resurrection, his signs and his appearances and his words.

We can't see, but we can and ought believe. It astonishes me sometimes when, from my own personal experience, talking to people who are skeptic of the Christian faith or non-believers who sort of dismiss it and put it out at arm's length, how rarely, in fact, they've read the Gospels at least.

How they're dismissive of their reliability, but more often than not, in my experience, have not actually bothered to read them and certainly not as adults. I find that actually the height of arrogance and ignorance that people are so dismissive of something that's so important, profound and true and yet refuse to actually grapple with the evidence for it.

You see, Christian faith is not blind. It's based on substantial, compelling and overwhelming evidence. We don't have to see the risen Jesus. There is sufficient for us recorded in the scriptures at least for real and profound faith like Thomas's to say, my Lord and my God.

[14 : 52] Have you read the Gospels lately? I mean, if not, why not? Especially if you're someone who sort of keeps God at arm's length, everything in a bit of moderation.

I'll keep it out there. I'll sort of pay lip service a couple of times a year. In a crisis, I'll turn to God. I don't want really my life upset too much.

I just want to keep it at a distance. Read John's Gospel or Mark or Matthew or Luke. Let the truth have an impact on you.

Read praying that God will lead you into truth. Come and do the Christianity Explored course in May and June. Find out for yourselves. Take the time to ask your questions.

Ere your doubts. Hear the evidence. Think and mull over the profoundest event in human history. The climax of John's Gospel are these words of Thomas, my Lord and my God.

[15 : 58] Throughout the Gospel, a number of people have made statements about who Jesus is. Way back at the beginning, John the Baptist, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And several others following.

This is the climax. My Lord and my God. For Thomas appreciated and understood the implications of the resurrection of Jesus.

It wasn't simply an historical event that you could sign an intellectual ascent, yes, I believed it happened and continue living your life. We can do that with lots of things. We can do it with Julius Caesar or Napoleon or Henry VIII.

It doesn't actually matter. I mean, if Henry VIII was real or not, it doesn't actually impact us today. Whether he had six wives or 23, it doesn't really matter. But if Jesus rose from the dead, Thomas knows that has an impact.

2,000 years later, it still should have an impact. If Jesus is risen from the dead, he is indeed Lord and God. We can't keep him at arm's length if he is indeed as he claims and as Thomas acknowledges, Lord and God.

[17 : 03] Astonishing thing for a Jew to worship the crucified carpenter from Nazareth. An offensive thing for most Jews and yet the right thing because he is Lord and God.

You see, most unbelievers actually don't want to believe. That's their problem. Most of them are afraid of setting demands like Thomas did and finding that God might meet them.

Most are too afraid of getting too close to the nail-scarred hands. Most people don't want their lives turned upside down. Most people want to rule their own lives. Nobody really wants somebody else to be their Lord and their God other than themselves.

And that's why most unbelievers remain unbelievers, not because they've actually grappled with the evidence, but because they don't want to grapple with it. They want to keep God out, maybe just, you know, at arm's length, but arm's length is really, in the end, out of touch.

In the end, that's unbelief. John's gospel is written so that you, we, today even, may believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that through believing we may have life in Jesus' name.

[18 : 19] It's only when we submit to Jesus as our Lord and God that life in his name is ours. And that's the incentive. Oh, life's good.

There's lots of great things about life as it is now, but life in Jesus' name is so much better. Not just better in the inestimable quantity of it lasting for eternity going on and on and on far more than our three score years and ten on this earth or whatever we have, but incomparable in quality as well.

Life in Jesus' name far exceeds and far surpasses the greatest heights of life on earth. In fact, John's gospel has made a theme of Jesus being the life giver.

He said, I'm the bread of life. He's the one who gives the living waters of life. He's the one who came to die so that we do not perish but have eternal life. He's the one who claimed to be the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, the one who came to give life and in all its fullness and abundance.

And all other life, no matter how good our life is on earth, without the life in Jesus' name, in the end, pales by comparison.

[19 : 36] Jesus, when he greeted the disciples on Easter night back in verse 19, said the same as he did on the week after, including Thomas in verse 26, peace be with you.

peace be with you is not a sort of casual, g'day mate, how are you going? Peace be with you is not simply a liturgical response, peace be with you and also with you.

When Jesus says peace be with you, he's saying something of deep significance, in fact. Peace with God is now yours. The peace of sins forgiven, the peace of the barrier between fallen humans and a perfect God removed by Jesus' death.

The peace of reconciliation with God for people who are alienated and estranged by ruling their own lives rather than letting God be their God. The peace that comes from the very scarred hands that Thomas wanted to touch.

Peace be with you. Not cheap peace, but in fact a pricey peace. A pricey peace because it's based on the costly cross, the death of God's own son.

[20 : 52] That's the price of peace so that you and I may have life in Jesus' name which has at its heart peace with a holy God.

Life comes from sins forgiven through Jesus' Good Friday death. Life in his name revolves around having peace with God.

Well thankfully you and I don't need to see in order to have faith and to have life. But we do need to believe. But thankfully God has given us all we need to believe and in believing have life in Jesus' name.

the writings of John, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Paul, Peter, indeed in the end the writings of the whole of the Bible so that we may believe and in believing have life in Jesus' name.

Don't keep God at its arm's length which in practice is out of touch. Explore. Read it. If you haven't got a copy we'll give you one.

[22 : 04] Free. Come closer. Grapple with the evidence that will confront your eyes and your mind as you read the word of God.

Knowing that believing is not a blind leap but actually a heavily reasoned and reasonable state to trust in the word of God.

These are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name. And then we'll be like Thomas.

Not doubting Thomas but believing Thomas who declares my Lord and my God. Don't be the sort of Douglas Adams sceptic.

Prove it to me and I still won't believe it. Be the Thomas who believes when confronted with the truth and proclaims with joy my Lord and my God.

[23 : 06] Amen.