

Christ is risen! Let me read John's account of the resurrection in John 20:1-31

**John 20:1-31** - Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. <sup>2</sup> 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!" <sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the **tomb first**. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to **rise from the dead**.) <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes, <sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize **that it was Jesus**. <sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to **my God and your God**.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. <sup>19</sup> On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, **I am sending you**." <sup>22</sup> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." <sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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 it**." <sup>26</sup> 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!" 27 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." 28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

I want to focus this morning on Jesus' words to his disciple Thomas in v. 27: Stop doubting and believe. John tells us that Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared to his disciples, and so Thomas declares that unless he sees Jesus with his own eyes, he will not believe that Jesus is alive. And so, when Jesus appears a second time, he seeks out Thomas and says *"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."* As we meditate this morning on the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus, I believe the words which Jesus spoke to Thomas are His Word for you this morning. Stop doubting and believe. Believe what, exactly? Three things:

1) Believe that Jesus is the risen Messiah, the Son of God, God in the flesh

The resurrection is the central event in the history of the world. Our faith rises and falls on whether or not this actually happened in history. Paul recognized this – in his great chapter on the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, he writes:

*1 Corinthians 15:14,17 - And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*

There are many reasons people have for rejecting God or Christianity, and many things we can argue about, but in the end, everything rises and falls on the resurrection. If Jesus truly claimed to be God in the flesh, and then died and rose again to prove it, then we had better pay close attention to His message. But if this is all one big lie, then what are we doing here?

The good news for us is that there is ample evidence for believing that Jesus truly rose from the dead. And if you, like Thomas, have your doubts, I encourage you to listen with an open mind, because Jesus is the only man in history to claim to be God, to claim that your eternal destiny depends upon how you respond to Him,

who claimed to be without sin, to be eternal, to be a king from heaven, and who died, and rose again, never to die again. So what is that evidence?

We have the New Testament documents – the gospels, Acts, and the letters, which are all reliable sources of information for what the disciples claimed happened to them. They are all based on eyewitness testimony.

***Luke 1:1-4** - Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*”

This is not “once upon a time” writing. This is an orderly account based on eyewitness testimony with lots of historical and chronological details that could be verified. They are accounts with unnecessary details, like the number of fish caught, with embarrassing testimony like women as the first eyewitnesses or the disciples as cowering deniers, details that surely would have been removed if the story was being made up.

The gospels give us the story of the disciples, who claimed to have experiences both as individuals and in groups, on multiple occasions, of conversing with Jesus after his death. They claimed that he had a body and was able to eat with them. We have **Acts**, which shows us that very soon after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples were completely transformed from cowards to fearless men and women proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead, even though it meant that all of them would be killed for that testimony. We have Jewish men who believed in one God worshiping Jesus as divine. We have Paul being transformed from persecutor of the church to a fervent disciple. And we have **the letters**, which show us that very early on, the apostles were proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus.

***1 Corinthians 15:1-8** - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. <sup>2</sup> By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Peter, and **then to the Twelve**. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still*

living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

These testimonies show that **this was not some game of telephone**, where over the centuries a story about a resurrected Jesus began to emerge. No – the story was being told within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. Paul says in v. 6 of 1 Corinthians 15 that most of the eyewitnesses are still alive. There wasn't time for a myth to grow. And if there had been a body, all their enemies needed to do was to produce the body to prove it was a hoax.

**Maybe they were just deceivers, making up a story.** Or maybe it was just wishful thinking. But what was their motivation? They were all killed for their beliefs!

And just as importantly, **who would have believed them?** Consider the view of Jews & Romans & Greeks on the resurrection - bodily resurrection was not desirable to the Romans and Greeks, since the soul or spirit was good and the physical body was bad. Salvation was liberation from the body. Jews believed in bodily resurrection of all righteous at the end of time. Resurrection in the middle of history when the world was still corrupt was inconceivable. This is why Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 1:23**, *“but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and **foolishness** to **Gentiles.**”*

The reality is that there were **dozens of other people in those days who claimed to be Messiahs**, but died, and their names and movements died out with history. There is only one reason this one did not, but instead changes the world. Because Jesus rose from the dead.

The problem for the skeptic is **how to explain the rise of the early church**. How do you explain the changed disciples, Paul's conversion, the worship of Jesus by a fiercely monotheistic culture, the growing belief in this God-man who rose from the dead in a culture that didn't see resurrection as desirable? **The truth is that most people who reject the resurrection do so not because of the evidence against it but because they already have an anti-supernatural bias.** They already believe that a miracle is the least possible outcome, and so therefore there must be another explanation. But if you come with an open mind, you will find that the evidence points to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.

Stop doubting and believe that Jesus rose from the dead, that He is the Messiah, the Savior of the World, God in the flesh.

## 2) Believe that in Jesus is found eternal life

When Jesus is arrested and crucified, look at how devastated the disciples were. They had devoted their lives to someone they believed was the Messiah, the one who would save them from Roman opposition, and now he was dead. They were utterly crushed and afraid. And death can be that way for us. So final, cruel, and devastating.

But when Jesus tells Thomas to stop doubting and believe, he is proclaiming that he has overcome the grave. That death is not the end.

Just as Jesus explained at the tomb of Lazarus, death is not the end for those who believe in Jesus:

*John 11:23-26 - Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am **the resurrection and the life**. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Because Jesus rose again, those who believe in him will never die:

*1 Corinthians 15:19-22 - If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. <sup>20</sup> But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the **resurrection** of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive*

Jesus is called the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Just as the firstfruits of the harvest promises a greater harvest to come, Jesus' resurrection promises that there will be a greater resurrection of all who die in Him.

*1 Corinthians 15:55-58 - "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>58</sup> Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Death has lost its sting, the grave has lost its victory. Hallelujah! Now for those who know Jesus, death is like falling asleep and waking up in eternity with God.

*Philippians 1:21 - For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

And more than that, Paul writes that we should always give ourselves fully to serving God, because nothing we do is in vain; everything matters.

*Matthew 10:42 - And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

If you do not believe in God, or that there is anything after death, there has to come a point of existential dread, where you ask yourself what it is all for. What difference does it make if you're going to be dead and gone, and in 100 years no one will remember your name? What's the best you can hope for? Your name on a building? Your invention or contribution in a history book?

But because of the resurrection, we know that everything we do matters eternally. The love I have longed for, the significance, the joy, the order, the peace, all of it will be mine forever when I am with God. The resurrection changes everything. Stop doubting and believe that in Jesus is found eternal life.

### 3) Believe that God is good and that He loves you.

Maybe you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Maybe you believe in life everlasting. But the cross and the resurrection also challenge us to stop doubting the goodness and love of God, and to instead believe that God is good and that He loves you.

In my experience, one of the biggest reasons people reject God is because of the terrible things that they have experienced or witnessed, and not understanding how a good and powerful God could allow such things to happen. Why, God? Why do you not answer my cries for help? Why did you allow such abuse, brokenness, and pain in my life? Ultimately, we know that you may never receive a satisfactory answer to why you suffered your specific injustice in this life. But when you look to the cross and the resurrection, you receive an answer. On the cross, you have what appeared to be God at his most evil and his most unloving. What could be worse than the innocent, sinless Son of God being unjustly executed while His all-powerful Father in heaven turns his back, even as His Son cries out "My God, My



God, why have you forsaken me?" Think of how you would respond if your child cried out to you for help as he was being abused, and contrast that to how God responded. Seriously, what kind of father would turn his back on his suffering son like that? God has never appeared more evil and unloving as he did at the cross, allowing his innocent son to be unjustly abused and executed.

But now, with the benefit of hindsight, we look back and we know that the reality was that God was never working more for good than He was at the cross. At the cross, God gave His Son to be sacrificed, and His Son willingly went to His execution, because the only way for a sinful and rebellious humanity to be restored to a right relationship with God and to have eternal life was for a sinless sacrifice to take on the sins of the world. On that cross God was taking on himself the punishment for all the things we had ever done wrong.

At the cross, facing enemies who wanted him dead, friends who had betrayed and denied and abandoned him, mocked by onlookers, He proved His love and goodness once and for all by staying up on the cross, saying "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." Out of the worst evil – the unjust execution of the innocent Son of God – God brought the greatest good – the salvation of the world. When he seemed so unloving and evil, God was in reality never more loving and good as He gave His Son for the salvation of the world.

**John 3:16** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

In your life, you will go through experiences if you have not already that cause you to question the goodness of God, to question whether God really is a God of love. You will wonder how it is possible that a good God could allow such evil to exist, or how a loving God would allow His child to suffer so horribly. You will struggle to even comprehend what possible good end God might have in all this evil. But the cross and the resurrection show us that even when it appears that God is not at work, that God is absent, or that God is allowing evil to triumph, that He is very much at work, bringing good out of even the worst possible evil.

**Romans 8:28-39** - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. <sup>31</sup> What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against*

*us?* <sup>32</sup> *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* <sup>33</sup> *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.* <sup>34</sup> *Who is he that condemns? 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.* <sup>35</sup> *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or **danger or sword?*** <sup>36</sup> *As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."* <sup>37</sup> *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* <sup>38</sup> *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,* <sup>39</sup> *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

God is good. And you are loved. Interestingly enough, twice in this chapter there is a reference to **"the disciple whom Jesus loved,"** which is John's way of referring to himself. I am the one Jesus loves. I am God's beloved. What would it mean for that to be how you see yourself? Brennan Manning, in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, writes "More pleasing to me than all your prayers, sacrifices, and good works is that you would believe that I love you."

I believe, God. I believe that you are good. I believe that in this evil and suffering I am experiencing that you are at work, bringing an even greater good. I believe that you love me, that you are for me, and that nothing could ever separate me from your love for me. This morning, Jesus' words to you are: Stop doubting and believe. Stop doubting, and believe that God is good. Stop doubting and believe that He loves you.

**There can be any number of other things about God that He might be challenging you to stop doubting and believe today. But whatever they are, the risen Jesus confronts us with the need to stop doubting and believe. Believe that He is the Messiah. Believe in life everlasting. Believe that God is good and that He loves you. That is the good news of Easter.**

As John ended this chapter: *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

If you do not know Jesus but would like to, you can pray something like this from your heart to His:



*Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.*