

# THE DEATH OF DOUBT IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

An exposition of John 20:24-31  
at West Hills San Jose on April 4, 2021

**INTRODUCTION:** Well good morning and welcome to West Hills Community Church, my name is Josh, I'm one of the elders and teaching pastors of this congregation. If you are new here or new to Christianity, one of our favorite traditions is on Easter Sunday when someone says "Christ is risen" to respond corporately by replying "He is risen indeed." So let me invite you if this is your 50th Easter in Christ, or if this is your 1st easter in Christ, to confess this glorious truth with God's eternal church...CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! Amen

So because it's easter, we are not running our normal ministries to the children. We do this on purpose so that we can worship together as whole families. So if your child makes noise, that's okay, that doesn't bother us, we want them here, we would literally rather have noisy easter together, then a quiet one apart from each other.

**PROBLEM:** So this morning we are going to look at what the Scripture says about the resurrection of Christ and the doubt of the apostle Thomas. You may have heard the phrase "doubting Thomas", to describe someone who is untrusting or unwilling to accept something as true even in the face of strong evidence. And that expression comes from today's text. From the doubt of Thomas the apostle of Jesus. But one of the reasons I wanted to look at this passage together on Easter is because it's important to acknowledge that we live in a place, and a time where most people doubt the reality of Christian resurrection. And I say Christian resurrection to make sure I'm distinguishing between what the bible means by Jesus' resurrection and the often confused with, common place, phenomena of resuscitation. Jesus wasn't legally dead for 9 minutes and resuscitated only to die again 5 years later. Jesus was crucified and died and was buried, and three days later came out of the grave, never to die again.

If you were to ask the average person in Silicon Valley, is it possible for people to die, be dead for several days, and then to spontaneously and without any medical rationale, to spring back to life never to die again? Most people would say no. Or they would say that is HIGHLY doubtful with intense skepticism. And I wanted to open our time together by openly acknowledging that that sentiment is NOT actually new. In the days of Christ, in the first century people were just as doubtful, just as suspicious, just as scornful of resurrection claims as they are today. And this isn't just something you find in historical studies, this is something that can be deduced from the Scriptures themselves.

For instance when Paul goes to Athens to reason with the Philosophers at the Areopagus, he tries persuading them about the life and ministry of Christ Jesus, and they are fine with everything he says, until he claims that Christ having died, rose again from the dead. Half the philosophers laughed him off the hill. When Paul in the NT, writes his first letter to Corinth, when you get to chapter 15 you discover that there is a large group of Christians, in the actual early church, who don't even believe in the resurrection of the dead. You might ask yourself, HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE? Well people haven't actually changed that much. It's possible to hear and read the words of Christ and say this is the truest thing I've ever heard, and then get to the resurrection piece and say, I'm not sure about that part though...

There wasn't just doubt in the Greco-Roman world, in Israel itself, there was a religious faction called the Sadducees who also didn't believe in the resurrection. And this was a constant point of contention between the major religious factions in Israel. Will God, at the end of days raise people from the dead. There was a large group of God worshippers who said NO, that can't happen.

But here is where I want to focus today...there wasn't just doubt among the greeks and romans about resurrection from the dead, there wasn't just doubt within Israel about resurrection from the dead...there was literally doubt among Christ's closest disciples. There was doubt in Jesus' apostles, his special 12 he set apart for a special role in the salvation of the world. And do you know why there was such widespread doubt about resurrection from the dead in the ancient world? For the same reason as ours...people don't rise again from the dead after they die. That's not how bodies work. That's not how death works. They new that. They observed that. They had charts and records of the dead. If someone actually rose from death that would be a really really really massive and notable exception in the world of human observation. Wouldn't it...

**MAIN POINT:** Today I want to suggest to you, that Jesus really did rise from the dead never to die again, so that you would believe in Him and receive life in His name for your joy.

**SETTING THE CONTEXT:** Please open your bibles to John 20:24-31. This morning we are going to journey into the experience of one man's doubt, the apostle Thomas. Let me quickly explain the context and then I will read you the short story of what took place. On the night before the crucifixion, Thomas and the other apostles were with the Lord Jesus eating the last supper, then leaving the upper room and walking down to the garden of Gethsemane. It was there while he was praying that the garrison of soldiers appeared with Judas and Christ was arrested and taken into custody. After his arrest, the apostles ran, scattering in a number of different directions. We are not told what they did next but they presumably hid for the night and came back out in the morning.

When Christ was taken out to the cross we are told that the disciples and some of the women watched from way out in the distance. They were probably to scared to come close with the exception of the apostle John, who saw Jesus' mother weeping at his crucified feet and couldn't bear to hold himself back. And so Thomas watched from a great distance as His Lord Jesus, was nailed to the cross, bled out, began to asphyxiate, cry out with his last breath, and give up His spirit to the Father. He saw the Lord pierced in the side to drain the fluid from his body. He saw Him taken down from the cross, and he went and he ran away but not with the other disciples. He went off somewhere by himself, we are not told where, but probably to shout at the sky. Probably to throw rocks and yell in anger and frustration and confusion...that His Jesus, His precious friend and teacher and Rabbi, and HE THOUGHT His messiah, had been falsely charged with crimes he didn't commit and had been put to death.

And after sitting alone in his room for several days he finally came out...and he met one of the other apostles somewhere who grabbed and said WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? And with wild eyes explained...we have seen the Lord! Thomas probably asked...what? Who, where? First to Mary, then to Peter and John, then to the rest of us. We have seen Him He lives...And this is what happened next, let's humble our hearts and open our minds to the reading of God'sW

**READING:** [24] Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

[26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” [28] Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” [29] Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” [30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

**PRAYER:** God I pray for everyone here, would you grant them the gift of faith. It is such a good and glorious thing that Christ has risen to give life to the world. I pray that no one would shrink back in doubt, in fear, in pride, from the world transforming power of your gospel. Open the eyes of every heart, to see the height, width, depth and breath of your love for us, in the resurrection of our Lord JESUS. In His name we pray, amen.

**ROAD MAP:** I’m going to move somewhat quickly today and my goal isn’t to answer every possible question. My goal is to get you thinking and talking to each other about what this text means, about your doubts and about what the resurrection of Christ could mean for your life. 1.) The doubt of Thomas, 2.) Seeing the Son of God, 3.) Believing when you can’t see, 4.) The joy of those who believe

## **THE DOUBT OF THOMAS**

1. So Thomas is introduced in our text as not having been present when Christ first appeared in verse 24. “We have seen the Lord” the other apostles told him in verse 25, but Thomas was unwilling to believe. So just to clarify, Thomas has lived and ministered alongside of Christ with these men for about three years. He knows them well. He probably trusts them in most ways. But not when it comes to something like this.
2. Thomas responds to them, unless I can physically see him myself I won’t believe. But then he takes it a step further unless I place my hands in his wounds and in his side, I WILL NEVER BELIEVE. What is Thomas getting at. I think what Thomas is saying is unless I am convinced that this really is the real thing I will never believe. You see Jesus’ crucifixion was a little bit unusual.
  1. Most people are crucified and left on the cross for about three days to be tortured and brutalized for their crimes. After they had suffered for what the Romans considered to be a just or appropriate length of time, they would take a strong iron rod and break their legs so that all of their weight was being pulled upward by the nails in their hands. This would put the pressure of their bodyweight on their lungs to the point that they would not

be able to breath and they would suffocate and die. That was how a normal crucifixion worked.

2. But Jesus had been violently brutalized before He was nailed to the cross. He had been bleeding and dying through the night. And so when He was finally nailed to the cross there wasn't much left to do to his body. He died in about six hours.
3. And so when the guards wanted to get the bodies down for the Sabbath, they came to the two men who were with Jesus and broke their legs but they found Jesus already dead. And so instead of breaking his legs they punctured his side with a spear to make sure his lungs were empty and then they took him down from the cross.
4. And again it's not like this never happened but it was unusual enough that Thomas would regard this as strong evidence that it really was the real Jesus who went into the tomb. Not someone else, not someone who looked like Jesus, the real Jesus the One who died.
3. Now here is what this tells me about the doubt of Thomas. This wasn't an atheistic doubt. Thomas was a first century Jew who believed Christ was God's promised Messiah and he followed him only to have all of his sincere religious expectations crucified on a cross. His doubt isn't a doubting of the supernatural. It's a doubt rooted in utter disappointment.
  1. Thomas heard the testimony of the eyewitnesses...they came to Him saying we have literally SEEN THE LORD...and his response is something like, I believe you think you saw him. I believe you had a dream or a vision or something. But I don't believe you really saw the Lord, people don't come back to life like that.
  2. Thomas is a skeptical or a pessimistic realist, not an antagonist. Some people doubt just to be antagonistic, there questions and challenges aren't genuine inquiry, it's just an attempt to belittle and assert intellectual dominance, not through genuine intelligence but by picking apart someone else while adding no wisdom or knowledge yourself. That's not what Thomas is doing.
  3. Thomas is like a grizzled sergeant in the military. And he's sitting there with the bright eyed lieutenant fresh out of the academy going we need to take this hill and here is how we are going to do it. This unit is going to charge this side and this one that side and then we will have the position. And Thomas is like the guy who has been hauling a rucksack for 10 years thinking to himself how many men is it going to cost to actually perform this operation. How many of my guys are we going to lose doing this job.
  4. Hey buddy, why are we trying to take that hill. I've taken a hundred hills that ended up being of no strategic importance. He's doubtful, not because he's obstinate. He's a realist. And thus he's skeptical. Thomas is skeptical of things that seem to good to be true.
  5. You see this showing up earlier in John chapter 11, when Jesus wants to go to Bethany and Thomas, recognizing that Jesus has many enemies there, concludes I guess we should go and die with him. I can imagine Him saying to himself after the crucifixion...I told you guys. I told you this would happen. A precious life WASTED, because you were all to idealistic and to quick to believe the best.
4. And so His response to the eyewitness testimony is to say, unless I can independently apart from you guys that Jesus my friend whom you claim is risen, is indeed the same body that was buried in the tomb, I will not believe.

5. I'm not saying God can't do it, or wouldn't do it. I'm just saying I'm not going to let myself get put in a place to be savagely disappointed again, unless I can see Him physically myself. This is the kind of doubt we are seeing in Thomas. An extremely loyal person, whose hopes were dashed, who witnessed the crucifixion and concluded what a waste.

Let's now transition to **Seeing the Son of God**

1. So 8 days later in verse 26, the disciples are again locked in a room and hiding but this time Thomas is with them. And without warning...the impossible happens. Jesus appears in their midst and says PEACE to you...
2. LISTEN TO ME...He appears and says peace to you...and then turn and the Risen Christ Himself says THOMAS...put your fingers in my wounds and put out your hand and place it in my side. I've lost a lot of people in my life and I've shared this before. People who loved me as a child. When I was born I had seven uncles and two aunts, a father and mother and two brothers. Today I have a mom and two brothers...everyone else is dead and buried.
  1. When I try to imagine what it would be like to have someone you love appear again, and look you in the eye and say your name it's almost too overwhelming to think about.
  2. But I want to call your attention to what Jesus does not do in this moment...Jesus doesn't show up and say Thomas you idiot. He doesn't say what's wrong with you Thomas I told you I would rise from the dead why didn't you believe me. There is literally NOTHING like that in this text. Christ shows up and says Thomas...look and touch. He comes and meets Thomas in the midst of his HONEST doubt and gives him the necessary evidence upon which to establish his faith.
  3. I want to submit to you that this is still what Jesus does in the midst of honest doubt. There is a kind of dishonest doubt that you see in the Pharisees and Saducees in the gospel narratives. Men who have already decided that Jesus is not the Messiah before they ask him a question or listen to his response. That's dishonest doubt...that isn't doubt seeking truth. That isn't skepticism seeking understanding. Thomas wants to believe what is true...even if it means opening himself up to being disappointed again. The Pharisees didn't care what was true...they had their pride and position, and assumptions and framework of ideas that they were unwilling to question even in the face of incredible contrary evidence.
3. But that's not Thomas. Thomas wants to believe the truth it's just hard to do it. And God is not angry at Him about that...God comes to help him in the midst of his doubt. If you deal with doubt, honest doubt, tells someone. Be open. Jude 22 tells the church to show mercy to those who doubt. We are rooted in a rich intellectual tradition that has asked just about every question that can be asked of the Scripture and there are good, well thought through answers for your doubts. If you want to ask hard questions, there are good thoughtful answers. And God graciously works in and among are honest question asking.
4. In any case, Thomas sees. And seeing he recognizes that He didn't actually need to touch. When we feel disappointed or discouraged we tend to overstate things don't we. Someone we love dies and we tell ourselves...I WILL NEVER LOVE LIKE THAT AGAIN. Not recognizing that God has an infinite number of ways of restoring love to our hearts.
5. But THOMAS sees and believes. He confesses with sharp clarity, my Lord and my God.

6. Thomas doesn't respond by saying...oh you are alive, well I guess resurrection is possible. His seeing isn't confirming evidence...His seeing leads Him to believe considerably more than what the evidence demonstrates. And this an important point to linger on for a moment.
7. Believing is more than seeing. In John's gospel, Jesus does a lot of miracles. There were large groups of people who witnessed his miracles and didn't believe what they implied about him. Sometimes Jesus would do a great miracle and the Pharisees would show up and say show us another sign to verify that you have come from God. Sometimes he would show them a great miracle and they would say do a better one.
8. When Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, they saw it, saw Lazarus and rather than believing began scheming how to put Christ and Lazarus to death. You can shut off belief so dramatically in your own mind that it makes you blind to the evidence that is right in front of your face. Thomas' doubt was a truth seeking doubt. It's not that he didn't want to believe... it's that he would not settle for anything less than the clear truth. Is that how you have oriented yourself to questions concerning life and death? God and eternity? I want to believe the truth and nothing less? If you haven't, why not?
9. Coming back to our text, Thomas doesn't just see, He believes. Thomas sees and believes two things in this moment, one of which is right on the face of things, and the other is implied. Thomas believes that Jesus is God, and that Jesus has saved Him.
  1. Thomas sees and believes everything Jesus Christ has said about Himself. Throughout John's gospel, Jesus has said many things that the disciples struggled to understand. And one of those things is when Jesus referred over and over to His own divinity and God-like authority. I could go through the many references, Jesus said BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS I AM, If you have seen ME you have seen the Father, all must honor the Son JUST AS THEY HONOR THE FATHER...
  2. And it seems in this moment...as Thomas sees, He is putting these realities together for the first time...He is seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and he utters His confession MY LORD AND MY GOD. In the Old Testament, God is typically called the Lord God...here Jesus is called my Lord and my God. Christ is divine.
  3. But the second thing Thomas has almost certainly put together...is that the wounds Christ bore really did accomplish all that He promised. Christ suffered and died...for my sins. My Lord and MY God has died and risen for me, to save me from my sins.
  4. In other words, the wounds didn't just verify Jesus' identity, they preached forgiveness and salvation tot he soul of Thomas. And Thomas responds in the only conceivable way when a person realizes this is true of them...with face down, heart wide worship of the living God.
10. This is what the resurrection means, that Christ really died to save sinners, and He is raised to make us righteous, to accomplish the forgiveness of our sins and to give us the gift of eternal life. This is what it means for you to believe...it's not just to see, it is to put your faith in Him that these things are really true. Let's now speak briefly about what it means to believe when you can't see.

### **Believing when you can't see**

- Jesus says to Thomas, you have believed because you have seen me. This isn't bad. The claim of the Scripture is that many eyewitnesses on numerous occasions saw the physically resurrected Lord Jesus.
- But He says blessed are those who have not seen, in the way you have seen and yet believe. What does that mean? He's not disparaging sight. He is saying that there are going to be thousands of generations coming after you who will not be among this small group of privileged disciples who enjoy physically seeing Christ in the flesh.
- And Jesus said blessed are those, happy are those, privileged are those who will not see him in this world, and yet believe anyway.
- Just because you can't physically see Jesus doesn't mean our faith is blind. Nowhere in the NT are you told to shut up and not ask questions, and just believe apart from evidence. When you are told to believe in the NT, the call for faith is always enjoined to truth.
- You are called to believe the truth concerning Christ Jesus. That he really did live, He really was God, He really did die for our sins and He really did rise from death to grant life and hope for all who follow after Him.
- The summons of the gospel is not to embrace certain religious notions. Becoming a Christian isn't primarily about resolving to live a more ethical life. It's a call to come to the Christ who lives and to receive eternal life.
- If you knock it will be opened to you.
  - There is a way you can hear Jesus without physically hearing Jesus. God has not left His Son without a witness. If you want to see and hear Jesus...you have been given the Word of God. And the apostolic witness is an EYE witness. John has written this story, for you, as someone who was in the room when it happened.
- I think the gospels are considerably MORE than an eyewitness account, but it's not less. And if you open this book and consider this man, what He did, what He said, and how He lived, with an openness to the idea that it's actually true...He can change your life forever. That's what happened to me.
- I was lost...I was enslaved to addiction and sin, I was ensnared in a web of lies and deception, this same Jesus, found me in the middle of my locked room. And I didn't touch His wounds, but I wrestled over His words, and pulled and pushed and shook and turned it inside out and upside down...and I thought if I can just ask every conceivable question I can think of, than I can put believe it all.
  - But as I doing that...He started answering my prayers. As I did that, He started helping me get free from the powerful sins that had trapped me. As I was doing that...He started changing my life, and healing my broken relationships, he started showing up in power in my life...and I began to realize two things...the first is that I'm not interacting with religious ideas...I'm interacting with the living God. The actual being, who actually loves us, who actually saves us, who actually wants to give us life.
  - And the second thing I realized was this...the Word of God cannot be broken. It can stand up to every doubt and question I could possibly think of. The Word of God is true, in every sense of that word. The Word of God is powerful...I thought I was probing it, it turns out that the Word is living and active and was probing me right back.

- If you have never honestly read the bible for yourself...I wonder if you would be brave enough to try. Not brave enough to read a gospel. It doesn't take courage to read a book. It takes intellectual courage to read this book with your guard down, and honestly entertaining the question, maybe this is all actually true, to try and lay down your presuppositions and your preconceived notions, and be open to considering the claims of what is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of western civilization, the Bible, the Word of God. I did that once, and it was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me.
- Maybe today is the day for you? To finally open yourself up to Christ. To say you know what, I've done my own thing for a long time...that hasn't led to anything helpful or ultimately satisfying. Maybe Christ really is real...maybe Jesus really can give me life. If that is you, come talk to me, talk to the person that brought you. If you feel something stirring in your heart as I say these things...that's not my preaching...that's GOD saying come to me and be healed.
- Don't take a leap in the dark, put your faith in the truth. If you're not sure if it's true or not... come and see. Come and consider, with an open heart and find life in Him, life as it was meant to be.

### **To you who believe**

1. Now many of you here, have come to the settled conclusion in your own mind that what the Scripture has declared to us is true. That we do hold the Word of God in our hands...and the Word of God bears witness to ultimate reality. And that in Christ there really is life everlasting. You have read and believed and found life in His name...if that is you I have something to say to you...
2. Christ is risen
3. And because He has risen, those of you who believe have life in His name.
4. And because you have life in His name, even if you die you will live.
5. Because Christ is risen, no matter how much you struggled last week, there is mercy and grace for you at the throne of God because Christ your high priest is seated there, and He can sympathize with all of your weakness and temptation.
6. Because Christ is risen...if I die, my kids and my family and my church knows exactly where I will be. And that's true for everyone of you who believe
7. Because Christ is risen, you have been declared righteous by God, an heir of His glorious inheritance, and you will be raised bodily with Him at the end of days, to reign with Him in the new creation forever and ever, where death is no more, where sin and tears and sorrow is gone. There will only be life. Because He has risen.

### **COMMUNION:**