

## **Easter 2021**

### **Resurrection Faith**

On Friday night, we spent time thinking about all that Christ went through for us, the pain of the cross, the agony in the garden, what looked like the triumph of death and sorrow.

But today, we celebrate because Jesus conquered death.

And this is the heart of it all. This is the event that everything depends on. Without Jesus rising from the dead, there is no Christianity. And there is no hope beyond the grave. We have some good days here, some hard days here, and then it ends.

Without Easter, Christianity has just one more religious leader who in the end was powerless in the face of death and might be able to guide us in some good ways, but offers no real lasting hope for any of us.

But Jesus conquered the grave and promised to be the firstfruits of those who will also rise with Him.

And for 2000 years Christians have been taunting death by saying, "'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' (1 Corinthians 15:54-55.) Because Jesus has conquered the grave, Christians can dance in the face of death and sorrow and loss and say it isn't the end.

Because as those who believe in him, we will rise one day too.

So because of the resurrection, we have something great to believe in.

Now if you were here on Friday, we saw that on Thursday, the followers of Jesus were so filled with sorrow that they went to sleep to avoid reality. What looked like the greatest of losses was too much for them to see: Jesus sweating blood and overwhelmed with deadly sorrow in the garden, Jesus the king being crucified and defeated. So they went to sleep to avoid it all on Thursday, they scattered and hid on Friday.

And while the Bible doesn't say anything about Saturday, it was probably a day when their heads were spinning and they were stewing in how deceived they had been, how dashed their hopes had been, how the one true one, the one good guy, the one really truly perfectly person still disappointed them. He wasn't who they thought He was.

And now on Sunday, Jesus has risen. But it wasn't immediate relief for all of the disciples.

In fact, doubt and confusion was the first response of Jesus' followers to the resurrection.

We'll jump around a bit in Mark and John to see that **doubt** was the response of nearly everyone to the news of the resurrection.

But also in the resurrection accounts, we see what to do with our doubt so that we can walk through it and come out with a stronger faith instead of a stifled faith. So in Mark's account:

**Mark 16 9** [[Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. 11 But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. 12 After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. 13 And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. 14 Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

The Bible just tells it like it is.

If they were going to write a legend about the response of people when the godman rose from the dead, they would describe their immediate, unshakeable faith. But their response is:

Verse 11: They would not believe it.

Verse 12 - He's in another form, it doesn't look like him, so they would not believe him.

Verse 13 - They hear about it, and they did not believe them

Verse 14 - He appears and rebukes them for not believing

So the immediate response to Jesus in his resurrected state is disbelief, even when they're looking right at him.

Doubt was the first response of everyone who first heard about the resurrection, even those who were close to Jesus, saw him do the miracles, and heard him teach repeatedly that he would rise. They doubted the good news they heard.

But, this same group of people who received the news with doubt and skepticism, later died for their faith. They went from unbelief to belief that was so strong that they were willing to be killed for it, often even tortured.

So their doubt was turned to a refined and firm faith.

And the most famous of these doubting disciples was Thomas. (TURN TO JOHN 20) He was a great disciple, a guy who after the resurrection moved to India and preached the message of Jesus there. And he met huge opposition from pagan priests, but would not back down, and ended up being killed with a spear. So he was a man of faith.

But he got a nickname given to him that day his faith was weak, and that's the nickname that stuck: doubting Thomas.

But Thomas, in his doubt, actually does a service by showing us how to doubt:

So let's look at his story:

**John 20:24-25 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."**

So this is where Thomas starts. With his own doubt.

And a question to ask when we don't believe is why not?

Not all doubt comes from the same place.

**Why did Thomas doubt?**

It wasn't that Thomas was unwilling to believe Jesus. He had left his life behind to follow Jesus. But now Jesus was dead, and Thomas was horribly disappointed. Which is what his doubt was based on, and a common type of doubt.

### **1. A doubt based on past disappointments**

He had been devoted to Jesus. And he, like the others probably thought that following Jesus meant that Jesus as the Messiah would become the king, and as a devoted follower, he would be in his cabinet or rule with him. So he loved Jesus, and had plans for the future Jesus would bring. But it didn't pan out that way.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, just like the king was supposed to, but then died outside the city on a criminal's cross. They knew he was dead, they stuck a spear in his side and blood and water flowed out. He was buried. And that was it.

So he was horribly disappointed, terribly let down. And he would not let it happen again. Think of all the "told ya so's" Thomas got from his friends. He's the equivalent of the gullible Christian who mails all his money to the slimy televangelist and everybody says, "Don't do it". And then the guy's exposed as a fraud. He's embarrassed and crushed.

*Like the guy who was going to marry a girl. He really trusted her, he had his future with her planned, he was going to marry her, had bought the ring, made the plans, they had named their future kids - and then he gets blindsided by a breakup. We've known people who take years to find someone again because they were so crushed by the one they thought was "the one."*

And here's Thomas - he has a future with Jesus, and now his hopes are buried with Jesus in the tomb. And it's like he's saying, "I'd love to believe Jesus is alive, but I can't unless I see some conclusive proof." I just don't want to put my life on the line for a myth again. He has been so disappointed by Jesus that he can't believe.

And many times, our doubt comes from religious disappointment. I started going to this church, and they said Christianity would make my marriage work. But it didn't. They said it would make it easier to raise kids, and it's been so hard. They promised I'd have money if I was faithful, and I was so faithful, and now I'm broke. They promised me that God would heal my loved one. But still she died. They said Jesus would come back for me on this date or that, and I'm still here, no rapture, no streets of gold, just a hole in my bank account from where I mailed my money in.

Or I knew this Christian leader who had a huge impact on me. My life changed directions because of their influence, I came to know God because of that person, and then he was exposed as a fraud. If the guy who led me to believe doesn't believe, how can I believe?

And now, as much as I'd love to believe Christianity, I just can't be fooled again. I won't be gullible again.

So it seems like Thomas's doubt was not a doubt that could never be overcome. It was the doubt that came from religious disappointment and just had to be convinced. A doubt that refused gullibility.

And that kind of doubt, if handled right, can be one of those antibodies.

So for Christians and non-Christians alike, Thomas can serve as an example - I'll believe when I get legitimate questions answered, and I won't just believe because somebody tries to emotion me into believing. I don't want to be gullible.

So it's fine to be just skeptical enough to avoid gullibility. It's good to want to get some questions answered.

But there are other kinds of doubt.

There are doubts that aren't based on past disappointment and experienced, but on

## **(2) Unanswered Challenges to The Faith**

Sometimes you are brought up in a Christian home, you may be a bit isolated from the world of ideas that challenges the Christian faith. Then you go off to college, and the challenges are all over the place, and you've never thought any of them through or come up with any of the answers. And, together, they make Christianity sound ridiculous.

A professor throws some curveball at you and you don't have an answer. Or just the culture on campus shows a widespread rejection of Christianity and for the first time in your life everybody around you thinks you're wrong. Or you spend too much time on social media, and it doesn't take that many people on twitter to be mocking Christianity to feel like "everybody thinks this" and I'm the lone idiot who believes this stuff.

And you start to doubt because you've never had to answer some of the challenges to the faith that are out there. You've never had to be in the minority. You've never faced the social pressure to doubt. And so when your faith is first challenged, some new doubts can arise.

**(3) Or doubt can come from life's tragedies and difficulties:**

Or sometimes the challenges to the faith come in the form of a tragedy: the sudden loss of someone you love, financial problems, prolonged difficulties. Life gets so hard and dark at times that you really start asking, "I want to believe in Jesus, but how could he be good and in control when life is this difficult." I feel so worn out by life, and you're telling me my life is governed by a good God who is in control. I'd love to believe, but how could I when life goes this way?

**(4) Or Maybe You Doubt Because you're just now hearing about Christianity and you have tons of questions:**

Maybe this whole Christianity thing is new to you: some friends have been telling you about Jesus, you've been going to church checking things out, and you have a million legitimate questions. You just want to understand it before you jump in, you don't respond to high pressure sales pitches, and you need to know more about the faith before you'll believe.

And all of those types of doubt are normal. They are really attempts to believe: I want to believe in Jesus, but I don't want to be deceived again. I want to believe in Jesus, but I don't know the answers.

But then there's a fifth kind of doubt, a much more dangerous kind, that doesn't want to believe.

**(5) Sometimes there's doubt that doesn't want to believe because of the cost.**

This is doubt that says I don't want to believe.

*Aldous Huxley, the famous atheist who wrote Brave New World, wrote, "I had motive for not wanting the world to have a meaning;... The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics, he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he*

wants to do, or why his friends should not seize political power and govern in the way that they find most advantageous to themselves. . . .For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political.

So he said, "The reason I refuse to believe in God is because I want to do what I want to do - in politics, and in the bedroom." His motive for disbelief was, "If I believe in God, I can't keep sleeping with who I want to sleep with, because God makes claims on that part of my life that I don't want to give up."

Which is like saying, "If I started believing in gravity, then I wouldn't be able to jump off this building feeling like I could fly. And because I want to believe I can fly, I refuse to believe in gravity." You can't judge a truth by whether or not you like it, but on whether or not it's true.

We shop for cars that way - we look for the one with the features we want and if it doesn't have them we don't buy it. But truth isn't like that - truth applies to us whether we buy it or not.

We often disbelieve Christianity because we believe something else.

And we'll never give up our other religion, so we have to reject Christianity. So if your other religion is sexual freedom - I do what I want with my body, you will have reason to doubt Christianity because it says, "You're not your own, you belong to Jesus."

Thomas was willing to believe, but couldn't be fooled again, and needed his doubts answered. But he was willing to have them answered:

**John 20: 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!"**

**Notice the invitation of Christ to bring His doubts to Jesus to have them replaced with faith.**

The faith that we're called to isn't a blind, unquestioning faith.

But a faith that looks and sees - that confronts doubts and confusion, so that our faith can be confirmed and strengthened. It calls us to look into it. Deal with it head-on. Explore the truth of what we've always been taught. Probe. To stick our head in the tomb and look into these things.

But often we're afraid to look.

Sometimes we're afraid to address our doubts because we want Christianity to be true. It's a great story. It's a story that we've come to see as wise in and of itself, but also it's a story that makes sense of the world. It seems to answer the question of why things are the way they are. And so we can become so used to seeing the world through the Christian lens that we would never want to lose those bearings.

And we fear that if we ask the hard questions about our faith, we might discover that Christianity isn't true. So we allow the doubts to go unchallenged and we pretend they aren't there.

And maybe it's not the Christian worldview that we love, it's just church. We like church, we like these people, we'd rather just stick our heads in the sand when doubts about our faith arise so it doesn't get weird with the friends.

But if truth is truth, it can stand up to hard honest questions, and we have nothing to worry about. Christianity has held its own for 2000 years, it can handle what we throw at it.

So again and again in the resurrection accounts, followers of Jesus like us are called to see for ourselves.

It's important when you doubt to deal with it. And to understand that working through those doubts is the right thing to do, and if you do it right, it can make you a stronger Christian.

*Keller says, "A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe what they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection."*

Which makes sense. Doubt that is addressed and handled rightly actually strengthens faith.

**Notice how his doubts dissolve and his faith is strengthened not by looking to his faith, but by looking to Jesus.**

This is important.

Because in the story of Thomas, we're told to focus on the object of faith - not on belief itself, but on the one we believe in. It's by learning more about Jesus, getting questions and doubts about Jesus himself answered that our doubts dissolve.

Because in our culture, the word faith just means believing in something. And faith is, in most circles, considered a good thing. But it doesn't have anything to do with facts and truth claims. I have faith in Jesus, you have faith in something different. I believe in Jesus, you believe in the power of crystals, you believe in wicca - What matters is we all have faith, and it doesn't really matter what it is in.

But the Bible doesn't say all faith is good. It can either be very good or very bad. Depending on what it is in.

***Faith in the wrong thing is a bad thing.***

If we go skydiving, and a bunch of us have faith in our parachutes, but one guy has faith in his umbrella - he's going to drift down to earth like Mary Poppins, we probably wouldn't say all of our faith is equally valid. We'd say, "Your faith is wrong - the umbrella can't help you."

And if he jumps out and he is clinging to that umbrella as it goes tulip and he plumps to his death, we would probably not say - well at least we had faith. All faith is equally valid. In that case, faith in a parachute is valid, faith in an umbrella is deadly.

So what makes faith good or bad is its object - what is that faith IN?

Faith is built and strengthened, then, not by focusing on faith itself, but on the object of our faith - on Jesus. By learning more about what, about WHO we believe.

So we should deal with doubt head on, bring it to Jesus and don't deny it and the key area to respond to doubt is by building a more complete picture and view of Jesus. And the process involves getting questions answered, but also repenting of heart attitudes that just don't want to believe.

So when we have doubts, we need to do a combination of things:

1) Repentance of our resistance to Jesus, and the ways we believe something is better. The way to increase this is looking to Jesus who said "peace be with you" - a powerful offer.

2) Build understanding - there any parts of the christian message - creation, sin, jesus as god, cross, resurrection - that you don't understand yet? Then read a lot, meet with trusted teachers, get them answered.

3) Worship - so that we continue to see the cross as better than everything you fear losing. Jesus said to Thomas "Peace be with you" - that's a powerful offer - peace with God is better than anything.

So see for yourself - examine the claims - but do so with an open heart and mind, be willing to be astonished. Because this news that's too good to be true is true.

And here's the news again: Gospel invitation