

It Isn't Over
John 20:24-29
Pastor Dan Erickson
April 1, 2018 (Easter Sunday)

“I still can't believe it happened! He's dead! He's really dead! What was this all about? We left everything to follow him. Oh, don't get me wrong – it was unbelievable. So many amazing things happened these past three years. We witnessed so many things we had never seen before. We saw him raise Lazarus. He was dead, and then he was alive! If I hadn't seen Lazarus with my own eyes, I don't think I would have believed it. It was incredible being a follower of Jesus! He taught us so much. He changed my life! He changed everything! How can he be dead?

Can it be over? It's over. Jesus was an amazing man, but he is dead. It's over. And I am afraid if we don't get out of Jerusalem soon, it will be over for us as well. Those chief priests will be after us next. It's time to go home. It's over. It's time to deal with the facts. Jesus is dead – that is a fact. He was crucified, and his body was put in Joseph's tomb. That is a fact. We were followers of Jesus, but there is no more Jesus to follow. Dead people don't come back to life. Well, except Lazarus. OK yes, Lazarus was dead once too. But Jesus was not just dead; he was crucified. He was beaten and bloodied. They stuck a spear in his side. The centurion confirmed he was dead. Sure, someone might claim to see Jesus alive again, but people can imagine pretty much anything. Not me. Unless I put my fingers in the nail holes in his hands, and unless I put my hand in his side, I will never believe. Never. It's over.”

Friends, you maybe recognize those as the words from the Apostle Thomas in our musical drama, “For Such a One as This.” Though these are not words from the Bible, they are a very plausible speculation of what Thomas might have said following Jesus' crucifixion.

He had every reason to believe the whole Jesus' story was over. Thomas had been one of Jesus' followers, one of the twelve disciples for three years. It was indeed an amazing time. But Jesus was dead. Dead and buried. Yes, they had been

followers of Jesus, but there was no more Jesus to follow. It was over. This thing called Christianity, then in its infant stage, was no more.

Yes, traditionally we call this fellow “Doubting Thomas,” but from his perspective he was just being a realist. He was about the facts. Thomas knew that we cannot just believe what we want to be true. We have to come to grips with what is really true. And it appeared what was really true meant that it was over.

But, it wasn't, it wasn't over at all. The reality of Easter, the facts of the day changed everything. It wasn't over in the first century, and it isn't over in the 21st. Thomas soon realized that; and folks, it is my hope we would realize that even this morning. Let's pause and pray that would happen.

As we begin, I want to turn to the text which tells us what actually happened to Thomas following Jesus' crucifixion. If you have your Bible, you can turn to...

John 20:24 – But Thomas (called “Didymus” or “Twin”), one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

Incidentally, Thomas was apparently a twin, but the Bible doesn't give a clue as to whom his twin was. Some suggest it was the Apostle Matthew, but that is pure speculation. Why Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them has also been the subject of speculation, but the Bible doesn't give us any information about that either.

And remember, any other source for what happened, like the so-called Gospel of Thomas, was composed over a hundred years after the biblical gospels. So Thomas was not there when the risen Jesus met with the other disciples, and...

John 20:25 – (They) were telling him, “We've seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “If I

don't see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Some would say Thomas must be from Missouri – the "Show-Me State." Others would call him an empiricist, someone focused only on empirical evidences, meaning proof gained through our five senses. Thomas wants to see and touch the nail marks in Jesus' hands. Without that evidence, Thomas insists any so-called "Jesus" that appears is really an imposter, perhaps a ghost, but not the real Jesus.

Now, it is actually irrational for Thomas to ignore the eyewitness testimony of ten of his best friends. He makes the same mistake some folks do today when they demand scientific proof, but ignore historical evidence. Yet, the bottom line is this: As far as Thomas is concerned, Jesus is dead and is going to stay dead! For all practical purposes, it's over. Thomas cannot continue to be a follower of Jesus, because there is no more Jesus to follow.

But, he was very wrong about that...

John 20:26 – A week later his disciples were indoors again, and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Now, exactly how Jesus got into that room is something about which people like to speculate. The bottom line is that Thomas is in the room, and then Jesus is also in the room. Thomas sees Jesus with his own eyes. He can see the nail marks in Jesus' hands. Yet, Jesus remembers that Thomas wanted to not only see, but also touch. So...

John 20:27 – He (Jesus) said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. And then a challenge – Don't be faithless, but believe."

And by the grace of God, that is what happens. Thomas realized that it is not over. It is Jesus speaking to him. Jesus is very much alive! He is risen from the dead! Rather than being over, a bold new chapter of following Jesus is about to begin!

John 20:28 – Thomas responded to him (Jesus), "My Lord and my God!"

It is important to realize that is one of the clearest affirmations of Jesus' deity in the Bible. Thomas calls Jesus God. He doesn't refer to him as merely a great teacher or even as "the Son of God." Jesus is "My Lord and my God."

Some suggest Thomas was just using the phrase as an exclamation of surprise. And yes, in the 21st century, people often use those phrases that way. Thomas, however, was a first century Jew. If uttered "lightly," as "just an expression," it would have been the worst form of blasphemy.

No, Thomas is saying that he now realizes that Jesus, who even though he had been crucified about ten days earlier, is now standing before him very much alive, is indeed the Creator and Ruler of the universe.

And Jesus does not correct or in any way negate Thomas' conclusion. He doesn't say, "Oh, Thomas, you shouldn't say that." Instead, he affirms what Thomas said:

John 20:29a – Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed."

You not only believe that I am alive, but that I am Lord and God. And Jesus wants us to believe the same truth.

John 29:29b – "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Yet, these words also point to another important reality. It was not over. Being a follower of Jesus was not over at all. In fact, it was just beginning. Thomas and his friends had been following someone who they thought was a wonderful teacher and marvelous miracle-worker. Yet, the night Jesus was arrested, they all fled. This

revealed that even though they thought they were willing to do almost anything for Jesus, they were not willing to risk their necks.

This is all changing. Now Thomas and his friends realize Jesus is much more than a teacher and miracle-worker. His resurrection from the dead demonstrates that Jesus is God incarnate, God in human form, and the eternal Son of God. They now believe there is no greater privilege in the world than following him wherever he leads.

And that is what Thomas does. In 50 A.D., about seventeen years after Jesus' resurrection, Thomas makes a 2,500 mile journey from Israel to India, mostly on foot. There he preaches the gospel and starts churches, churches that 2,000 years later still trace their roots to his ministry. Then in 72 A.D., religious leaders in the Indian city of Chennai demand he quit preaching about Jesus. When Thomas refuses, they run a spear through him, killing Thomas and giving him a spear-wound like Jesus had.

And the other apostles were also willing to give their lives for the sake of the gospel. The night Jesus was arrested, it did indeed look as if it was over. The disciples scattered. After Jesus was crucified, they were hiding; fearing they, too, would be arrested.

Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday totally turned things around. A few weeks later, there were 120 followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem during Pentecost. And from there, the message that Jesus was the crucified and risen Lord began to spread through the Roman Empire.

By the year 100, less than 70 years later, it is estimated that group had grown to one million believers in Jesus Christ. And that, of course, was just the beginning. The decades and centuries would go by. The church would continue to grow until today in our world, 2.4 billion people identify as Christians.

Historians voted Jesus to be the most influential individual, not just of the first millennium, but of the second millennium, years 1000-2000. It's not over. Oh, there have been times and places in the

past 2,000 years where it looked like it might be over, that Christianity was on the rocks, its very existence threatened, where there would be no more followers of Jesus. Yet, in those times, God would often work in a powerful way, enabling the church to not only survive but thrive, so that instead of the light going out, it shined more brightly than ever.

And yes, there are plenty of folks who think it is over for Christianity, and it is no longer relevant in the 21st century. They point to the increasing secularization of the West, with Europe pretty much abandoning the Christian faith.

In Sweden, for example, where I have most of my roots, over 80% of the population describe themselves as atheists or completely non-religious. Only 5% of Swedes attend church on any regular basis.

In our country, the dominant view in media and academic circles is that it is pretty much over for Christianity, that religious faith is a relic of a bygone era. They point to statistics which show the percentage of people professing to be Christians has declined from 80% to 70% in recent years, and that young people especially are increasingly likely to consider themselves atheists or agnostics.

Of course, this attitude is not really new. It was over fifty years ago, when John Lennon of the Beatles said, "Christianity will go. It will shrink and vanish...I am right, and I will be proved right."

Yet, like Mark Twain, the rumors of Christianity's death have been very much exaggerated. A recent study by the Pew Foundation concluded that the world is getting more religious, not less. In the U.S., the shift from identifying as Christian to non-religious has pretty much happened among people who were not very religious to start with.

For example, ten years ago, Joe went to church twice a year – Christmas and Easter – but Joe still called himself a Christian. Now, he still sometimes goes to church with his parents on

holidays, but he describes himself as non-religious.

Mary, on the other hand, was teaching Sunday School ten years ago and is still very active in her church. Based on that sample, there are half as many Christians as there used to be; but in reality, nothing has really changed.

And in other parts of the world, Christianity is in anything but decline. In East Asia – China, Korea and Japan – the number of Christians has gone from 11.4 million to 171 million. That means that the percentage of the population in those countries that consider themselves Christian has gone from 1.2% to 10.5%. One hundred years ago, about 10% of the population in Africa identified as Christian; now that number is about 50%. Even in the West, the secular alternatives to Christianity seem to be running out of steam.

There are three individuals from the 19th century who many believe have made religion in general, and Christianity in particular, unnecessary: Karl Marx, Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. Yet, following those three men has proven to be most disappointing.

Marx promised a workers' paradise which would guarantee peace and equality for everyone. Yet, the Communist states his followers formed ended up being the most murderous in all of history, killing over 100 million of their own people.

The scientific naturalism promoted by Darwin and his followers claimed to be the solution to humanity's problems; but besides eliminating the need for superstition or religion, the hard determinism of scientific naturalists has no room for meaning, love, hope, human freedom or even genuine knowledge.

As for Freud, the therapeutic revolution he started has largely been discredited and has hardly brought universal happiness to the human race. If anything "is over," it is not Christianity, but the myth of secular hope.

Now, this doesn't mean that the Christian church doesn't have any problems. There are all sorts of issues facing the church, both in the U.S. and around the world, including a few here at CBC.

My point, however, is that Christianity is hardly vanishing. There are millions and millions of followers of Jesus Christ all over the world, seeking to honor the Lord and serve the people around them. They are convinced the Jesus who rose from the dead on Easter Sunday is very much alive, present with his people today through his Spirit, and certain to return to earth from heaven one day to rule as King of kings and Lord of lords. Christianity, following Jesus, is not over. Not over at all!

Now friends, that is a very important and significant truth. Yet, I realize that may not be obvious to some of you. I used to think my main job in an Easter sermon was to convince folks that Jesus really rose from the dead. Then I realized that most people, at least the vast majority of those who come to church on Easter Sunday, already believe in Jesus' resurrection. What they have a difficult time grasping is how anything which happened 2,000 years ago could possibly have anything to do with life today. They don't think Christianity is over in theory; but in practical terms, it doesn't really have much relevance.

Friend, that may be where you are at today. The health issues you are facing, the financial difficulties which seem so overwhelming, the conflicts you are experiencing within your family all seem to be bigger problems than Easter can solve. Maybe at one time in your life, you thought that if you just trusted God, everything would work out fine. Now, that seems like a naïve faith that is, well, pretty much over.

Yet friends, the reality is that the resurrection of Jesus, what happened that first Easter Sunday, makes all the difference in the world. Oh, it doesn't mean we will always have smooth sailing. Just like anyone else, Christians can face some pretty big storms in life. Yet, no matter what we are facing, Jesus' resurrection is a fact that

enables us to face those storms with courage and hope.

That is what David and Denise were talking about this morning. A diagnosis of Stage 4 cancer is about as tough as things get. And in the world we as Christians inhabit, cancer happens to us sometimes. Sometimes when that cancer strikes, the Lord does a miraculous healing, and sometimes he doesn't. Yet, because of Jesus' resurrection, whatever life brings, whether it is health or sickness, healing or not, we can live with hope!

And friend, whatever problem you may be facing in your life right now, whatever problem, the resurrection of Jesus means there is reason for hope. You don't have to give up. You don't have to be in despair. Yes, maybe your dream is over. Your life is not like you wanted it to be or imagined it to be. But the Lord can give you an even better dream. At the heart of that better dream is, like Thomas and the other apostles, following the risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Yes, as we follow Jesus, the road is not always easy. There are disappointments, but life is always an adventure. And in the end, because he has conquered death through his resurrection, the Lord Jesus promises he will bring us safely to our true home.

Revelation 21:4b – “...there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, because all these things are gone forever.”

Or as C.S. Lewis put it, we will leave this world which has only been the cover and the title page and will...

*“Begin Chapter One of the Great Story
which no one on earth has read;
which goes on forever;
in which every chapter is better
than the one before.”*

Lewis understood that Jesus' story is one that is never over!

Friends, this is the hope that belongs to all those trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And friend, if you are here this morning and are not doing that, or are not sure you are doing that, it is not too late. You can experience the salvation and hope that only the Lord Jesus can give.

All you need to do is, as God enables, stop trusting in yourself, stop thinking you are doing fine in life without Jesus, and turn to him and embrace him as your Savior. If you are not sure what that means, please talk to me after.

For those of you who are believers in Jesus, for those of you who know it's not over, please join us as we continue to worship the risen Lord and celebrate what his resurrection means for our lives!