

Those Who Have Hope But Have Not Seen Jesus

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[0 : 00] If you have a Bible, we're going to turn to John chapter 20.!

I wouldn't rush out to visit him. John chapter 20, and we're going to be reading from verse 24 to 31.

Verse 19 says, On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for the fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them.

So that's the context. The day that he was raised from the dead, this is the evening. The disciples are gathered together in a room that is locked. And verse 24 says, 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. And then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here.

[2 : 21] See my hands. And put your hand. Place it in my sight. Do not disbelieve, but believe. Thomas answered him, My Lord and my God.

Jesus said to him, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. And then John, writing his gospel, says this, Now Jesus 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 believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name.

Amen. God, please help us with your word open to us. Please teach us by your Holy Spirit. We ask in Jesus' name for his glory. Amen.

Well, have you ever had a friend or a colleague or someone in your family tell you about something that happened that was quite extraordinary? But they started telling you the story by saying that you will never believe it.

You'll never believe this. And you think to yourself, Well, am I supposed to? I don't know. It's a funny little phrase, isn't it? It could be anything. But it's the kind of thing where they begin by saying, You'll never believe.

[3 : 49] Hey, you'll never believe what happened at the hairdressers. Somebody got their hair cut. You'll never believe where my glasses were on your head.

You'll never believe who we met on our hike today. I don't know if you remember that. At the start of the year, when we started Mark's gospel, I told a story about a group of mountain bikers who met King Charles along the way, the same trail that they were on.

What are the chances? That's the kind of story where the bikers go back and they say, You'll never believe who we met on the trail. King Charles.

Aye, right? You see, although we might say you'll never believe, we're just trying to express how extraordinary the thing is.

But we do actually want the person to believe us when we tell them, don't we? We start with that phrase because we understand how unlikely it seems. But imagine the person you're telling just point blank refused to believe.

[4 : 57] It would be quite frustrating. It would be certainly frustrating if you were telling someone a story and they thought that you were lying about the whole thing. That would be pretty frustrating. And so this story about King Charles is actually quite a good example because although it might seem unlikely to bump into King Charles on a trail out in the wilderness, it's not a random trail that they met him.

The trail was on the grounds of the Royal Balmoral Estate where the king visits. And they had already, when they started out on their journey, they'd already noticed some armed guards.

They'd already noticed some of the people on the estate. And so it would be like one of those in the group deciding not to go on the cycle. He just stays in a car park. And the others go on a cycle. And they come back and they hear about this fanciful tale about meeting the king.

You should have came on this bike ride. We met the king. It sounds unlikely. But they already knew that there were armed guards there. They already knew that they were on the Balmoral Estate, the royal estate where the king visits.

But imagine the person at the car park insists that they don't believe. I just don't believe you. And they keep saying, now listen, I know you think we're joking, but we're not joking.

[6 : 28] And they just keep insisting, we really did see the king. Then you're only really left with a few options. Either it's true, or they are all clinically insane, or they're all lying.

And those last two options are not very good, are they? This is what it's like for Thomas. Thomas' disciple, when the others tell him that they've seen the Lord, it's not the first piece of the puzzle.

We must understand, this is not the first piece of the puzzle. It's not just some random sighting. When Thomas hears this story, there are other things that point to whether it's true or not. The stone has already been rolled away.

The guards who were guarding the tomb are gone. The tomb is empty. There are some grave clothes left behind. The body cannot be located.

And the mood of the disciples has suddenly changed. Not to mention that Thomas has already spent years witnessing miraculous things with Jesus.

[7 : 37] And so, despite all the other pieces of the evidence, Thomas concludes that it's more believable that his fellow disciples are all lying to him or they've at least gone all mad with grief.

He concludes that. And if you were one of the other disciples, that would be pretty frustrating. If Thomas thought that you were lying and you think, have you not spent three years with us and with Jesus and you think we're all lying?

Maybe he thinks, well, you've all gone mad. Mad with grief. And Thomas is acting like he's the only sane person in the room. But he spent years with his disciples.

He spent years seeing the miracles of Jesus. How many stories do you think that Thomas could have began with, you'll never believe this? How many times could Thomas have started a story like that?

You'll never believe. And yet when it comes to him hearing a story, he thinks that he's got it all sorted out. And so the question is, is Thomas' judgment sound?

[8 : 45] Is his judgment sound? Because it seems like, see if this was a courtroom and Thomas was the judge, there are all these pieces of evidence presented to him and then multiple eyewitnesses come up and give the same testimony.

But it's like the judge then says, I will never believe this unless I see it with my very own eyes. And that's just not how it happens. Now I think that one of the reasons why John is including this account is that he's using the experiences even of the disciples to lead us to this purpose of why he's writing.

I've written these things. I've included these things so that you, me and you, might believe. And so he's telling you about how even the disciples struggled with this.

So, he's telling us that the disciples struggled in different ways, yet Jesus brought them all to a point of confidence for our sake so that we could believe in the testimony of the chosen witnesses, the disciples.

Now think about if you insisted that you would never believe unless he appeared to you. Imagine you just said, I will never believe in Jesus unless he appears to me.

[10 : 05] Imagine, what would, what about the person that you then tell? Imagine Jesus does, appear to you and then you tell someone about it and then they say, well, no, well, I'm just going to be the same as you.

I'm never going to believe it unless he appears to me. And on and on and on and on and everyone in the world just refuses to believe unless he has a personal visit to every single person in the world.

Imagine that was the case. Imagine they didn't believe and insisted that they would never believe. And here's what's wrong with that, right? I'm going to tell you what's wrong with that because that's what Thomas is doing and I'll tell you what's wrong with that.

Firstly, it doesn't work like that. Plenty of people saw Jesus do incredible things, miraculous things and still didn't believe. So it doesn't follow that, oh, if he appears to me, I'm going to believe.

Not necessarily. Not necessarily. You might just explain it away. And so it doesn't work like that, firstly. Secondly, belief is a matter of the heart, not just the eyes.

[11 : 10] And that's why some people still didn't believe despite seeing Jesus because their hearts were hard. Thirdly, faith comes through, what's the verse?

Faith comes through hearing. Faith comes through hearing, not through sight. So God has chosen the gospel as a means of salvation for the world so that God would quicken his people by his spirit through his word.

Fourthly, Jesus chose certain primary witnesses to give their testimony and through them he satisfied any insistence for him to appear.

Do you notice that? He satisfies all of the questions that we would have. He satisfies it with the disciples. Remember when he appeared to them and they couldn't believe it for joy?

It was too good to be true and they thought he was a ghost and he said, give me a piece of fish and I'll eat it in front of you. Touch. See, ghosts don't have bones and skin and even Thomas, his insistence might be our insistence and Jesus satisfies that with the disciples because if he did appear, he appeared to them with enough evidence that their testimony the disciples' testimony is true and reliable.

[12 : 31] Fifthly, these disciples are being given this task and the fact that they are given this task is reason enough for Thomas that he should have believed.

He should believe his fellow disciples. If they are to be witnesses to the world, then he's like the first case study, isn't he? we're going to tell people about Jesus and the first person he tells is like, nah, I'm not believing it.

It's not getting on very well, is it? And so he should have believed and if Thomas is going to be asking people to believe on the basis of his account, he should at least believe on the basis of his fellow disciples.

He should have practiced some trust in the testimony of his friends. But as it was, Jesus did this for Thomas because he was going to be a witness for us.

So, let me finish just with two short points, okay? Just two questions. Number one, how did being absent affect Thomas?

[13 : 36] So, maybe later on today and this week, have a little think about how being absent affected Thomas. Let me ask you a couple of questions about Thomas being absent.

And it was for a full week that he didn't see Jesus. Thomas was absent when Jesus first appeared. Let me ask you this. Him being absent, did that strengthen his faith?

No, it didn't strengthen his faith. Did it restore his hope after the grief of him dying? Well, Thomas being absent didn't restore hope in his life.

did being absent give Thomas more knowledge about reality? Did it give him clearer knowledge about reality? No, it didn't because he only had half the puzzle.

And so, it seems like Thomas being absent from the company of the disciples as they gathered on the evening of the resurrection did him no good to be absent.

[14 : 39] He shouldn't have been called doubting Thomas because it's not doubts, it's disbelief. He isn't struggling with a bit of doubt, he's flat out disbelieving.

And what he gained by being absent was only a kind of harsh disbelief because even if the disciples didn't say we've seen the Lord, we know by Thomas' response that that's the place that he was at.

He was at a place of disbelief, very harsh disbelief. In fact, the Greek in the text is a double negative. He says, by no means will I believe.

By no means will I believe. And so, being absent from the company of disciples only led him to disbelief, disillusionment, lost faith, lost hope.

and it did not give him knowledge either. It's not like he had reality sorted out.

[15 : 43] Like he thinks he knows all the facts. He doesn't because he wasn't there and he didn't see Jesus. So he's not got all the facts. And sometimes I think that we think that we know everything and we don't need other people to fill in the gaps of our knowledge, of our faith, of reality, of life.

How many times do we need someone whether it's struggles in suffering or struggles in marriage or struggles with children or struggles with neighbours? How often do we need a brother or sister to say, listen, there's something you're not seeing here.

There's something you're missing. We need that. And so, so, what he gained by being absent was only disbelief.

And it wasn't just disbelief in the resurrection. Listen to this. What he gained in being absent was a distrust of his friends. See how he says, I will never believe this.

This thing that you're saying, he just does not trust his friends. It's a horrible thing. And the only thing, that's the only thing he gains, but what he misses is actually meeting Jesus.

[16 : 54] He misses seeing Jesus. And notice how Jesus doesn't then turn up the next day. Oh, poor Thomas. You weren't there. I'm sorry you couldn't make it. I'll come and see you tomorrow.

Jesus leaves him hanging for a week. That must have been an agonizing week for Thomas. And he doesn't meet him privately. When he does meet him, he does not meet him privately. He waits until he's gathered with the other disciples.

And so he has to sit in his own disbelief. You ever had that experience where Jesus lets you sit in your own disbelief or your own struggle or your own doubts?

Jesus will let you sit in it and stew in it and ponder it. And he will let you challenge it yourself. Press in by his spirit. And in the end, it won't be a private meeting. Thomas must be present with the disciples for him to see Jesus.

And notice that when Jesus appeared, Thomas being absent from the company of disciples meant that he missed it. But when he was present, he saw Jesus appear. What a wonderful thing it is.

[18 : 01] And so we likewise, we are in a place where we are waiting for Christ to appear. Yet, let me tell you this, waiting alone will not help your faith. If you're waiting alone for Jesus to appear, it will not help your faith.

It won't help your hope. It won't help your endurance. If we are always absent, then we might actually stop looking for Jesus. We might actually stop hoping in Jesus.

We might actually stop believing. And let me ask you, have you ever known someone who stopped gathering, who stopped being present, and where did it lead? It probably led to them stopping believing.

Neither will they have the full picture. Now, Thomas thought he had all the facts, yet we know that he didn't. And how can we think that we know more alone than we do with the collective experience of the whole group?

And so the second question, that was an exploration of how did being absent affect Thomas? Thomas, how did being present affect Thomas? Well, although he was absent at first, now he's present.

[19 : 10] He knows where he needs to be. And although Jesus did not meet him privately, he did meet him where he was at, spiritually. Notice how Jesus condescends to Thomas' requirement to touch his hands and his wounds.

Jesus didn't need to do that. Jesus didn't need to humor Thomas. And yet, how did he even know? How did he know? Did Jesus appear and then say, fill me in what's been happening and who's been saying what?

He knew. He knew what Thomas was struggling with. And he condescended to Thomas' struggle to help him. And he did it, not just for Thomas, he did it for our sake.

You see, Jesus knows, Jesus would have known that Thomas was absent when he showed up. And in a way, he first appeared, think about this, when Jesus first appeared to the group, he first appeared when the one who needed it most was not there.

The one who needed it most was not there. Jesus knows what he's doing. And so finally, Thomas comes together with the disciples. Jesus not only appears, but the great thing is, he doesn't just appear, he restores.

[20 : 28] He restores. He restores Thomas' faith. He restores Thomas' hope. He restores Thomas' place among the chosen witnesses. And I think this story is included in a similar way to Peter.

That both of these disciples, in John's gospel, both of these disciples say that they would die with Jesus. And yet both of them fail in their own way. And both of them are restored by Jesus.

You see, Jesus will never give up on someone as long as they come to him. He will never give up. And both of these men needed to be restored when they were in the company of the group.

We don't know why Thomas was absent. We just know that he was absent. And it did him no good. Staying absent will not alleviate doubts. It will not gain you clearer knowledge. It will only lead to disbelief and push you further adrift.

But Thomas returning meant that he was in the right place to see the Lord. He was in the right place to have his faith increase. To have his hope restored.

[21 : 34] To be given the honour not just of seeing the Lord but to have his not just to be in the company of his people but he was given the honour of being part of the Lord's mission.

Do you notice that? Jesus could have said I'm done with you Thomas. But he says no, you're to be my witness. And he restores him. And he can do that for any one of us.

You see John wrote these things for our sake. For those who have not seen yet believe. Have you believed Thomas because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

So John included these things for our sake because immediately after he quotes Jesus saying that John says Jesus did many more things but I've written these so that you may believe.

I've written these so that me and you might believe. And Peter says this doesn't he? Though you've not seen him you'll love him. Not that our faith is blind belief it's not.

[22 : 36] It's based on all of these things that these reliable witnesses have recorded in history and the gospel we have heard and the spirit that has opened our hearts and our eyes that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God that we might say with Thomas with joy my Lord and my God and that by believing we might have life in his name.

And we can only do that with each other and so believe. Let me pray. Lord we thank you so much that these things were recorded for our sake.

We thank you that they were recorded by true and reliable eyewitnesses. We thank you that they were there and that you did appear to them. And we thank you that you alleviated any doubts any disbelief any fears that they had to give them confidence that they might share to the death this truth about you so that we might hear it.

Lord I thank you that even Thomas took your gospel to the ends of the earth and gave his life for your gospel. I thank you that it has come all the way to us that we might believe.

Help us to believe these things in Jesus name. Amen.