

John 20:24-31: Before Belief

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] We pray before we take a look at this story that presents us with this man named Thomas.

! Our Heavenly Father, I now pray that through the reading of the word and the hearing of it now, you would bolster faith in this place.

That all around this auditorium, men and women and children would have a very living encounter with the risen Lord.

We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin.

He was a Bolshevik revolutionary who rose to great prominence in Soviet circles during the revolution in Russia 1917.

[1 : 00] A story often put into writing claimed that in 1930, he traveled from Moscow to Kyiv. He was speaking before a large crowd.

And while he gave his remarks, he emphatically denounced religion, as the communist atheist regime frequently did.

He harangued the crowd of would-be believers. He belittled religious thought in general. And after he was finished, a hush fell and an Orthodox priest rose and made his way to the lectern.

And he looked at the crowd and said in his customary Orthodox fashion, Christ is risen, to which they all said, he is risen indeed.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. You know, Christians like stories like that. Especially on Easter.

[2 : 09] It presents us with faith, finding its defiant voice. It presents us with belief bolstered and ready to speak.

And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that for any non-Christian in his day or our day or in this room or outside, saying Christ is risen does not necessarily make it so. In fact, for any Christian, someone here today who's already believing, there are all kinds of times in life, are there not?

When Christ being risen seems to be hidden in a cloud. And we wonder and doubt whether it is so. And so whether you're a non-Christian or a Christian, simply saying Christ is risen presents a problem.

[3 : 27] Is it true? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise?

Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise?

Did he rise? Did he rise? Did he rise? him is not available to us today.

And what do we make of it? Put simply, here's a man so much like us who comes to faith through a means not available to us, but nevertheless I'm going to argue that there's things here that talk about the ongoing possibility of belief for us.

So let's meet the man. I hope you've got it open. We're introduced to him there in verse 24. This man who at the moment in the text is before belief. You can hear it in him. Verse 24, now Thomas one of the twelve called the twin was not with them when Jesus came. That's a reference to the previous paragraph eight days before on Easter Sunday. I think it was JC Ryle who indicated that Thomas learned the lesson, don't miss church because stuff can happen while you're away. But here he is, one of the twelve who hadn't been with them on that Easter evening when Jesus appeared to the others. So the other disciples told him, verse 25 now, we have seen the Lord. But he said to them, and here's our man, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and placing my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side, I will never believe. This is Thomas before belief.

[5 : 45] There's a couple things here I think we can appreciate about Thomas. First, he's not called doubting Thomas for nothing. He's filled with doubt. And let me just concede that doubt is a virtue. Can you imagine a blind adherence to all things that anyone said without your ability to question it? I mean, where would we be in all of our exploration of the world and its sciences if previous thoughts long held could not be examined squarely, fairly, re-examined, altered, changed? In this way, doubt is a virtue. But more than that, he's not just a doubter, is he? He's a disbeliever. I get that from his own words. Verse 25, unless I see in his hand 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. That's disbelief. And I admire this in him as well.

One doesn't want to come to belief in something this large without it being verified. Verification is a value, just as doubt is a virtue. Thomas was a, I'm going to think things through before I give myself to kind of guy. Thomas was a, I'm going to have to see some things before I believe some things kind of person. In fact, John Updike, it was who penned that magisterial poem on Easter. And he wrote very clearly. Make no mistake, if he rose at all, it was as his body. If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecules re-knit, the amino acids rekindled, the church will fall. I'm so grateful for that kind of disbelief. I'm so tired of what the 20th century gave us on Easter as though he could rise within your heart.

And that was all that mattered. It didn't matter if he actually rose from the dead in bodily form. Fortunately, we're done with that in these days. You can doubt the resurrection. You can disbelieve in the resurrection. But at least we know there had to be a real resurrection. Without a real resurrection, Christianity is nothing more than some kind of subjective, internalized Charlie Brown-like feeling that every spring something new might happen. So here he is, a couple of things to admire about. So the real question is, what made the difference for him? How does a man before belief who is so like us come to a belief?

In particular, in ways that aren't available to us? Well, it's right there. He had a personal encounter with Jesus.

[9 : 31] I mean, if you leave the first paragraph off, 24 and 25, where we met Thomas before belief. In verses 26 through 28, we see what brought him to belief. 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. Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here and see my hands. Put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve.

Do not disbelieve, but believe. I mean, what a turn of literary magisterial form. In verse 25, I will never believe. Now Jesus, coming through the door locked with this nearly magical like physical appearance now in the flesh, not merely a spirit.

And he says to him, do not disbelieve, but believe. Do not disbelieve, but believe. Present active imperative. Do not be disbelieving, but believe.

It was a personal experience that he had with the risen Lord in bodily form that was the drop dead moment of new life for him.

[11 : 01] You know, there's a lot of ways you can come to know something. He's kind of very contemporary. He requires personal experience.

Let me ask you a question. What's your view on law enforcement? Well, your answer is probably grounded in your personal experience with law enforcement.

Our personal experiences are dominating the things that we claim to know and believe and trust. Whether or not our personal experiences square up to the reality or not of an entity or an individual. You know, it wasn't always like that. Just let's get this straight. You know, it was a long ago before Pastor Pace was even born.

Before the Reformation, even. People came to believe things because there were trusted institutions or individuals who told them what to believe.

[12 : 20] So the church would say, this is what we believe and everyone would believe. Rome would say, this is what you will believe and everyone believed.

But that gave way. A monk of all kinds of people by the name of Martin Luther. He comes along and he says, you know, I don't think I come to belief or truth.

Belief or disbelief based upon what you say to me. I come to it simply by my conscience and what I read in the Bible. Well, that lit a fire that spread all through the globe.

Because there was now a new movement in play. Believers were made not by someone telling them so. But by exploring for them the scriptures and in their conscience, holding that to be so. But that gave way. Belief, not a monk, but a philosopher comes along and enlightens the world through an age of enlightenment.

[13 : 36] And he says, you know, you can't really believe all the institutions. You can't really necessarily trust what the Bible has to say. If you want to know why someone would believe or disbelieve, it's going to have to be relegated to human reason.

It has to be verified. This gives rise to the scientific enterprise, to experimentation, to the multiplication of things over and over and over again.

So that we know they're true. And so the Bible itself receded. Institutional authority had already receded. And science becomes the means by which you are persuaded.

But now you and I live in this day where that's given way to personal experience. And in one sense, naturally so.

Because whose science is it anyway? So you see this historical pattern of how people come to know or not know.

[14 : 39] At some level, some of you are more likely to believe if an institution or an individual you admire claims something to be true, a friend holds it to be true, and therefore you can take them at their word.

Some of you are strictly saying, well, if I can read it here, understand it here, in the scriptures, I'm more likely to believe. Some of you have come to faith in the resurrection because you've seen the reasonableness.

You've had to account for an empty tomb. You've had to think about it, talk about it, wrestle with it, and it seemed suddenly rational, clear, right. But yet some of you, most of you probably feel like, well, I sure wish I had what Thomas had.

Just give me a personal encounter. Just walk him in through my door. Well, I got to tell you right now, that's not available to us.

You cannot become a Christian and will not become a Christian because Jesus somehow decides to rise from the right hand of the Father where he is seated and descend all the way into your bedroom, although the universe is filled with billions of people to make sure that you had your chance to see him face to face.

[16 : 06] So what do we do? This is the problem. Remember the question we set out to answer. How does this story of someone who is so much like us but whose means to coming to belief in the resurrection is not available to us nevertheless reveal an ongoing possibility for us?

Well, for that you've got to move even down the text a little further because what you begin to see then is that we are not necessarily shut out from a reasonable belief in the resurrection.

You don't have to see his frame. You don't have to hear his voice. You're not disadvantaged. You don't live in the wrong time. You don't have to go to bed going, Oh, if only I had been there then.

Well, they had the upper hand. The rest of us don't have it. That's really not the case. There is a possibility for us to believe. How so?

Well, look at the text. Verse 28, you get the first observation. The words of Jesus indicate that belief is still possible for those who weren't there.

[17 : 23] Let me read it for you. Thomas answered him, my Lord and my God. Here it is, verse 29. Jesus said to him, have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Every indication from his lips that a belief in the resurrection, a consideration of the crucifixion, the substitutionary atonement for sins, that by faith can be had through his sacrifice on your behalf, the fact that he is alive, that death could not hold him.

He seems to indicate you don't have to see it to believe it. In fact, he says, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

I kind of feel as though he's chiding the resistance of Thomas to require a firsthand sighting.

Remember, Thomas had friends. And some of you do too. Well, not all of you, but some of you do.

[18 : 37] He disbelieved defiantly in the face of good friends who had already come to faith. Now think about some of the people in your life who do believe.

Is your resistance to their belief as fixed as you think it might should be? Jesus himself in the word said he was going to rise.

If your friends aren't good enough for you to come to believe, certainly the scriptures here indicate all things are possible. Let me put it this way.

The resurrection, the death and resurrection of Christ is the best attested event we have, I think, almost in all of human history. I mean, you're talking lots of people at the time, eyewitnesses, multiple gospels written concerning it, the appearances to many.

It is so well attested. That you actually have to go outside of yourself to disbelieve. Let me put it to you this way.

[19 : 57] Not only do the words of Jesus state that belief is possible, but the words of John indicate that your belief is possible. Look at him.

He gets the last word. Verse 30 and 31. This is the writer. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in his 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. How do you become a believer in the resurrection when the means that converted Thomas are not available to you? For him, for him seeing was believing.

For you and me, we come to believing by reading, trusting, an eyewitness account.

Now you say, that's pretty tough for me to do. But did you read any article this week that told you about activities that were going on in another part of the world this week?

[21 : 03] And if the news source was reliable, do you not come to some reasonable belief based upon what somebody wrote when you yourself weren't there?

Are you in the field of medicine and stand behind a bed and want to ask a patient, how are you doing and what's your problem and which leg are we operating on? Or do you actually also want to read the chart, look at it, because you believe the condition of the patient based on that which is written down and recorded?

How many of you actually want to hear something in writing? I'm glad I'm going to get that. Will you email me that confirmation in writing, please? Why do you do that?

Because reading and writing is confirmation for believing. This is no different. This is no different, says John. I've written these things that you might believe in the resurrection.

You've seen all kinds of evidence today. That was evidence today. Friends, trusted friends, who say, I believe and I've never seen them yet.

[22 : 25] A belief in the resurrection is what I call us to today on Easter Sunday. And for those of you who came in believing, know this.

Life is not kind and you will be tested and your belief will often fall into doubt and at times disbelief. And the way forward for you for ongoing belief is the same thing required for any to believe. A trust in the word of God that these things are so.

In fact, it was Peter who said, you and I are more advantaged than the apostles. Because while he stood on the Mount Transfiguration and had his own personal encounter with Jesus, something that most of us would just dream about.

He says, what we have to give you after we, the eyewitnesses, depart is something more sure, more complete, more trustworthy.

[23 : 35] It is all those promises written down. And so today I call upon you. Who might have come in doubting.

Or disbelieving. To faith in Christ. I call upon the believer. Who's come in doubting.

And disbelieving. And feeling I'm not seeing it. To have faith. In the word that's been given to us.

In the scripture. And it's on the basis of that reasonableness. Then. That like a old ancient Orthodox priest in Kiev.

I would stand and say to you. Christ. Is risen. He is risen indeed. Christ. Christ. Is risen.

[24 : 35] He is risen indeed. Christ. Is risen. He is risen indeed. And saying so.

While not necessarily making it so. Is not without foundation. For believing it to be so. Our heavenly father.

We come to you this Easter. With our lives. And ask that you would save. And strengthen. All. Who need. Ongoing.

Abiding trust. In a world. Where we just don't get to see. As much as we'd like. In Jesus name.

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