

# Did Jesus really rise?

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Preacher: Andy Meadows

[ 0 : 00 ] John chapter 20 and we're starting at verse 24. Now, Thomas, one of the twelve, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

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.

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 and put out your hand and place it in my side. 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.

[ 1 : 08 ] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the 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.

Well, good morning. Happy Easter. My name is Andy. I'm the acting lead pastor here at Grace Church. It's wonderful to see you here, especially if you are a visitor with us this morning.

Let's pray as we come to God's word. Heavenly Father, we thank you for that first Easter when Jesus rose from the dead. Please help us now to engage with the evidence and to give thanks.

Amen. Well, I want us to consider this Easter Sunday the common misunderstanding that in order to believe something, you have to have been there to see it.

Well, on first glance, that's the most obvious point in the world. The whole point of history relies on that, as well as most court cases.

[ 2 : 18 ] The testimony of others on unrepeatable events is what we found so much of our confidence on in this life. Last September, I was up in Leeds on a conference.

I was walking around and spotted something a bit odd at the corner of my eye. Just two people going for a walk. Nothing wrong with that. But they were going for a walk with their two parrots, fittingly on Leeds, behind them through the city centre.

Do you believe me? Well, closer than last month, I finished a staff meeting and walked back to my house to find eight ambulances outside a house down the road and two people in full hazmat suits going into a property.

Do you believe me? Jim does because he lives on my road. But all of history, all of history depends upon things we weren't there to see.

But we depend on reliable eyewitnesses. The event is unrepeatable, but the people who are there are reliable, so I can trust it.

[ 3 : 35 ] See, every courtroom, every history faculty, every family memory, every biography relies on this principle. And it's this principle that lies at the heart of Jesus' final resurrection appearance in John chapter 20.

Do keep your Bible open or turn back to it if you've closed it. When we're looking at Jesus appearing to this guy called Thomas, we may know him better as Doubting Thomas, perhaps the patron saint of scepticism.

He comes across as a bit of a pessimist, doesn't he? A bit of an eeyore. Someone whose cup is always half empty. A man whose football team is always destined for relegation rather than promotion.

A man for whom the light at the end of a tunnel is not a sign of hope, but an out-of-control express train. Perhaps Thomas is someone you identify with. A sceptic.

And when it comes to the claims of Christianity and the claims of Jesus rising again from the dead, perhaps you're sceptical. Well, you'd be in good company.

[ 4 : 47 ] Wikipedia maintains a growing list of famous agnostics, which includes the tycoons Elon Musk and Warren Buffett, the actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Charlie Chaplin, the philosophers Noam Chomsky and David Hume, the scientists Mary Curie and Charles Darwin.

And yet Thomas, who began the Easter weekend as a sceptic, ended the Easter holidays as a firm believer in Jesus' resurrection from the dead on the basis of solid evidence.

And John wrote his gospel so that we can be like Thomas in having that certainty. It's how the chapter ends, isn't it? Look at that last verse that was read, verse 31.

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. John has carefully written his gospel to convince us not only that we can believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but that we can benefit from it too.

And so two things for us to consider this Easter, they'll be on the screen and they're on that handout on the back of the service sheet. The first is this, Jesus really did rise from the dead. We can believe the eyewitnesses.

[ 6 : 11 ] Jesus really did rise from the dead. We can believe the eyewitnesses. John chapter 20 is about John recording the resurrection that nobody expected.

Roman soldiers had crucified Jesus two days beforehand just outside Jerusalem in front of a large crowd and John watched the whole thing. Now my history is sketchy, but I know the Romans were good at two things, building roads and killing people.

And John records that on this occasion, the Romans sped up death by breaking the legs of the two criminals alongside Jesus. But that was unnecessary in Jesus' case.

He'd already died. The executioners, though being professionals, nonetheless wanted to make sure the job was done to verify his death by lancing his side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

Now modern physiologists know that fluid accumulates in the pericardium and pleural cavity as a result of heart failure, which would explain that. There could be no doubt that Jesus was dead.

[ 7 : 25 ] And then none of the disciples is expected to find him alive on Easter Sunday, even though the Jewish scriptures have foretold his resurrection repeatedly. Mary Magdalene discovers the empty tomb has been rolled away, the stone's been rolled away, and she tells Peter and John, who then have a race to the tomb and see it empty.

And more evidence piles up as people start meeting the actually resurrected Jesus. First Mary Magdalene, and then the disciples, except one.

Look at verse 24 with me. Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord.

But he said to them, unless I see in his hands and 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.

Now Thomas was the odd one out. Perhaps he couldn't get a babysitter. We don't know why he wasn't there, but he missed out. So he lays down this triple test. I want to see the holes where the nails are.

[ 8 : 43 ] I want to put my fingers into those holes and I want to see his side. I want to shove my fingers into his side. If I don't, I will never believe.

In effect, he's saying, I don't care what my ten friends say. I will only trust my ten fingers. That is what he is saying. Well, straight away, we can see that Thomas' demand for physical proof rejects the view that people in the first century were just a bit thick, that they were just a bit naive and gullible.

It's a common view to think, you know, people back then were a bit thick, they'd believe anything. Not us in the 21st century. We are advanced. We know better. The Christian author C.S. Lewis called that attitude chronological snobbery.

And whilst there's been lots of advances in technology and history, Thomas knew the basics of biology. That dead people do not come back to life again.

And so his request sounds reasonable. Perhaps it's a request that we might have. But if we think about who Thomas is and what he's been taught, then his request is actually quite unreasonable.

[ 10 : 04 ] Thomas has been a close friend of Jesus for three years. He saw his miracles. He saw him turn water into wine. He saw him heal the sick. He saw him raise the dead, calm the storm.

Now Thomas had heard the claims of Jesus to be God, come to earth.

He had sat under his teaching. And Jesus described on a number of occasions how he would die and rise again. And so if Jesus had taken, if Thomas had taken seriously the teaching of Jesus and the testimony of the Old Testament, then Thomas would have believed the testimony of the other disciples.

John himself only had the empty tomb to go on. He saw it and believed because he had the words of Jesus, he must have risen.

Well, just over a week passes and we cut to the same scene. Let's read from verse 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. Then he said to Thomas, put your finger here and see in my hands. Put out your hand and place it in my side.

[11:24] Do not disbelieve but believe. there'd be no doubt that Jesus was dead and now as he stood there in front of Thomas larger's life there was no denying that Jesus was alive either and Jesus invites Thomas to perform all his medical tests that he wants to do.

We're not told whether he did or not. Perhaps he not only became an eyewitness but a touch witness but either way the question is would it be reasonable at this point for Thomas to remain sceptical?

Of course not. He was actually there and that is what he actually witnessed. And so then the only reasonable response is certainty.

And so Thomas exclaims verse 28 my Lord and my God. But again that's all well and good for Thomas. he saw Jesus with his own eyes.

Some of us here might be thinking well of course if Jesus appeared to me physically then of course I believe. But one of the most intriguing things about this encounter is that Jesus doesn't just give Thomas the proof that he demanded he goes on to chide him for needing it in the first place.

[12:48] So verse 29 Jesus said to him have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed. Jesus graciously condescends to meet the conditions that Thomas has laid down but at the same time pronounces a blessing on those who have faith even though they have not seen for themselves.

It's very important to underline that Jesus is not commending faith without evidence here. At this point that's where the modern atheist critics of the Christian faith tend to make a huge mistake. They confuse faith with wishful thinking. And so Richard Dawkins says faith is the great cop-out the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence.

Faith is blind trust in the absence of evidence even in the teeth of evidence. But actually Jesus is not commending faith without evidence. He's commending faith without sight.

You see there's different types of evidence isn't there? There's scientific evidence produced in laboratory conditions by definition is repeatable.

[14:11] You see the experiment is set up maybe do this at school in science the program is run the culture grows in that petri dish and the microscope observes the bacteria and you can repeat it and repeat it.

But courtroom historical eyewitness evidence is different. It's no less believable it's just different and the laws of time mean it's not possible to wind back the clock and ask for it to be done again. We can't ask Wellington to re-fight the Battle of Waterloo to prove it happened. But what we're dealing with here is eyewitness testimony of a historical event that by definition is not to be repeated.

And as we considered at the outset if we only believed and acted on things we could see for ourselves life would be impossible.

I guess we all believe the world is round but none of us have seen it for ourselves. It was only actually until 1966 that someone actually saw the curvature of the earth. But we all believe it.

[15:24] We trust people. Yes of course witnesses can lie be mistaken or forget. Recollections may vary as the late queen once said.

That's why evidence needs to be carefully evaluated as the police and courts routinely do. And as for Thomas evaluating the eyewitness evidence, well he knew these men.

He spent three years with them. He could vouch for them. And so when they said, Thomas we've seen Jesus alive, he should have believed them. Jesus gently tells him off.

Tells him you should have believed. And the point for us in this chapter is that because we have access to the same reliable eyewitness testimony, we are to believe as well.

You see, like Thomas, in that week after the first Easter, we haven't personally seen the risen Jesus. but also like Thomas, we have access to the same reliable eyewitness testimony.

[ 16 : 32 ] At John, Thomas heard their testimony in the flesh but we read it on the pages of John's Gospel. The testimony is the same and by doing so, by believing that testimony, Jesus calls us blessed, having God's favour.

some may think, and some people have said to me before, the resurrection didn't happen because resurrections don't happen. Well, yes, resurrections do not normally happen, that's the point.

It's why we celebrate today. Christianity isn't about believing people get resurrected all the time. I'm sure none of us have been to a funeral and we go and say to a grieving person, you never know, wait a few days, they could come back.

That would be absurdly cruel. Instead, Christianity centres on one resurrection in history that when God came to earth as a man and was crucified, he rose from the dead.

We may have preferred to have been there, but that doesn't mean we don't have access to him because in the pages of the Bible, we have exactly that.

[ 17 : 48 ] And so if you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus, John wants us to see that the Christian faith is not unreasonable nor unreasoned. It's grounded in historical fact and reliable eyewitness testimony.

And if you would already call yourself a follower of Jesus, and then John wants us to have this complete certainty that we're not on a fool's errand, that Christianity is not a blind leap of faith, but following the facts of history, that Jesus really did rise from the dead, we can believe the eyewitnesses.

And as verse 31 says, if we come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who rose from the dead, then we will have life in his name. That's our next and briefer point.

Jesus really did rise from the dead, we can have eternal life. Jesus really did rise from the dead, we can have eternal life. John has written this eyewitness account about Jesus for a purpose.

Let me read verse 30 again. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the 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.

[ 19 : 22 ] If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is false. If Jesus rose from the dead, then death is not the end and there can be life after death for anyone.

Jesus himself promised this. Earlier in John's Gospel, he said to Martha, one of his friends, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

And by his own resurrection, Jesus has proved that his incredible claim is not a cruel lie to give people false hope, but the truth.

It's hard to actually grasp how brilliant this is because deep down, down, we know that whatever we live for ends in death. Whatever we touch ends in death.

It's like the story of Midas, where every touch turns to gold. We have the Midas touch, but instead for us, it's not gold but death. It's all around us.

[ 20 : 24 ] At time and time again, as we look out onto the world and in our own lives, we come face to face with our own mortality and the reality that death takes away people we love.

Even to give examples seems too much to bear, and yet Jesus' resurrection shows us the amazing truth that in him, death is not the end.

We can have hope of eternal life to come. But Jesus' resurrection does actually leave us uncomfortable, well it should do, because it shows us that Jesus is the ruler over the world.

That's what Thomas said to him, my Lord and my God. That's what verse 31 means, to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

According to the Old Testament, when Christ came in the royal line of King David, he would sit on David's throne, and not just to rule Israel, but the whole world. And that immediately transforms how we think of Jesus.

[ 21 : 31 ] Jesus. He is our rightful ruler, and we do not have the right to ignore him, because if Jesus is the reigning Christ, then we are living in his world, and in the end, we will be answerable to him.

That's exactly how the first followers of Jesus, the disciples, understood his resurrection. Yes, they started the first Easter Sunday hiding in a locked room, fearful that those who called for Jesus' crucifixion would hunt them down to, but they were utterly transformed.

They went out into the world, far and wide, suffering to death, so they could tell other people about Jesus, and Jesus being the rightful ruler over everything and everyone, and that he will come again to judge and reign, was intrinsic to their message.

But they also proclaimed the good news, that Jesus died and rose again in history to pay the penalty our rejection deserves, that eternal life is now possible by believing in his name, by trusting Jesus as Lord of all, raised from the dead.

That's what Jesus means as he appears to his disciples and says, verse 26, peace be with you.

This is not a how you doing, or good day mate, or this is Jesus pronouncing that his death on the cross brings peace with God.

[ 23 : 06 ] His resurrection showing not only that Jesus reigns as king, but that his sacrificial death has dealt with God's punishment at our rejection of him, and so he announces peace.

Peace be with you, work accomplished, reconciliation, peace with God now available. This passage then is the story of Thomas' personal journey from doubt through evidence to belief.

And so the obvious question for us all this morning is where are each of us on that journey? Maybe we're still at that stage of doubting, but we don't need to be.

We can examine the evidence for ourselves, read John's gospel in particular, and like Thomas, we can come to Jesus and say, my Lord and my God.

If we have done that already and believed in Jesus and his death and resurrection for our forgiveness, then we can be assured again this Easter that by believing Jesus' resurrection in history, our resurrection in the future is to come.

[ 24 : 28 ] We have peace with God, eternal life in his name. As we close, the comedian Eddie Izzard gave a poignant interview reflecting on a death of his mother back in 2017.

He said this, I have a very strong sense that we are only on this planet for a short length of time.

Religious people might think life goes on after death.

My feeling is that if that is the case, it would be nice if just one person came back and let us know it was all fine, all confirmed. Of all the billions of people who have died, if just one of them could come through the clouds and say, you know, it's me, Janine, it's brilliant, there's a really good spa up here, that would be great.

Perhaps Eddie Izzard doesn't know it, but he's crying out for resurrection. And he's not the only one who has recently come face to face with the power of death over us.

Yet in Jesus, we do have someone who has come back. In him there is real confidence and real thanksgiving. Eternal life has been confirmed for all those who believe in his name and bow to him as the risen ruling king.

[ 25 : 48 ] A friendship with God that starts now and can never be taken away. And that will go on into eternity, even through death.

Do not disbelieve, says Jesus, but believe. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that through the evidence you've given us in your word that we can have confidence that Jesus rose again in history, never to die again.

And that's by believing we have eternal life in his name. Please help us to go out with joy and to give you great thanks and praise for that truth this Easter.

Amen.