

EASTER SUNDAY - Believing - Whether We've Seen or Not

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[0 : 00] Well, please take a seat. I want to pray for us before we look at God's Word together. Let's pray.

Father, we do thank you so much that you continue to speak to us through your Word. And what you have to tell us is still very much relevant for us today. And so, Father, we ask that as we listen that you give us minds to understand, wills to put into practice and hearts that would seek to love and live for you.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, there is a custom in the Anglican Church, which we've practiced once already, where one person says Christ is risen and you reply with he is risen indeed.

So let's have another go at that. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hey, that's not bad, not bad. But the question is, how do you know? Why can we give such a confident response that says he is risen indeed?

Why not he is risen, I think? Or perhaps he is risen, maybe? Why can we have such a confident expression that says indeed?

[1 : 14] And the answer quite simply is because of the evidence that we have. We have reliable eyewitness accounts. That is, we can believe because others have seen.

And more than any other gospel, this is John's point in chapter 20. In fact, he's already made the point in chapter 19. Now, it would be really helpful if you had your Bibles open. And there's also an outline in the bulletin that you might find helpful.

I'll be at page 1087. And we're going to be working through this chapter reasonably quickly. So it would be really good to have your Bibles open. But for starters, look at chapter 19, verse 33.

It's still page 1087. And look at what John says. Look at the point he makes. So from verse 33, we read this two days ago. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony.

[2 : 22] And his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth. And he testifies so that you also may believe.

See what John is saying here? He's saying he wants you to believe based on testimony, based on evidence. In fact, that's why he's written his whole book, his whole gospel.

So just turn the page a moment to the end of chapter 20, to the end of chapter 20, to verse number 30. Have a look what he says here.

It says, Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

You see, Christianity is not about parking your brain at the door and believing blindly. It's not about blind faith. It's about reasoned faith.

[3 : 24] It's not about faith creating evidence or manufacturing evidence, but it's about evidence leading to faith. John has recorded these historical eyewitness accounts so that we can believe.

And so that's why I've changed the title of the sermon slightly from what it says in the bulletin there, because John is all about believing in Jesus because others have seen. And the resurrection is no exception.

And so John gives us four eyewitness accounts, which brings us to point one, believing because others have seen. And we'll spend most of our time here. Now, the first eyewitness account is John himself who sees an empty tomb.

So come with me to chapter 20, verse 1, and we'll start working our way through now. Chapter 20, verse 1. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him.

[4 : 27] Now, here John tells us that it is early on Sunday morning. Jesus was crucified on Friday, and Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath. And no Jew could do any work, which included anointing Jesus' body with spices and oils to help hide the odour, as was the custom.

And so the very first chance Mary gets is at dawn on Sunday, the first day of the week. And so she goes to the tomb at dawn, but when she arrives, she sees that the stone is gone.

The body is missing. Now, at this point, we know from the other gospel accounts that before Mary goes back to the disciples in verse 2, she actually sees angels and meets Jesus, and then goes back to the disciples with great joy.

But John doesn't tell us any of that until verse 11. In other words, verses 11 to 18 is kind of like a flashback that you might see in movies. You know how you might see a scene, and then later on, they give a flashback to that scene and flesh out some more detail.

That's what verses 11 to 18 are like. But for now, John just skips over it. But why does he do that? Why doesn't he just write it in the order that it happened? Well, because the empty tomb is the first piece of evidence that Jesus is risen from the dead.

[5 : 42] And so he focuses on that. I mean, let me read verses 1 to 10 to you again, and notice how many times the word tomb comes up. So from verse 1, I asked the child to count how many this morning.

They got it first go. So see how you go. From verse 1, Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from, literally, the tomb.

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one that Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him. So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came behind him and went straight into the tomb.

He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went inside.

[6 : 43] He saw and believed. How many times? Seven, yeah. Seven times in ten verses. That's a lot, isn't it? You see, John wants to highlight the fact of the empty tomb.

Indeed, when he records what Mary said to the disciples back in verse 2, he doesn't include how she saw the angels. He doesn't even include the crucial testimony where Mary says, I have seen the Lord.

He holds that over until verse 18. Instead, at this point, he only records the bit about Jesus' body missing from the tomb. Why? Well, again, because at this point, that's what he wants to highlight. The empty tomb. For this is evidence that Jesus has risen. In fact, it's what clinches it for John in verse 8. Do you see verse 8 again? And finally, the other disciple, this is John, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside.

He saw and believed. Though they still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. See, John sees the empty tomb and the cloths and believes that Jesus has risen.

[7 : 53] He doesn't quite understand from the Old Testament why Jesus had to rise. Though we do, don't we? Remember our first reading from Isaiah 9? It's kind of Christmas and Easter in one.

You know, for unto us a child is born. But of course, that child grows up to be the Prince of Peace who will rule on the throne forever. Now, if you're dead, you cannot rule forever, can you?

Jesus had to rise again if he is to be God's forever king. Now, I should also point out that John's name isn't actually used here. Instead, he describes himself as the other disciple.

In verse 2, he says, The other disciple, the one Jesus loved. Now, it sounds a little bit like he's boasting, doesn't it? You know, think of a child's voice. I'm the one that Jesus loved. I mean, can you imagine if I went to a party with my wife, Michelle, and I introduced ourselves by saying, This is my wife, Michelle, and I'm the one that Michelle loves. [8 : 55] It might seem a bit big-headed. People would avoid me even more than they do. But John is not boasting. It's actually the opposite. John avoids using his name, so he does not get the credit. He mentions John the Baptist, a different John, quite a bit, but never his own name to avoid the spotlight. And the phrase itself is more along the lines of the disciple that Jesus actually loved. That is, there is meant to be a tone of amazement on John's behalf that Jesus would actually love him. And this John, who writes this gospel, says he has seen the empty tomb. Now, of course, by itself, an empty tomb does not prove Jesus rose from the dead. But it is evidence that suggests it. I mean, the Jews or the Romans didn't take the body, as Mary suspected. Otherwise, when the Christians were telling everyone that Jesus has risen as king, the Jews and the Romans were saying, Nah, he's not risen. Look, blonk. He's his body. But they didn't do that. And the disciples didn't take the body. Otherwise, they would have produced it when threatened with death. Settle down, guys. Here's the body. Don't kill us. [9 : 58] It's all a joke. I got you. But they didn't. The tomb really was empty. And if no one took the body, then how do you explain an empty tomb? For John, it's evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

And he's an eyewitness to this fact. Or take Mary, our second eyewitness, who sees Jesus himself. Verses 11 to 18, we come to this flashback, as I mentioned before. And we see what happened when Mary went to the tomb that early Sunday morning. She arrives at the tomb in verse 1. And then in verse 11, we read, Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they've put him. At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. But she did not realise that it was Jesus. He asked her, Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you're looking for? Thinking he was the gardener? She said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will get him. And Jesus said to her, Mary. [11 : 04] She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. On the word of her name, Mary finally sees Jesus for who he is, and her great grief turns to overwhelming joy.

So much so that it seems that she hugs Jesus, because Jesus then says in verse 17, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. And so Mary went to the disciples with the news, I have seen the Lord. And she told them that he had said these things to her. You see here, Mary no doubt relays her whole story to the disciples, from not knowing where the body was, to the conversation with the angels, and to meeting Jesus. But again, John just records one sentence, doesn't he? Why? Well, because now he's focusing on Mary's testimony, and the most important sentence of her testimony is, I have seen the Lord. You don't need anything else other than that. In fact, we hear the disciples say a similar thing with their testimony, in verses 19 to 25. Have a look at verse 19.

[12 : 22] On the evening of that same first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you. After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. But then verse 24, Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the 12, he wasn't there with the disciples when Jesus came. And so the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord. Jesus appears to the disciples and shows them his hands and his side. He shows them as if to say, I'm the same man that was killed on Friday. Yet here I am alive. You see, this is not a case of mistaken identity, nor is it a case of some sort of spiritual experience, as though Jesus just came back to life in the disciples' imaginations, but not in reality or physical

form.

In fact, there are some who just believe it's an imagining of the disciples. In fact, I heard just last week an Anglican bishop, not from Melbourne, who does not believe Jesus physically rose from the grave.

[13:31] But Jesus says the exact opposite, doesn't he? He shows them his hands and his side. They could touch, they could shake hands, they could see and check it out, that Jesus is physically and really back from the dead.

And upon seeing this, they are overjoyed. One Bible translation says that they were glad, which I don't think quite captures it. I mean, I am glad when Collingwood loses, but I rejoice when Carlton wins.

And I haven't rejoiced for quite some time. But these disciples see, they believe and rejoice, and later declare to Thomas, we have seen the Lord.

And so here is yet another historical eyewitness account. Now, in the law courts today, eyewitness accounts are the best kind of evidence you can get.

And when you have multiple witnesses saying the same thing, it only adds weight. But it's not good enough for Thomas. In the rest of verse 25, we'd read this.

[14:37] Thomas said to them, unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

See, Thomas will not believe until he sees. Now, we shouldn't be too hard on Thomas, because his reaction is one we can relate to, really, can't we? I mean, it would be our natural reaction, I think.

If you told, imagine you told some people at work, or at the shops, that Jesus has risen from the dead. How do you think they would respond to you? I can very easily imagine them saying something like, Thomas, unless I see it, I'm not going to believe it.

Or perhaps you're here today, because it's Easter, and you think you should go to church at Easter, and Christmas time. And you're right, you should. So well done for coming. But your natural response is to think, well, it's a nice story, but it can hardly be true.

I'd have to see it for myself. You see, it's a natural reaction, Thomas's. Natural, but not reasoned.

That is, he hasn't thought through the evidence, hasn't reasoned through the evidence.

[15:48] Can you imagine what was going on in his head? I mean, was he thinking, this is just a practical joke? Of course not. There was no time for joking. They were locked away in the upper room, for fear of the Jewish leaders.

Or perhaps he was thinking, you know, my friends are deluded, but all of them, this quickly? I only saw them yesterday. Or perhaps he thought, they were lying. But no, he knew them better than that.

No, the most likely thing was, that like many people today, he just didn't think. He didn't think, well, I know these men, and they're serious, about what they saw.

Maybe I should check out the evidence. Maybe I should go and see that empty tomb. But he didn't do that. Instead, he just reacted, and dismissed it as impossible, without thinking, whether it might be true.

And can I encourage you, if you are here today, and you don't really believe Jesus rose, I encourage you to not just react, and leave it there. But to take the next step, and check it out.

[16:50] Read through the gospel of John. Now, speak to me afterwards, and I can give you evidence, upon evidence, that you can reason through, and come to your own conclusion. For Thomas, his reaction was natural, but it was not reasoned.

And a week later, Thomas sees Jesus for himself, and he becomes our fourth eyewitness. So pick it up in verse 26. A week later, his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

Though 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. See my hands? Reach out your hand, and put it into my side.

Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said to him, My Lord, and my God. Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.

See, Jesus in his kindness, appears to Thomas, and offers him the very things, that Thomas demanded. No fingers on the nail marks, hand inside, but there's no record of Thomas doing that, is there?

[17 : 55] Instead, we simply hear Thomas declare, My Lord, and my God. And so, Thomas believes, and is now added, to the eyewitness account, to that of John, and Mary, and the disciples. Now you might be thinking, at this point, that if Thomas didn't believe, until he saw, then I shouldn't have to believe, until I see. Well, we need to remember two things. At first, Thomas should have believed.

Do you notice, what Jesus said to him, in verse 27? Stop doubting, and believe. In other words, like us, Thomas did have enough evidence, to go off, to believe in, without having to see.

And the second thing, we have to remember, is that we have even more evidence, than Thomas did. And so, for example, we have, the writings of the Apostle Paul, which historians, regard as strong evidence.

We have the change, in behaviour of the disciples, who went from, being scared, in a locked room, for fear of the Jews, to boldly proclaiming Jesus, to those Jews. We also have, the rise of the early church.

[19 : 03] We have the willingness, of those disciples, to even die. Some of them, were killed by lions, in the Roman arena. Others, it was death, by being sawn in two.

Others, was beheaded. Others, crucifixion. You see, what could they have gained, for lying? It wasn't a lie, it wasn't a hallucination. In fact, it cost them, ridicule, flogging, exile, and death.

Now, would these disciples, really have gone through all that, for something they were not sure about? Would they really do that, if they didn't truly believe, Jesus was raised from the dead? On the next slide, there's a quote, we might skip that one, and go to the next one, which is running out of time.

So, there's a quote from Sir Edward Clark, early 1900s, a British high court judge, he says this, he says, to me, the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again, in the high court, I have secured the verdict, on evidence, not so nearly compelling, as the resurrection.

He's put people in jail, for less evidence, than we have, for the resurrection. That's what he's saying.

Well, on the next slide, a bit closer to home, Mr. Justice Peter Young, now retired, Supreme Court Judge of New South Wales, was asked, whether there was enough evidence, to prove the resurrection, whether it had a burden of proof.

[20 : 22] He says, my analysis is that, the resurrection passes the test. It's important that this be said, and accepted. It passes the test, for the burden of proof. There is enough evidence, and this is important, because it shows, we're not, got blind at faith, but it's faith, based on evidence.

And this is great news, because the resurrection, makes all the difference, to our lives. I once heard a, it's a rather cheeky joke, about mother-in-law, so if you're a mother-in-law here, it's not about you, but it's about a man, who went on holidays, with his mother-in-law, you may have heard it before, and they went to Jerusalem.

But while they were there, the mother-in-law passed away. Now the hotel manager, had a brother, who was a funeral director, and so he could inform, the son-in-law, that it would cost, him either, \$100, to have his mother-in-law, cremated in Jerusalem, or \$10,000, to send her body, back home, to be cremated.

The son-in-law said, I'll pay the \$10,000, thanks. Now the hotel manager, was rather surprised, after all he'd seen, how the mother-in-law, had treated the son, while staying there. So he asked the son-in-law, why would you pay, so much money for her?

And the son-in-law replied, well I heard that someone else, died in Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago, and then he rose again. So I'm not taking any chances. It's a cheeky joke, I know.

[21 : 45] Now this is not quite, the application of John 20, let me say. But it does show, the resurrection makes a difference, or ought to make a difference, to people's lives, though in that joke, perhaps poorly.

The resurrection does make, a very big difference. We know elsewhere in the Bible, it gives us assurance, that Jesus' death was enough, to pay for our sins. It was enough, it was God's vindication, God's seal of approval, that Jesus' death did, what it was supposed to do.

It also gives us, the assurance of hope, that we too, can be raised to new life. And so we know, that our loved ones, who have passed away, who believed in Jesus, are safe in heaven.

The Jula family, knows that of Philip, without a shadow of a doubt, because of the resurrection, of Jesus. And we also know, that we too, will be raised to new life, where there'll be no more pain, or suffering. Won't that be a good day?

We know those things, but we don't have time, to unpack them. And it's not actually, what John focuses on, to be honest. Rather, he focuses on, what it tells us, about Jesus. You see, the resurrection also signals, that Jesus is, who he said he was.

[22 : 54] The King, the Lord, the Son of God. It's the connection, that Thomas makes. He sees Jesus, raised from the dead, and he says, my Lord, and my God. Indeed, it's the connection, John makes himself.

Do you remember, that last bit of the passage, chapter 20, verse 30, Jesus appears, Thomas says, my Lord, and my God, and then John says, Jesus performed, many other signs, in the presence, of his disciples, which are not recorded, in this book.

But these are written, including, the resurrection, and the eyewitness accounts, that you may believe, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life, in his name.

See, John wants us, to believe, in Jesus. He wants us to believe, that he is, the Messiah, the King, the Lord, the Son of God. Everything John has written, and all the eyewitness accounts, he has given, including the four, we've seen today, are all so that, we can believe, in Jesus.

Not blindly, but based on evidence. And so, can I ask you then, do you, believe? Do you, believe, he really did die for you, to pay for your sins?

[24 : 13] Do you believe, that he really did rise again, as Lord, and King? Have you, with Thomas, said to Jesus, my Lord, and my God? God. Because if you do, then you have life, says John.

Life eternal. Life with God now, as part of his family, and life with him forever, in heaven. But if you do not believe, despite the evidence, then you will not see, eternal life, says John.

Now for us, who believe in Jesus, as our Lord and God, then we are to continue, living with Jesus, as our Lord and God. And that means, Jesus is to shape, our priorities, our thoughts, our behaviour towards, one another.

Indeed our whole lives, including doing what we can, to speak about Jesus, to others. That's what Jesus says, to his disciples, in verses 21 to 23, which is kind of a foreshadowing, of what will happen, on the day of Pentecost.

We don't have time, to look at it now. But it's interesting, that all the gospels, include a similar thing. Certainly Matthew, and Luke do. They see Jesus, risen.

[25 : 21] And then there is, an imperative, to go and tell others. It's as though, his resurrection, as Lord of all, means we are to tell everyone, so that everyone, will treat him, as Lord of all.

Because that is who he is. And I wonder, if we are doing that. Of course, we may not all, do it in the same way, or to the same extent, as the first disciples, did, or as each other, may do. After all, we are all given, different gifts, disabilities, and opportunities.

But we must all, seek to do it in some way. A good way, might be simply, start praying, for opportunities. This Easter, as you remember, that Jesus truly did, rise from the dead.

Or get involved, with evangelistic events, that will be running, later in the year. For believing, that Jesus has risen, means doing what we can, to see him honoured, as the Lord he is, by all people.

So why do we say, that Christ has risen indeed? Or because we have, ample evidence, that he has risen. So let me try this again. Christ is risen.