

Believing and Seeing

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[0 : 00] Well, as is our custom on Easter Sunday, when I say Christ is risen, then you respond with He is risen indeed. In fact, Mark and I were both itching to start the service like this, but we wanted to save it for now.

So you're ready on the next slide. There it is. Christ is risen. You say? Ah, no, look, I'm sorry. I didn't hear any of you.

Why don't we try that one more time? Here we go. Christ is risen. Oh, I think I heard someone that time. Yeah, He is risen indeed.

But here's the question. How do you know? How do we know? How can we have such confidence to say He has risen indeed?

Why not He has risen perhaps? Or He has risen I think? Why is it we can have such confidence to say indeed? Well, today, John gives us an answer.

[1 : 03] And his answer is because of the evidence we have, the eyewitness evidence we have. At first, they saw the empty tomb, which is point one on your outlines.

The outline will come up on the slide. It's also a printable download on the website, but it's a bit late to print it now. So, have a look at point one on your outline and verses one to seven in your Bibles. And as I read, have a listen for the words saw and tomb. They saw the empty tomb. So, verse one, 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. 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.

[2 : 14] Then Simon Peter came along 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. Did you notice the repetition of tomb and saw? John wants us to know the first bit of evidence is that they saw an empty tomb.

Mary saw it, as did some other women, according to the other Gospels we know. That's why in verse two, after she runs to tell Peter and John, it says, We don't know where they have put Him, because she was there originally with some other women, and they all saw the empty tomb.

And it seems at this point Mary runs back to tell the other disciples by herself, because the other Gospel accounts tell us that the women who stayed saw some angels, and then on their way back they met Jesus.

But Mary doesn't meet Jesus until later on in our passage today. Either way, Mary saw an empty tomb, and so did Peter and this other disciple, who is likely John himself.

[3 : 27] I should say, when John describes himself as the other disciple whom Jesus loved, it sounds like he's boasting and seeking attention, doesn't it? You know, like a child, I'm the one Jesus loves.

But it's actually the opposite. John avoids using his name, so he does not get the attention. He remains anonymous in his book. And the phrase is more along the lines of the disciple Jesus actually loved.

The tone is meant to be one of amazement on John's behalf, that Jesus would actually love him.

But the point here is that these two men also saw an empty tomb, which according to Jewish law is exactly what you needed for reliable evidence.

You needed two witnesses. And here they are. And what's more, did you notice the detail of their testimony? Like about who the fastest runner was, but then who went in the tomb first?

Even in verse 6 and 7, there's lots of detail about all this linen lying there, isn't there? By the way, it's worth noticing that the linen is left lying in the tomb.

[4 : 38] Unlike Lazarus, you might remember, he came out of the tomb still wrapped up like a mummy. So on the next slide, do you remember this verse from John chapter 11?

Jesus had to tell them to unbind Lazarus and let him go. It's as though the grave clothes still clung to Lazarus. Because his resurrection was more like a resuscitation.

Death still clung to him. Death would still come to him, but not with Jesus. The linen is left lying in the tomb, for death no longer has hold of Christ.

He remains risen. Which is why we don't say on Easter Day Christ was risen, as though it's happened in the past and he's since died. No, we say Christ is risen, for he remains alive.

The linen left in the tomb. But here these details signal a real eyewitness testimony, don't they? I mean, did you even notice how John even mentions the piece of cloth for Jesus' head, which was separate from the other linen, still lying in its place?

[5 : 55] In fact, lying in its place is literally folded in its place. Why add such detail? Unless that's how you remembered it, because you were there.

It's one of the tricks I use with my children, actually, to see who's telling the truth. I ask them the details, and the one who can give me the details is the one I know was there and is telling the truth. I hope they're not listening, because they now know my trick. But even if they are listening, it's very hard to fake such detail, isn't it? And these details are there in our passage because they were there at the tomb.

This is real eyewitness testimony we're reading. And what they witnessed was already enough for one to believe. Here is our first response in our passage, our verse 8.

Finally, the other disciple, John, we think, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

[7 : 01] They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. You see, John believes that Jesus rose, despite not yet understanding from Scripture that Jesus must rise.

A Scripture like our first reading, where God's chosen king, his body would not see decay. But the point is, they really saw an empty tomb.

But they also saw the risen Jesus. This brings us to the next bit of the evidence and point two of your outlines. First, Mary saw the tomb, but then the disciples follow.

And now this time, when they see the risen Jesus, look out for the words saw and Jesus. So verse 11. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying, and she wept.

She bent over to look in the tomb and saw two angels in white, see to where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, Woman, why are you crying?

[8 : 11] They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize it was Jesus.

Jesus asked her, Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned to him and cried out in Aramaic, Roboni, which means teacher. Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

Go and said to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene 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, Jesus' name comes up quite a lot in these verses. And the idea is, this is whom Mary saw.

[9 : 17] She has seen the risen Lord. Although it's interesting, she doesn't recognize Jesus until Jesus speaks her name in verse 16. Do you remember what Jesus said about being the good shepherd back in chapter 10?

It's on the next slide. It says, he said, he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

Jesus calls Mary by name. And at that moment, she recognizes his voice. The voice of her teacher, her shepherd, her Lord.

And understandably, she clings to Christ. I mean, can you imagine the joy and relief of that moment she must have felt? But then in verse 17, Jesus tells her not to cling to him.

Not because Jesus has problems with public displays of affection like I do. It was our wedding anniversary yesterday. And I was reminded that on our wedding day, when the minister said, you may now kiss the bride.

[10:22] I actually paused and said, but everybody's looking. It was very embarrassing. But for Jesus, it was about having a job for himself and for her.

He must return to the father to rule. And she must return to the disciples to tell. Here is the second response in our passage. You see verse 18 again.

You see, having seen the risen Jesus, she tells others about him.

And just like the disciples follow in Mary's footsteps in terms of seeing the tomb. So they now follow in Mary's footsteps in terms of seeing the risen Jesus.

Have a look at verse 19. Again, Jesus said, peace be with you.

[11:34] He said, peace be with you.

It's Sunday evening. And like us here this morning, we are gathered together inside our homes. And not for fear of spreading the virus or being fined by the police.

But here, the disciples, for fear of the Jews. And Jesus appeared to them, which no doubt was a surprise for them, though it ought not be for us.

After all, if Jesus can calm the storm, if he can raise the dead, if Christ is risen indeed, then appearing in a room behind a locked door is a piece of cake, isn't it?

In fact, some people don't believe in Jesus because they can't believe in miracles. But that's illogical when you think about it. I mean, if he got stuck on the outside and had to kind of knock on the door saying, please let me in.

[12:35] Come on, guys, let me in. I mean, that wouldn't mean he'd be much of a son of God or king, would it? No, no. So miracles like these are precisely what you'd expect from someone claiming to be the son of God and king.

But notice he says, peace be with you. It actually comes up three times. Jesus says it three times in our passage. So this is more than just a greeting. This is what they now have with God.

How? Well, not by his resurrection, but by his death. That's why in verse 20 it says, after he said, peace be with you, he showed them the marks of his crucifixion.

Not just so that they know it was really him and not some other person, but so they also connect the peace he brings with the death he died.

In fact, in verses 20 to 21, he says twice, peace be with you. And in the middle, he shows how it's possible. Do you see that? By his crucified hands and feet, his death for us.

[13:49] For it's by his death that he paid for all our sin. That made us all enemies with God. As we heard a few weeks ago, at the cross, he drank the bitter cup of God's wrath, his right anger at our sin.

So that we could be reconciled with him. He gave us peace with God, relationship restored. And the resurrection proves that his death has done all this.

He has conquered death, which means he has dealt with sin. And we can have peace with God.

And of course, this relational peace with God also brings us emotional peace in life, doesn't it?

I mean, have you ever had an argument with someone, but then cleared the air, being reconciled to them? Perhaps a sibling or a parent or a spouse or a colleague?

And when you're reconciled, when the air is cleared, you not only have relational peace, but it brings this sense of relief, doesn't it? And emotional peace.

[14:57] Well, how much more so with God? For Jesus cleared the air between us and God, taking all our judgment for all our sins so that we can have real relational peace with God.

And with it, a real emotional peace in life, knowing that whatever happens, we're right with him, part of his family. Our future is secure. But just as Mary's response was to tell the others what she saw, so too must these disciples.

And Jesus symbolizes this with what he says next. So have a look at verse 21. Again, Jesus said, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.

And with that, he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sin, their sins are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

What Jesus does here is like a parable that foreshadows what will actually happen on the day of Pentecost. That's when these disciples receive the Spirit and start telling everyone the good news. [16:08] In fact, the disciples, though, they actually get a chance to start practicing telling others when Thomas turns up. And Thomas was supposed to believe because they had seen and told him, which brings us to point three on your outlines and verse 24 and 25 in your Bibles.

Now, Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciple told him, We have seen the Lord.

But he 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.

You see, like Mary, these disciples tell Thomas what they saw. In fact, they even use almost the exact same words, We have seen the Lord.

But Thomas gives us the third response in our passage, which is a negative one. He says he won't believe unless he sees for himself. Their eyewitness testimony, he's saying, is not enough for him to believe.

[17:23] And this is a response we see in our world today, isn't it? People often say they won't believe unless they see for themselves. Now, at one level, it's a natural response.

After all, we don't normally see people rise from the dead, do we? So we might sympathize with Thomas. Perhaps we might even relate to Thomas. And yet, while his response might be a natural one, it's actually not a reasonable one.

He doesn't actually reason or think through the evidence. He doesn't think about all he'd seen Jesus do. He doesn't think about how he just ate with Lazarus, who was raised a few days ago. He doesn't even think about how he knows these men and these times, that it's no practical joke they're pulling. Instead of reasoning, he simply refuses to believe.

You see, it might be a natural response, but it's actually not a reasonable one. For he had enough evidence to believe without seeing. And this is the point Jesus seems to now make in verse 26 to 29.

[18:40] 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. But blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Jesus basically rebukes Thomas, doesn't he? In verse 27, he quotes Thomas' words back to him, as if to say, I heard what you said, Thomas.

And then Jesus tells him plainly to stop doubting, but believe. Now Thomas does in verse 28 with those famous words, My Lord and my God.

[19:45] And while this is a right response to make, Jesus doesn't so much praise him for it, but rather pronounces a blessing on those who do what Thomas should have done.

Those like us who believe without seeing. Those like us who believe because others have seen. For their reliable eyewitness testimony is actually enough to believe.

Just like it's enough evidence for a court of law. For they really saw an empty tomb and they really saw the risen Jesus. John wants us to know that we can say Christ is risen.

Not perhaps, or not I think, but indeed. In fact, we have even more evidence than what John has given us here today.

We have evidence like a creed that shows Christians believed Jesus rose within months of his death on the cross. So it was not a legend that grew up over time.

[20:49] And we have loads of New Testament copies from multiple sources, which shows us the eyewitness accounts we have in our Bibles today are the same eyewitness accounts given in Jesus' day.

The Bible hasn't changed over time. And we have the quick rise of the early church. I mean, both the Romans and the Jews wanted to kill Christianity off. And do you think if they sold the body, they would not have produced it to stop the spread of Christianity?

Of course they would have. But they didn't. And we have the disciples who went from being scared, locked in a room for fear of the Jews, to boldly preaching to all of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

Or Paul the persecutor who changed to preacher. And most of them who died for Jesus. Some of them crucified, some beheaded, one thrown off a cliff, and when he didn't die, he was clubbed to death.

Now, would they have really died such terrible deaths if they knew they had Jesus' body on ice at the back? Would they really have died such terrible deaths if they knew it was all a hoax?

[21 : 52] Would you? A couple of years ago, iTunes brought out a movie which you can still rent today, actually, and it's based on the book called Case of Christ. The movie cover is on the next slide.

It's about an atheist, an award-winning journalist called Lee Strobel, who worked for the Chicago Tribune. I'm sure you've probably heard of this story. And he set out in the 80s to prove God is dead.

On the next slide, using the cover of Time magazine. And he proved out that Christianity is false by proving the resurrection was a made-up story.

But as many of you know, as he searched and looked at the evidence, it was so overwhelming in favor of the resurrection, he converted and became a Christian.

Even non-Christian scholars admit that the evidence makes the resurrection of Jesus the best explanation they have. They're just hoping to find a better one. But they've had 2,000 years and they still haven't.

[23 : 01] You see, we have ample evidence to say that Christ is risen indeed. And that makes all the difference in the world. I once heard a rather cheeky joke about a man's family who went on holidays to Jerusalem with his mother-in-law.

But while they were there, the mother-in-law passed away and the hotel manager had a brother-in-law who was a funeral director. So he said to the son, look, I can arrange for your mother.

You can either pay \$100 for your mother-in-law to be cremated here in Jerusalem or \$10,000 for us to wrap her up and send her back with you to the States.

And so the son-in-law said, look, I'll pay the \$10,000, thanks. What? The hotel manager was shocked. He had seen the mother-in-law and how he had treated her son-in-law while they were staying there.

And he asked, why? He asked the son, why would you pay that much money for her? 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.

[24 : 05] I'm not sure that's the kind of difference John had in mind. Rather, that Christ is risen indeed means we can believe in him as law, doesn't it? Point four. Remember, this is John's purpose in writing his book, verse 30.

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, John has recorded all these miraculous signs in this book culminating with the resurrection that we might believe in Jesus. That we might believe he really is the Messiah, the Son of God, the anointed king of the world, the one who died to pay for our sins and bring us peace with God and life in his name.

And so, do you believe in Jesus? John and Mary and others did, will you? Or do you simply refuse to believe in him like Thomas did?

It may be natural, but it's actually, in light of the evidence, not reasonable. So this Easter, why not believe in Jesus and have life in his name?

[25 : 30] And do email us if you want to find out more. And for us who do believe in Jesus, then since he is risen indeed, it means we can know three things which are summarized on the next slide.

At first, our faith is not futile. For despite what the world thinks, we follow not a lifeless corpse, but a living Lord.

So we're not wasting our time being Christians and serving Jesus as our Lord. Second, since Christ is risen indeed, it means our life is not helpless.

For Christ remains risen to help us. So despite what the world thinks, our lives are not out of control, they are under his control.

And Christ will sustain us and provide for us. In fact, Christ even prays for us. One of the verses that really struck me, I've read many times, I forgot to put it on the slide, but it really struck me last year. [26 : 40] It's from Romans chapter 8. And it says, Christ Jesus who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Isn't that extraordinary? That Jesus continues to pray for us. I sometimes forget that Jesus is still working for our good.

And he is. He's praying to God on our behalf. that God might sustain us through the ups and downs of life. That he might help us, provide for us what we need.

Our life is not helpless for Christ remains risen to help us. And lastly, that Christ is risen indeed means our hope is not hopeless.

Our hope of life eternal with a new resurrected body and a new virus-free creation is not wishful thinking but certain.

[27 : 43] For if God raised Jesus from the dead, then he can raise us too. In fact, Jesus' resurrection signals the new age to come. Last week, all the churches received a letter from the Prime Minister.

And in this letter, he reminds us to stay at home this Easter weekend. But he also says the story of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection serves as a source of strength and hope.

And it's true, isn't it? His resurrection gives us certain hope. And this is where the rubber hits the road for us, particularly now in our world where we see so much death.

death. The US alone has recorded over a thousand deaths every day for the last four days from this virus alone. Not to mention the thousands more around the world.

Or for those of us who have lost loved ones like many in our church have. Or those who are facing the loss of a loved one at the moment.

[28 : 59] I know of some whose loved ones have been told by the doctors that there's nothing more they can do for them. It's just a matter of time.

But today reminds us that Jesus has done something about it. He's died for our sins and his resurrection proves our hope is not hopeless.

for if God raised him he can raise us too. You see because of all the evidence we can say Christ is risen indeed.

And that makes all the difference. It proves Jesus is Lord that we might believe in him. And for us who do it shows our faith is not futile for we follow not a lifeless corpse but a living Lord.

It shows our lives are not helpless. for Christ remains risen to help us. And it shows that our hope is not hopeless. For if God raised Jesus never to die again the linen left lying in the tomb then he can do the same for us and our loved ones that we might be reunited with them and him.

[30 : 19] Someone emailed me a cartoon yesterday morning from the Australian newspaper by Joanne's Leak. Joanne's Leak I should say. By the end of the day I think it had done all the rounds on social media so you've probably seen it now.

I quite enjoyed it but here it is on the next slide. It's the police telling Jesus to get back in the tomb to stay at home on Easter. But of course it's too late isn't it?

For Christ is already risen. To which we can confidently say together on the next slide he is risen indeed.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father we thank you for that very first Easter Sunday. We thank you that we can know because of the evidence that Jesus is risen indeed.

Help us then we pray to live as those who know it. For we ask it in his name. Amen.