Easter Sunday - John 20:19-31

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Date: 17 April 2022

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] Well, it's great to have you and our custom is to turn to the Bible at this time. If you'd like to follow along with where we're looking, it's in that reading in John 20.

And we're going to look at the story of Thomas. Because what we celebrate today is the greatest news possible, both for believers and for unbelievers, it's breathtakingly full of joy and life, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.
Alleluia. Yaroslav Pelikan, who's a historian, said, if Christ is risen, nothing else matters.
If Christ is not, nothing else matters. So we have a great privilege today of entering into what really matters by going back to those first days after Jesus rose and looking at this story of Thomas, who was one of the 12 disciples who went about with Jesus for three years.
It is a beautiful and simple story and full of help to everyone who struggles to believe. This is a story for all of us who think we're complicated and deeply relevant to every single person.
[1:25] And it's unique to John's gospel. And this whole section completely demolishes any idea that the resurrection was invented by Jesus' followers. Despite the fact that Jesus talked clearly about his death and clearly about his resurrection, it was the last thing that they were expecting.

So they are shocked and shattered by his death. And if I could say it this way, they're even more shocked and shattered by his resurrection. And all of them resisted the idea that Jesus had been raised from the dead.
That's why their testimony is so important for us today. But more than any other resurrection appearance of Jesus, in this one, we are taken inside the experience of one specific follower.
And I am increasingly thankful for Thomas, not just because of his transparency, but for how graciously and patiently Jesus deals with him.
You know, most modern commentators call Thomas doubting Thomas. That's become a phrase in the English language. They read him as though he is a kind of post-enlightenment scientific empiricist, a man of scepticism.
[2:41] And they say, and you've probably heard sermons like this, he does a jolly good job because, well, Christians shouldn't leave their brains behind and God doesn't expect us to believe anything we don't have good reason to believe.

And there's some truth in that. But I think they're trying to make Thomas in their own image because he's not doubting Thomas. He's unbelieving Thomas.
And we have met him twice before in the gospel. And the picture is much more complicated and nuanced. Let me just tell you those two times.
The first time we met him was in chapter 11. Jesus and the 12 had just escaped being stoned to death in Jerusalem. And he tells his disciples, I need to go back up to Jerusalem to raise Lazarus back to this life again.
And the other 11 desperately try and talk Jesus out of him. That's a very bad thing to do, Jesus.
And Thomas steps up and leads and he says, let's go in order that we may die with him.
[3:46] That's not a sceptic. A bit gloomy, a bit pessimistic maybe, and not really full of faith in Jesus. But he is full of courage and he's full of commitment.

He would rather die with Jesus than live without him. Chapter 11. He's a bit like Peter. He's a boots and all kind of guy. He's an all-in guy.
The second time we meet him is in chapter 14, where Jesus is talking about his death that's about to happen the next day and how he's going to prepare a place for us in the Father's house and the way he says, you know the way I'm going through the cross.
And Thomas basically says, we do not know what you are talking about. We don't have the first clue about the way you're talking. And Jesus, he doesn't get angry.

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He doesn't say, look, how many times have I got to explain this to you? He says, no, he takes the opportunity to take him deeper and the others deeper. He says, I am the way and the truth and the life.
[4:52] No one comes to the Father except by me. So as we come to this section in chapter 20, we know something of the character of Thomas. He's brutally honest.

He's a little bit gloomy. He's full of courage. When he commits, he doesn't mess about. He wants to go all the way. And this last episode that Martin read for us is Thomas and Jesus.
And it's like a game of hide and seek where the stakes couldn't be higher. Thomas is hiding. Jesus is seeking. Thomas is hiding in unbelief.
And Jesus is seeking in love. And they are my two points. Number one, Thomas hiding in unbelief. So you go to the beginning of the story in verse 24.
It's been one of the worst 10 days of Thomas' entire life. You know, like the other followers of Jesus, he was completely shattered by the arrest and trial and the brutally slow slaughter of Jesus on the cross, the one man he would have died for.
[6:03] And to make matters worse, like all the others, he'd run away and abandon Jesus at the first sign of real trouble, even though he said he'd die with him. To say that he was full of shock and full of guilt just does not do justice to it.

And then a few days later, on the first Sunday after the crucifixion, Mary comes back from the tomb saying that she's seen the risen Jesus, which Thomas and the others dismiss as complete romantic fiction.
You know, Mary, she's been under a lot of strain and grief and the trauma. It's just showing. But worse than that, that Easter night, that first resurrection night, the other 10 were in a room and Jesus appeared to them.
They were hiding in fear in verse 19. And Thomas was not there with them. And it seems that Jesus just appeared behind the locked door.
He didn't need to open the door. He showed them his hands in his side and they were astonished and full of joy. And Thomas completely missed out. He wasn't there in the room. And over the next week, verse 25, the other disciples, full of thrill and full of hope, it literally reads, they tell Thomas over and over and over and over and over.
[7:18] We've seen the Lord. We've seen the Lord. They keep telling him. And Thomas' response in verse 25 is, you're lying. I don't believe you.

You see it? Look at verse 25. I know you've been with Jesus like I have every day for three years. I know we saw him turn water into wine and walk on the sea and raise Lazarus from the dead.
I know you heard like I did that he claims to be the resurrection and the life. I don't believe you. And here are the absolute minimum conditions that will take it for me to believe.
Number one, I have to see the marks of the nails in his hands. Number two, I need to put my fingers in the marks of the nail in his hands. And number three, I need to put my hand in the massive hole in his side that we saw the Roman soldier make in his side with the spear to show that he was really dead.
In other words, I don't just need to see him. I need to do my own autopsy on that body. And until I get one, two and three, I refuse to believe you.
[8:21] It's not I can't believe you honestly. It's that I will never believe you until I have my demands met. It's crass.

And he is completely confident this is never going to happen. Otherwise, he would never have said it. And I think at the end of his life, it's going to go into the book of most embarrassing things he ever said.
I bet you he regrets saying it. I have a big book like that. He's hiding from the risen Jesus in unbelief. You know, one of the best known stories out of World War II is the Japanese Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda, who was stationed on a small island in the Philippines in 1944.
And he and three other soldiers refused to believe the war had ended. And he lived on on that island for 30 years, committed to holding the island until the Japanese Imperial Army returned and took the island back for Japan.
There's a new three-hour film that's winning awards at the Cannes Film Festival about his life. And he wrote in a memoir that he and his comrades, and I quote, had developed so many fixed ideas, we were unable to understand anything that did not conform to them.

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[9:41] And his fixed ideas meant he refused to believe any news that the war had finished. He dismissed the newspapers that came to the island as propaganda and leaflets that the Americans dropped.

Of course, that was propaganda. He refused to believe the Japanese search parties that were sent to Japan to search for him and bring him home. He said they were just forced to say those things against their will.
He refused to believe the war was over and it had a darker side as well. It meant he attacked and killed dozens of Filipinas that were living on that island. Until in 1974, his commanding officer from the war was brought to him with direct orders to lay down his arms.
His refusal to believe was just a denial of reality. The war had ended, but he refused to believe it. He was hiding in his unbelief. And so with Thomas.
For the first time, the door of death has been forced open from the inside by Jesus. He refused to believe it. The greatest miracle since the creation of the world had taken place and he chose not to believe it.
[10:50] And he chose not to believe it until Jesus came seeking him. And I think this is where the story is so beautiful for us. Because as Thomas hides in his unbelief, Jesus comes seeking him.

Jesus humbles himself again, just as he did in the incarnation, just as he did on the cross. So he comes and he humbles himself before these demands of Thomas in amazing love and kindness.
So I'm going to turn from the first point to the second point and look at Jesus seeking in love. And this goes from verse 26 onwards in chapter 20.
And it's almost as though Jesus knew Thomas would not be there the previous Sunday evening. It's almost as though the reason Jesus appeared only to the 10 on that night was because Thomas was not there.
And now a week later, because Thomas is there, because he's seeking Thomas. And we read eight days later, which is the Jewish inclusive way of counting. So it's the next Sunday night.
[11:55] And we are told that Jesus appears exactly the same way as he did in verse 19. They're behind locked doors. Jesus comes to them. He says exactly the same words that he said in verse 19.

Peace be with you. You might have expected him to say peace be with, well, 10 of you, except Thomas, who's laid down a list of demands. No, no. He knows exactly what's going on for Thomas like he knows exactly what's going on for you.
He knows Thomas's last 10 days have been terrible. And he is delayed because he loves him. Every one of Jesus' delays is a delay of love. And then in verse 27, if you look at it, he invites Thomas to begin his bizarre autopsy.
And the fearful thing is that he uses exactly the words that Thomas spoke the week before. Just imagine the patience this took from Jesus.
You know, he'd come from glory from the Father's side to be made flesh as a baby for us. Rejected by those he came for. His own disciples had abandoned him in his time of greatest need.
[13:04] Laid in a tomb, as he said. Raised on the third day, as he said. Now he has one of his closest disciples refusing to believe the testimony of the other 10.

But there's no exasperation in Jesus. He knows who Thomas is. He knows who we are. Thomas had had more than enough evidence to believe, just as we do.
And yet Jesus still invites him to put his fingers in the scar and put his hand in his side. Because he's seeking him in love. Now this is one of the most wonderful things about the Easter message. That Jesus not only bears our sins on the cross. He continues to bear with our weaknesses and our failings and our feebleness. He doesn't treat us as we deserve.
He doesn't look down on us. He's always kind to the weak. He always takes great pains in his patience with us. He doesn't blame Thomas.
[14:10] He doesn't write him off. He doesn't crush him. He doesn't humiliate him in front of everyone else. He seeks him in love just as he seeks us. So, you know, whenever our prayers are mixed with selfishness, which they usually are.

You know, whenever our following is spotty and half-hearted, our serving others is a subtle way of serving ourselves. He continues to seek us in love, to restore us to himself and to bring us to full faith in him.

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And though Jesus does not tell Thomas off, in verse 27, the last words do have a tone of rebuke about them. He says literally, do not be unbelieving, but be believing.
Don't be an unbeliever. Be a believer. Don't be an unbeliever. It's so, so, so simple. Jesus says to Thomas, underneath all your difficulties and thrashing around is simply unbelief.
That's the issue. There's plenty of evidence. You just need to look at it. The trouble is not the evidence, dear Thomas. The trouble is in you. And Satan wants us to think that there is this vast and uncrossable chasm between belief and unbelief.
[15:28] It's a lie. The risen Jesus stands in front of us and just simply says, believe. No one is to blame for your unbelief except yourself.

You do not believe because you choose not to believe. This is the one thing that you and I need to turn away from today to see his risen glory. And in that moment, wonderfully, Thomas does believe. And he doesn't do any of his intrusive medical experiments on Jesus as he demanded. But he spontaneously and instantly says to Jesus, my Lord and my God.
And that's what it means to have Christian faith. It's to say to Jesus, the risen Jesus, you are my Lord and you are my God. Just as John told us in the very first chapter that Jesus was with the Father in the beginning.
He was with God and he was God. Now, for the first time in the gospel, right near the end of the gospel, one of his followers calls Jesus, my God. This is the way we were taught to address God in the Old Testament.
[16:40] And now Jesus is raised from the dead. This is the only way to speak to him. It's not that Jesus shows the divine in us or how to reach our potential. He's God and therefore he is Lord.

And seeing the man standing before him, the same man crucified 10 days before, now in a risen body with the scars.
Thomas confesses he's not just a wonderful human being. He's not just the most wonderful human being. But he is God in the flesh. And not just God. My God.
He's come for me. He's died for me. He sought me even when I didn't believe. And the penny drops. This Christian faith isn't some vague belief in life after death.
It's not a thought that, you know, our personalities survive death. Christian faith is that Jesus, the Son of God, has come from heaven for me. And by his death and by his resurrection, he has sought us and made us his own.
[17:48] And he's given his life and he's given us the gift of heaven, eternal life. And something completely new in history has happened since he has been raised from the dead. He's defeated death. And taking him as my Lord and my God in the most personal and specific way we can.

And the fact that that risen body still has the scars in it means that Jesus is continual, will continual eternally as the wounded one.
Yes, he is the Lion of Judah who triumphed over Satan and triumphed over the grave. But he is also the Lamb of God slain forever, which is why we can rest our souls on him and everything we are, because of his infinite and divine power and his infinite and divine love.
What does this all mean for us? Well, look down at verse 29, how Jesus responds to Thomas' clear worship. He welcomes his worship, verse 29. He says, you have believed because you've seen me. And then he adds a beatitude, the final beatitude of his ministry. He says, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. And do you know who he's talking about? Talking about us.
[19:01] Jesus is saying to Thomas and to the others, you and the other eyewitnesses are standing on the boundary line of a new age, where others will come to full faith, not by seeing, but by hearing your witness and your testimony.

Because faith now comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. And just as Jesus sought Thomas out in love, now he reaches out through Thomas' words and the words of these eyewitnesses, including John, who wrote this gospel to us here today.
And Jesus reaches out to all of those who are faith hesitant, all of those who are unbelieving. And he spreads his blessing over us as we read these words and come to the truth.
Because Jesus is no longer confined to Palestine 2,000 years ago. He has gone into heaven. His body is now at the right hand of the Father. And now we have access to him throughout history and space as we hear his words and seek him through these words, as he seeks us through these words.

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That's why John steps in, in verse 30, and he tells us why he's writing this. It's not a neutral exercise. He says, I'm writing this to lead you to faith in Christ.
[20:21] He says, verse 30, 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 the believing you may have life in his name, life, capital L, life.

And you may be undecided about Jesus or intrigued by Jesus. But this news that Jesus spreads the blessing of eternal life to you, though his words may be new, we want to host a series of Zoom sessions introducing Jesus, starting Monday, April 25th, full of eyewitness stories about Jesus. You don't need to know anything to come to this. But we want to say to each other this morning, and we want to say to each other through this series, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and he is seeking each of us in love.
Don't be unbelieving, but believe. He's holding out the blessing of life to you, abundant life, eternal life. I mean, it's his to give, and he gives it to all who receive him by faith as Christ, the Son of God. So our main work today is just to turn away from unbelief and to turn to him and say to him, Jesus Christ, you are my Lord and my God. And you know, later in the New Testament, the Apostle Peter writes to people who'd never seen Jesus, another generation, and he says this to them, And the call to all of us this morning is to join with all those who stand under the blessing of Christ and confess him as your Lord and your God.
[22:27] Let's kneel for prayer.

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