

Easter Sunday - John 20:19-31 (PM)

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Our world is standing, let's pray, Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, amen. And please be seated. Be seated. Hello, friends.
- It's really good to see you this evening. You know, a while ago, when thinking about what to preach tonight, Easter Sunday, I look back over the things we've preached, like over the last 10 years.
- And I found that typically we look at the resurrection and the immediate context. So there's first few hours, so the empty tomb, the angels, Christ has risen, Mary meeting Jesus and everyone saying, I've seen the Lord.
- Fantastic stuff. But there's one character who plays a really important part in the story, but generally does not get much of a look in at Easter.
- And that's Thomas, infamously known as Doubting Thomas, Doubting Thomas, which is just a terrible, I mean, you feel for the guy. It's a terrible nickname, isn't it?
- [1 : 0 6] The poor guy. And as a side note, everybody in New Zealand gets a nickname in the old country. My nickname was Ginge, because I'm a redhead.
- If you live in New Zealand and you're a redhead, you don't get a choice. That's just your name forever. I had good friends in New Zealand. Their names were Gibbo, Jacko, Presto, and Gino. And then I had one friend who inexplicably had the nickname Jawama Jawama Jawama.
- And that was like legit. I cannot remember how he came up with it, but you say it three times. It's always Jawama Jawama Jawama. He had a PhD in biology.
- And so we'd honestly walk into a room and go, hey, where's Jawama Jawama Jawama? Over the library in the university, we'd pretend there was no crisis. Can you please call Jawama Jawama Jawama?
- Anyway, back to Thomas. Poor guy, right, gets landed with doubting Thomas in perpetuity. So I feel a bit sad for him. You don't hear much about him on Easter generally, probably because the name suggests his story is a bit of a downer.
- [2 : 1 9] But it's actually a wonderful story, the story of Thomas, I think, and we'll get there. I think it's a shame we don't talk about him much at Easter because to me he seems to be one of the most relatable disciples there is.
- I mean, aren't you glad that there was one person after the resurrection who said, I've got more questions.
- I've got some questions. I'm not sure about this. Aren't you glad there was one person like that? I just think he's so relatable, isn't he?
- Relatable because perhaps you have doubts and questions about Jesus at the moment. Like, is Jesus really in charge of the world? Like he sits on the throne of the universe?
- Is he really in control? Because the world feels like a mess. COVID and Ukraine and all the sort of general political hostility. It seems like a really good chunk of the leaders of the nations of the world act like children or are crazy people or are bullies.

[3 : 37] I mean, how can we believe that Jesus rose again and sits on the throne of the universe with all this carry on? So perhaps you have questions like that. Perhaps you wonder, how can I be sure about all this Christian stuff?

I mean, I've never seen a miracle. And it wasn't there when the big thing went down. How can I believe? I have some questions about this.

So let's walk with Thomas here from his doubts to him saying, of Jesus, my Lord, my God. So the biggest doubter becomes the person who calls Jesus God, which really is, there's nothing bigger you can say about Jesus.

You can't say anything more important about Jesus than that, that you are God. So how did this happen for Thomas? How did that happen? Let's get into it.

This sermon has two sections. The first section, what Thomas did. The second section, what Jesus did. You got that? What Thomas did.

[4 : 44] What Jesus did. I know, it's not very sophisticated, but just be cool. Just be cool. It'll get more interesting. So starting with Thomas. What Thomas did.

So the obvious question is, why was he doubting? And to be fair, we don't really know. I mean, leading up to this, he wasn't presented as an especially weak disciple.

In fact, in John 11, when Jesus was about to head to a place where there are people there who wanted to kill him, it was Thomas that said to his fellow disciples, let us go and die with him.

So he was not presented as some second tier and not quite up to scratch disciple. He was very, very committed to Jesus. So what happened? Well, the Bible doesn't say, but I think the best guess is that it looks like the crucifixion of Christ outside Jerusalem was so gruesome and so awful, it was just impossible for him to imagine Jesus coming back from that.

Seeing Jesus torn to shreds. You know, you can imagine his universe just collapsed. That's why he doubted.

[5 : 57] Now let's pause here for a moment. And I think, I just wanted to add this. I think it's important to say, don't freak out about your doubts. I mean, your doubts are only a problem if you don't attend to them.

And that's important, okay? Doubting does not make you a second class Christian. But you have to take the next step to address those doubts.

And this is what Thomas didn't do. What did he do with his doubts? What did he do with his questions? What did he do with his pain? He did what he should not do.

He withdrew into himself. How do we know this? Well, if you look at verses 19 to 23, there's this amazing scene. Jesus turns up into the room where all the disciples are.

Well, most of the disciples are huddled away. Jesus appears in the room and he doesn't say to them, well, hello, losers who run away, who give up.

[6 : 57] No, he was really wonderful and gracious. He says, peace be with you. And then straight after that, he says, as the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you.

So the risen Christ doesn't just say, you guys, come on, man. And doesn't say, I'm back. It's great. Let's talk about me. Straight away, he sends them out. He gives them a life and an identity and a purpose and a mission in life, a purpose bigger than their small hopes and dreams.

And he says, go out into the world and be my ambassadors. And before anyone can say, there is no way we are capable of doing that. Just think about what's just happened. There is no way we can do that.

Before anyone can say that, verse 22 says, receive the Holy Spirit. So God sends them and he equips them to do the task he's asked them to do.

That's brilliant, isn't it? Isn't that fantastic? Imagine being in the room when that happens. Imagine being in the town. I mean, you wouldn't have wanted to miss out on that, right?

[8 : 0 6] Well, there were two disciples who missed out on that. Judas, for obvious reasons, and Thomas. He wasn't there.

Verse 24. Now, Thomas, one of the 12, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came. Where was Thomas? He was alone with his doubts. And it's what many people do.

They start to doubt, they start to question, and they withdraw. It's a classic move. Questioning, doubting, you withdraw.

A classic move, and it is catastrophically unhelpful. You start to question your faith, you say, I need some space, and you pull back. It's a spiritually very dangerous thing to do.

Charles Taylor, who's a Canadian Catholic philosopher, who's written a lot about Western society's movement over the centuries, from being a place where there was a widely held belief in God, to the transition to a widely held sort of secular humanist vision for humanity.

[9 : 1 7] Charles Taylor says of our time that doubt has become the heroic moral narrative. Doubt is the beginning of the great coming-of-age story, where you discard these childish religious ideas, where you become your real, authentic self by looking inside yourself, by listening only to yourself.

And it turns out, though, that the job of defining self is just too hard and too weighty for a person to do on their own, and as a recipe for sort of just, you know, existential crisis. That's Charles Taylor's proposition.

I think he's right. That's a bit of an excuse. How does it relate? All that to say, retreating from community when doubting is a spiritually dangerous thing to do, but it seems that's what Thomas did.

He withdrew into his own thoughts. And it would have been a disaster for Thomas, if not for Jesus. So let's look at what Jesus did for Thomas.

We looked at what Thomas did. Doubt, withdraw, unhelpful. What did Jesus do? We see in verse 25, it seems that the other disciples sought out Thomas, and were telling him during the week, we've seen the Lord, we've seen the Lord.

[1 0 : 3 1] But for Thomas, it just was not good enough. Verse 25, Thomas says these famous words, unless I see 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, the disciples are gathered again. Thomas is there this time. Jesus appears, and this time, Jesus goes straight to Thomas, walks in the room, goes straight to Thomas, and says, put your finger here, and see my hands, and put out your hand, and place it in my side.

What does it tell you? Jesus doesn't dismiss Thomas, doesn't write him off. In fact, it seems like this appearance of Christ, after the resurrection, was specifically for him.

It was for Thomas. And do you notice that Jesus knows Thomas' doubts? He knows what he's thinking in detail. Remember, Thomas kept saying, I won't believe unless I can touch the scars. Jesus shows up, and unprompted says, here are the scars, touch them.

I think that's beautiful. Thomas is doubting and withdrawing, and Jesus is seeking him out. If you're doubting this Easter, if faith is hard for you right now, know this, Jesus knows all of your doubts.

[1 2 : 0 0] He knows your struggles. He knows them, and he wants to meet you in them. For Thomas, he realizes that, you know, even though he was walking away from faith, Jesus never abandoned him.

He was always with him. Now, when my kids get really annoying sometimes, I just have to leave the room, or my wife has to walk me out of the room, you know, before I say something, I will regret.

I mean, that happened this morning, actually. That's not how Jesus operates. He never leaves us when we're being scallywax, you know.

Now, in the Chronicles of Narnia, the book, The Horse and His Boy, is a great scene. So the book is about this kid who's searching for Narnia, and he's going on this big journey to get to Narnia, and the boy faces just a lot of drama.

And strangely, in his mind, a lot of drama involving lions chasing him. And at one point in the story, the boy's called Shasta, at one point in the story, he gets lost in the fog, and he's joined by this unknown being who turns out to be Aslan, and the boy is telling him all about his misfortunes on the journey, and he's feeling very sorry for himself, and the boy says, don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?

[13 : 31] And the boy says, there was only one lion. There was only one lion, and continues, I was the lion, and as Shasta gasped with open mouth and said nothing, the voice continued, I was the lion who forced you to join with avarice.

I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the horses new strength of fear for the last mile so you could reach King Loon in time.

And I was the lion, you did not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to the shore where a man sat wakeful at midnight to receive you.

Isn't that lovely? Folks, Jesus hears you. He hears your doubts. He knows your questions. He knows you. He will always be there. He will not abandon you.

He knows you. Even though you have a lot of unresolved stuff in your brain. Now, you're here, all you folks are at church, you're watching online, that's good. It means you're seeking him somewhat.

[14 : 45] But a far more important truth is that he is seeking you. He is always seeking you. There's only one lion.

So, what does Jesus do for Thomas? Thomas. He meets him in his doubts. He meets him in his pain and he can do that for you. Don't withdraw.

The second thing Jesus does for Thomas is he rebukes him, which is great. He calls him out. Jesus says to him, do not disbelieve, but believe.

And then he follows it up by saying, have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. What's all that about? What's that? What's going on here?

Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed. That's us. That's talking about all of us here. And 99.99% of the Christians in history who did not physically see Jesus.

[15 : 45] Jesus is saying, for those of you who have not seen him physically raised from the dead, he's saying, there's actually more than enough evidence. There's more than enough reasons to believe. And what are those reasons? It's mostly tied up in the account of the eyewitnesses.

I mean, think about it. There's two types of evidence, right? For belief. There's the people that actually saw Jesus, firsthand witnesses, and then there's the rest of us who respond to that eyewitness testimony, or put it more simply, some see and others just believe the eyewitnesses.

So Jesus' rebuke of Thomas is, Thomas, you should have gotten this. You should have believed. There was more than enough evidence.

You had that whole week of the disciples telling you, I have seen the risen Lord. That should have been enough. Thomas had those eyewitness accounts to draw on for faith.

And do you know, we have those same accounts, right? We have exactly the same accounts written down for us in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the stories of Jesus, written within a lifetime of the events so we can trust them.

[16 : 54] Now, you know, you might be here or watching online, you might not be a Christian or very religious at all, and you might have, but you're curious about Jesus and you might have a lot of doubts about it.

I mean, how can we, can we trust these people that wrote these things down? Can we do that? Well, ask yourself this question, how many things happen in history do you believe? Like most of it, right?

Like mostly, you believe most of it. This guy called Caesar, Brutus, you know, Waterloo, there was a battle that happened. You know, like we believe this stuff.

Why? We just, we trust reliable, the reliable testimony of eyewitnesses. Folks, there is more than enough reason to believe Jesus died and rose again.

Let me finish here. If Jesus rose from the dead, the truth is out there. Truth is out there. If Jesus rose and defeated death and appeared to hundreds of people, then Thomas' response to him is absolutely spot on.

[17 : 58] My Lord, my God. My Lord, my God. That's the right response. But perhaps you have honest doubts.

Perhaps you're a reasonable skeptic. and you're just still finding it hard to wrap your head around all this Jesus stuff. Can I just say this to you?

Don't think about this on your own. Don't think about it by yourself. My friend here, Chris Lay, who works at St. John's, he's running a discussion group called Introducing Jesus.

It's going to be a little mini community to give folks an opportunity to bring their doubts and questions. It's specifically for people who are not Christians and not religious.

So it would be a group of like-minded people, not 20 Christians trying to brainwash you, a group of like-minded people with a healthy skepticism. You'll meet on Zoom, so it's convenient, starting April the 25th.

[19 : 03] That's a Monday night. Chris will take you through the story of Jesus and perhaps you'll have a Thomas experience. Wouldn't that be interesting?

You can register for that online at the website. There's more details in the service sheet. And, well, now to finish really properly. Folks, Jesus did rise from the dead.

so we can have peace with God. If you've got questions, don't withdraw.

Do something with those doubts. Bring them to Jesus in community, knowing that you take one step towards Jesus. He's, I mean, he's just taken a million steps towards you.

And he does that because he loves you and he carries his scars with him eternally. It's proof. Amen.

[20 : 07] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.