

# Certain Hope

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, everyone. If I've met you before, my name is Steve. I'm the senior pastor here at St. Paul's. And I just want to say as I kick off, really grateful for those who do the translation work for me in advance, submit a sermon in advance so that they can do the translation so that those who are not as sharp with English or can't follow my English have got something in their own language.

And so thank you, John, for this last week. Let me just say I've actually changed it since then, particularly the introduction bit mainly, mainly because I read something this morning which prompted my attention and I thought would be particularly useful for us this morning. So if you've got John chapter 20 open in front of you, that would be awesome. Also, there's St. Paul's app. You can download that and I've got an outline there for us. So here it is. Read this this morning in the Australian newspaper. Immortality has become the great question mark. The answer used to be provided at Easter with the Christian climax in the death by crucifixion followed by resurrection.

The Jesus story wrestled with death, not being merely death. Today, however, the sacred meaning of Easter is little more than a dusty relic.

[ 1 : 24 ] For the secular modern age, belief in any form of life after death is in doubt. Most no longer believe in any form of supernatural being.

God has become a figment of the archaic imagination. Gods of any type are mere alien superstitions held once upon a time by naive and even primitive ancestors.

All in all, human consciousness has narrowed down to focus on mortal life. Here, now, and on this worldly plane.

A finite span bound by death, by birth and death, and governed by everyday pleasures and pains. Well, it's Easter Day 2021 in modern Australia, so, frankly, why are we here?

If that article's true, why are you here? Why even bother? Why not just eat the chocolate, go out for breakfast, and get ready to head to the beach?

[ 2 : 32 ] Why bother even turning up? This article, and many like it, raises two big questions about Easter, and not just about Easter, but about the truth of Christianity. It's central, and the essential event of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The first question is, the truth question. The second question is, the meaning question. Whenever we talk about the resurrection of Jesus, the truth question and the meaning question are intertwined.

They are deeply connected. The truth question, did it actually happen? The meaning question, who cares that it happened or not happened? Humanity rejects Easter, Christianity, the lordship of Jesus Christ, on both of those accounts.

See, about 50 years ago, an article like that would not have appeared in an Australian newspaper. 50 years ago, people lived with the assumption that there are universal laws that govern the universe.

Resurrection was rejected on the basis of it not fitting into the common person's observable laws. That's now changed.

[ 3 : 42 ] Today, the assumption is that there is a personal law inside of me. Not a universal law, a personal law. It's called individualism.

And one form of individualism is the personal law that says, I don't have to adapt my life to anything that I don't find personally helpful for me.

Truth for me is what I find acceptable, helpful, useful, and affirming of me and my worldview. That's truth.

So both questions. The truth question and the so what question are important to address at the same time and no more important than now on Easter Day.

And so the next little while I'm going to briefly tackle those two questions and land with a third point. So I've got the truth question, the who cares question, and what it means for us on Easter Day to discover some certainty, certain hope.

[ 4 : 51 ] So the truth question. The great C.S. Lewis once wrote that in a world that was making rapid advancement in scientific understanding, he said, there's a great danger for us in our modern age of what he called a chronological snobbery.

It's the assumption that any conclusion that's made from previous generations is fundamentally based on ignorance. For instance, chronological snobbery might lead some to conclude that the people around Jesus' time were just gullible, simple peasants who were just ignorant of reality and just believed anything.

And yet that's not the picture we get when we look at John chapter 20. If you've got John chapter 20, open it up for me again. Look at the very first two verses there. 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.

And so she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, and notice what she says, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they put him.

Now you see, Jesus, a number of times before his execution, he said, I'm going to come back to life after they kill me.

[ 6 : 20 ] And yet, in this moment, this is not what Mary's expecting. One of his keenest followers doesn't come to the conclusion, he said he was going to rise.

The first assumption here, somebody, whoever they is, somebody has taken the body, moved it. It's the same in verse 13.

She was working on the assumption that most likely the Jewish leaders or the Romans or someone have taken the body and dumped it outside the city limits. That is, Mary, first century, gullible peasant, doesn't jump to the conclusion that Jesus is resurrected.

Even Peter and John, two of the key followers of Jesus, didn't automatically jump to the conclusion that Jesus had been resurrected. Have a look at verse 8. Finally, the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went inside.

He saw and believed. But verse 9, they did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. That is, they believed the testimony of what Mary had said, the tomb's empty.

[ 7 : 36 ] And so they believed that, but they had not yet come to the conclusion that Jesus had resurrected. This tells me that these early followers of Jesus were not gullible people. Jesus told them repeatedly that he would come back to life.

But they weren't looking for it. And yet, what they were confronted with on that morning was a bodiless tomb.

All the evidence pointed to a bodiless tomb. There was no body in the tomb. In fact, one of the great historical evidences of the resurrection is that to this day, no one can explain why the tomb was empty apart from a resurrection.

To this day, historical evidence that tomb was empty and it still cannot be explained except for a resurrection. And even the enemies of Jesus could not produce the body.

And if they could have, they would have ended this whole Christian movement thing within a day. Done. Finished. There's your Messiah. Right there.

[ 8 : 53 ] So what are some of the more modern explanations of an empty tomb? What are the ones people that have come up with more recently? Some have suggested, well, in actual fact, Jesus didn't really die.

He was revived. You know, put in the coolness, of the, you know, tomb. He revived, moved the stone himself and disappeared in history somewhere.

Of course, that doesn't come to grips with the actual horrible realities of crucifixion. The rigorous steps that Pilate and the leaders demanded to make sure that he was, in fact, dead on the cross, on the cross before they took his body down.

And the steps that were also taken to make sure that no one got in or out of that tomb. Of course, that was never an argument that neither Jews or the Romans came up with.

Neither of them came up. The actual people there at the time never came up with that as an argument. Some have suggested that the disciples of Jesus stole the body. [10:04] if they did, then these guys began to risk their lives and, in fact, give their lives up for what they knew to be nothing more than an April Fool's joke.

The fact is, these disciples were utterly dejected. They were terrified after the crucifixion of Jesus. They were scared that they were going to be treated in exactly the same way as Jesus. They feared for their lives. They did not have hope of a resurrection and they were ready to go back to fishing. They were hiding in a secluded room unwilling to believe the first reports of Jesus' appearance three days after he was executed.

And yet, that bunch of cowards who deserted him with a matter of weeks, these same men were overflowing with joy and courage and they were not only just ready to die for Jesus but most of them did.

This little band of ordinary believers changed the course of human history. They and those who came to believe through them loved and served their enemies and gave their lives to their enemies across the entire Roman Empire in such a way that the world was changed within three centuries.

[11:30] How? What happened? Their own explanation was that they saw Jesus alive after he was dead as Jesus had promised.

Now there is far more historical and rational evidence than just that but much more that could be said except to say that doubting the resurrection of Jesus is a normal starting point and if that's you just out there on the table out in the atrium there is a book here called The Case for Easter there is a few copies out there if that's you and you are really wrestling with this take it as a gift and go read it please or come and speak to one of us we would love to have a chat with you about that.

Strangely however in John 20 the first person to doubt the resurrection verbally was not a person who was opposed to Christianity it's one of Jesus closest supporters a man named Thomas and Thomas is the most famous of all doubters in fact we have a saying in our culture to this day for the skeptic of any news ah you're just a doubting Thomas so for those of us who are struggling to understand or accept the resurrection you've got to ask yourself right now can Thomas help me if this is me now can Thomas help me here now we're told that Thomas was not there when Jesus first appeared to his disciples soon after he rose from the dead so have a look there verse 24 so the other disciples 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 it in other words I will believe in Jesus if he shows himself to me his response to the news is absolute he makes his terms his demands in absolute terms unless I see I place my hands I will not believe he demands here in this moment exhaustive proof rather than sufficient evidence belief in Jesus belief in the resurrection comes down in the end as we see here with Thomas not just to a matter of evidence but a battle of the will Thomas rejects the witness of 10 of and more in fact more than 10 of his trusted friends and he dictates in absolute terms to God about what's required for him to believe now we aren't told specifically in John 20 why Thomas was so skeptical so anything

I say is speculation but I'm going to speculate anyway because it might be helpful for us so let me speculate maybe it was his personality that's maybe why he's doubting he's a personality thing maybe he was well you know one of those what the personality tests call a sensing person sensing people paying more attention to physical reality to facts to hard evidence the opposite is the intuitive person who goes on perceptions gut feel instincts that may be a personality thing another alternative is that he was skeptical about the supernatural unlikely but possible you know dead people don't come back to life and that's it it's a common western view in fact it's primarily just a western view a very small minority of our world have that view and

[15:42] Thomas wasn't a westerner so it's unlikely what we tend to think when we come to this text as westerners we assume that Thomas's doubting here is an intellectual one but skepticism is not simply intellectual so let me speculate imagine for instance that someone very close to you is dying in fact some of you may not even need to imagine much and you finally accepted that all hope of recovery is lost and your loved one is going to die it's shocking news and then all of a sudden someone says comes in with some new news there's a possible cure in a clinic on the other side of the world and you had there a hope of recovery there's a hope of recovery here then your hopes are dashed when you realize that you're going to die and with the news of a possible cure most people in that moment don't go fantastic you've gotten used to the fact that you're going to die most

people do not go fantastic news most people cannot bear the concept of their hopes being raised only to be dashed again most people do not step out in hope for fear of losing again and maybe this is what's happening with

Thomas there is no indication in the New Testament at all up until this point that Thomas did not love Jesus as much as the other disciples no reason to believe that he wasn't as devastated as the other disciples at the execution of Jesus and now they come along and say hey Thomas in his grief hey Thomas good news he's alive and so maybe Thomas in this moment in the upper room is don't you dare get my hopes up don't you dare get my hopes up I'm just coming to terms with the fact he's dead maybe he was afraid to hope in the same way that many in our world are afraid to hope it may be our narrow secular western worldview that says it cannot happen

I have no hope it might be a personality thing that says I need more evidence it may be a heart that is afraid to be drawn into something only to be disappointed in the end Thomas believed with joy he's the greatest doubter and yet his confession of faith becomes the greatest look at verse 26 a week later his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them and though the doors were locked Jesus came and stood among them and said peace be with you and 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 and then Thomas said to him my Lord my God it's a remarkable statement Thomas is a Jewish man and to call another human being just a mere human being not just your Lord but your God is incomprehensible unless

Thomas has seen something absolutely life changing there is no higher confession of faith in Jesus Christ in all of the scriptures in my view so that brings me to the who cares question for some some doubt is not a matter of having not having enough sufficient evidence it's more a matter of claims that Jesus has made about himself his mission and therefore what his claims are on my life that is it's about the heart and the will there is a comfortable place of happy ignorance if I ignore the evidence I can just go on and live life my way this is broadly the meaning of the resurrection Thomas says to him my Lord and my God notice this notice what's changed with Thomas his first words were not okay

Jesus Jesus said to him put your hand here put your fist in the side and he doesn't go oh the evidence his immediate response is my Lord and my God the whole issue that Thomas had was I want to see Jesus for myself and I will not ever believe until I touch those wounds Jesus shows up and Thomas doesn't even touch him the wounds on Jesus were not so much more than the evidence of the resurrection they were evidence of something so much more powerful for Thomas what he is saying in that moment in encountering the risen Jesus is that everything you said about yourself is true everything you said about me is true everything you said about this world is true he is

[ 21 : 59 ] God he is the king of the universe he is my lord he is my king he is my boss he is my ruler he is my god he is my savior the resurrection means that what Jesus has promised he delivered Thomas has just joyfully discovered that the wounds on the cross on Jesus that he thought had ruined his life those wounds have in fact saved his life this is the answer to the so what question the resurrection means that everything Jesus said about himself is right and true he is the way for humanity to be reunited to their creator the resurrection means that human guilt and shame has been dealt with finally and fully through Jesus satisfying God's justice on the cross for us it means that death has not only been confronted but it's actually been conquered by

Jesus it means that new and true life can be experienced before death and eternal life beyond death it means that hope for better things have gone from a category of oh I hope so to an absolute definite certainty it means that a new heavens and a new earth where those who trust in Christ will live forever like he lives forever is just a matter of time that's what Jesus offers everyone who trusts in him a number of chapters earlier in John's account of this good news we have Jesus declaring the life changing news of Easter he says I am the resurrection and the life the one who believes in me will live even though they die and whoever lives by believing in me will never die it means that Jesus isn't just one option amongst any and many that you might have to turn to something incredibly unique and life changing and worldview shaping has happened in the resurrection of Jesus that is what Thomas has discovered that's what people across this world for 2000 years have discovered from every cultural group and people group there is hope in Jesus Christ so lastly how do we discover this certain hope firstly it's important to listen to the eyewitness accounts don't don't cast them off we are told here in John 20 that Thomas wasn't there when Jesus first appeared to

the disciples one week later Jesus shows up again with Thomas present during the week in between we are told in verse 25 of

John 20 that the other disciples kept telling him we have seen him we have seen him we have seen him during that week Thomas was in the exact same spot that you and I are in right now and people have been in for 2,000 years like him we have the eyewitness accounts we have the eyewitness accounts we have the accounts of the people who were there access to them access direct access to the people who had direct access to Jesus the eyewitness accounts have been written down for us and preserved through history in the New Testament if you haven't got one you can grab one of those out in the table out in the atrium as well and read it take it home and read it for yourself a number of years ago it was common accusation that the gospel accounts the historical biographies of

Jesus the gospel accounts were fables that were written down long long after the events and so are not trustworthy the reality is enormous amount and I mean an enormous amount of scholarship that actually argues the gospels do not even carry one mark of fiction in them written by people who know their stuff not even a single mark of fiction they have all the marks of oral history and eyewitness testimony and when these events were written down nearly all of the eyewitnesses were still alive and could vouch for everything that was written John who wrote his biography was one of the eyewitnesses and this is what he says about what it means to come to certain hope in Jesus Christ it was read out to us

[ 27 : 30 ] John chapter 20 verse 30 one of the last things that was read to us what he is saying is that what is written in the biography of Jesus life his ministry his death and his resurrection by eyewitnesses account is all that you need for certain hope you don't need anything more for certain hope than what has been recorded and that makes pure sense doesn't it I mean doesn't it make pure sense it is in fact how we operate every single day of our life what I mean is this how many things that you believe actually happened in world history that you actually didn't see how many of it all of it all of it we actually believe eyewitness testimony that has been written down by historically reliable authors and so why is it that we don't do it with

Jesus why because it's not about historical evidence it's about a battle of the will and who's in control of my life we don't need to know anything more than what is written in John's gospel or any of the other biographies of Jesus to see and believe and so give it a read get yourself immersed in it and see read them as eyewitness accounts and think the second thing that we need to do to move from doubt into a place of certain hope is to drop our conditions every single one of us moves towards Jesus with a set of conditions no one ever goes to Jesus just because he is awesome and he's great and he's the savior of humanity just purely on those terms no one goes to him purely on his sake we always move towards him because we want something which means we have conditions

I've known people who have refused to make any move towards Jesus because it would mean that they would need to repair a relationship that's gone wrong and they don't want to repair it it would mean they have to change a habit and they don't want to change that habit it means to confess sin and they love it and that's all of us we all come with yeah Jesus I know you're offering me eternal life it sounds fantastic but frankly I don't want it to disrupt my family I don't want it to hurt my career and I don't want it to interrupt my long weekends we need to drop our conditions because every condition says I will love you Jesus if and that if is life changing Jesus did not do that for us he loved us unconditionally the death of Jesus was no accident of history Jesus died he rose to redeem us and to reclaim us to our creator

God it was all of God's plan it is a plan that is historically reliable and experientially satisfying as we navigate life historically reliable and experientially satisfying as we navigate life God has brought you here this Easter make no mistake God has brought you here this Easter for this message for this bit of the Bible for this story of the resurrection of Jesus for this eyewitness account so that you might believe in Jesus and have certain life of immortality life forever with joy as Jesus himself is alive forever in joy in a moment