

Come to LIFE this Easter Sunday

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[0 : 0 0] What a day to be gathering as we remember and celebrate the resurrection of Christ, altering everything. And that's basically what we're going to look at here in John chapter 20.

I want to pray and then we're going to launch into this. If you've got a Bible handy or an iPad or something like that, it'd be great if you could get to John chapter 20. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the opportunity just to gather now to have your word open in front of us.

We have just heard that what has been written has been written so that we might see Jesus and that we might believe in him and that we might have life.

And so we ask that you might do that for us tonight, that we might see him, that we might believe in him and that we might have life in his name, that we might live as he lives now forever and in perfection.

And we ask it for your glory. Amen. There was an opinion piece in the Herald's Good Weekend yesterday. It's normally a good morning.

[1 : 0 4] Good Weekend yesterday. It was written by Benjamin Law and it was titled something like Holidays are Sacred. Benjamin describes himself as non-religious, not an atheist, but a happy agnostic, that is, a lifelong doubter.

He suggested if he was to adopt a religious symbol at all, it would be a question mark. Having said that, he goes on in the short little piece to say that he does, in fact, love Jesus.

Not in the religious sense, obviously, but I think that everyone can agree that he sounded like a decent fellow. Jesus distrusted the rich.

He helped the poor and embraced the most shunned and vulnerable members of society. He was the first Marxist radical. He goes on to say, And then he makes his point.

But why stop at Easter and Christmas? In our cities, especially with their Muslim and Jewish and Buddhist and Hindu communities, wouldn't it make sense to celebrate and learn about these cultures too?

[2 : 3 3] And he concludes that if we were to do that, in fact, have a whole heap more public holidays, and frankly, who wouldn't agree with that? Or public holidays. He said not just have more holidays, but that we'd, in fact, be a more tolerant society.

The piece wasn't militantly anti-religious. It was positive. It raised some questions in a fairly authentic manner. He was fairly honest about where he stood and what his thoughts were.

But for me, it raised the question, and I think in some ways he's getting at this, it's the truth question and the meaning question. Is Christianity one of the cultural options that you can choose from in a society like Australia at the moment, including the option that he has chosen, and that is to be happily a lifelong doubter?

Is Easter, what we're gathered here to celebrate right now, one of the special religious holidays in a mixed bag of equally valid religious holidays that we could be celebrating?

Or are we gathered here tonight as we've just sung and as we'll just hear from God's word to celebrate something totally unique and wonderful and life-changing that means that Jesus, just something a little bit more than just a fairly decent bloke and potentially the first communist?

[4 : 0 6] And so there are two questions for us here on this Easter Sunday, and that is the truth question and the meaning question. Whenever you talk about the resurrection of Jesus, the truth question and the meaning question are actually intertwined.

The truth question is, well, did it actually happen? And the meaning question is, who cares if it happened? Whether it happened or not, who cares?

What difference does it make to my life? There are people who reject Christianity because intellectually they don't think that it's true. But there are other people who reject Christianity, not because they're convinced it's not true, but because they can't see why to make any real difference in their life if it were true, or they don't want to see that it makes any real difference in their life.

Recent survey came out, and I'm going to fudge the figures a little bit, I think, because I can't remember them totally. Something like 19% of Australians believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

And about a similar sort of figure are completely open to the idea that he rose again from the dead. And yet only a very small number of people actually go to church and declare themselves to be Christian in our country.

[5 : 2 5] So it's not just a matter of truth, it's the matter of meaning. What difference does it make? 40 years ago, there was an assumption in the Western world that there were fixed natural laws that made this world understandable and scientifically manageable.

And unfortunately, these laws did not allow for the truth claim that someone who was dead actually would come back alive and certainly, in Jesus' case, live forever.

The world at that time, with its scientific understanding of natural laws, did not allow for things to come back from the dead. And so unbelief in the claims of Christianity were often connected to those kinds of assumptions, an intellectual assumption.

Today, there's a different assumption behind unbelief in our world. Today, the assumption is there's a personal law inside of me. You could call it individualism.

One form of individualism is a personal law that says I do not have to adapt my life to anything that I don't find personally satisfying or personally helpful to me.

[6 : 3 5] That is, truth for me is what I find personally satisfying or what I find useful or helpful for me. And so in the end, don't give a rip whether Jesus rose from the dead or not.

Because whether he did or not is not my issue. My issue is, do I actually care? Even if it is true, what difference does it make to my life day by day?

And so if you can't see why it actually matters for life now, then this personal law will just view the resurrection of Jesus in the same way that you might view a UFO.

I really don't need to bother about it. Unless it's hovering over my house late at night. Now, some of us think, in fact, if you're of a younger generation, you will definitely think this way and probably not even know that's the way you think.

It's just part of the cultural soup that you've been marinating in since you were born. Now, I think both questions, the truth question and the so what question, are important to address at the same time.

[7 : 52] So let's deal with the truth question to start with. The great C.S. Lewis, the writer of the Narnia series and a bunch of other stuff, you know, he was a professor in Oxford and other things like that, wrote that in a world that was making such rapid advancement in scientific understanding, he said there's a danger of what he called chronological snobbery.

It's the assumption that any conclusion that was made by previous generations was based on ignorance. For instance, chronological snobbery might lead some to conclude that the people who were living around Jesus' time were just gullible peasants who were just ignorant of reality, just excitable, stupid people.

But that's not the picture we get here in the first couple of verses of John chapter 20. If you've got your Bibles there, it'd be great if you could open them up to the passage that Nick and Sam read out to us. John chapter 20, look at the first couple of verses with me.

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 that Jesus loved, and said, notice what she says here, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they've put him.

Now, before he was crucified, Jesus had mentioned a number of times, after I'm dead, I'm actually going to come back to life. And he was like, yeah, yeah, yeah. He said a number of times and then we kind of struck with the disciples, this is what's going to happen.

[9 : 32] Even though it was mentioned so many times, Mary goes to the tomb, sees the tomb's empty and she doesn't conclude there's been a resurrection here. The first assumption for her is that the body has been removed.

It's down there in verse 13 as well. She's working on the assumption. Later on we find out that the Jewish leaders have come along in the middle of the night, stolen the body of Jesus and dumped it somewhere outside the city limits.

Like us, Mary didn't just assume that Jesus came back to life and even Peter and John, two of Jesus' key disciples, didn't automatically jump to the conclusion that Jesus had resurrected either.

Notice verses eight and nine here. Finally, the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went inside. He saw and he believed. They did not, they still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

So when he goes there, John sees and believes. He saw and he believed what Mary just told him, that Jesus' body's not there. So looks in the tomb, oh yeah, Mary's right, the body's not there.

[10 : 41] Tomb's empty. And yet they still hadn't clicked that Jesus had risen again as he said he would. And so this tells me that the, at least three of the early disciples of Jesus were not just a bunch of silly peasants, easily excitable, gullible people who believe any sort of story that came along.

Even though Jesus had told them repeatedly that he would come back to life, they weren't actually looking for it. And yet, what they were confronted with as they went to the tomb was a bodiless tomb.

There was no body in the tomb. You cannot play around with the resurrection of Jesus and see that maybe it was just some sort of spiritual resurrection. There was no body.

And one of the great historical evidences for the resurrection is that the tomb where Jesus was buried, which was guarded by the Romans, handpicked by the Jewish leaders, was actually empty on the third day.

Even the enemies of Jesus could never produce the body. And if they could have, we wouldn't be sitting here right now. They would have nipped this early thing called Christianity in the bud right there and then, dealt with it, over and done with and it would have gone by the wayside of every other nutcase movement that began back in those times.

[12 : 13] Some have come up with the explanation as to why the tomb was empty. For instance, some have suggested that he never really died. He was just really sick.

And they put him in the cool tomb, closed it over, three days in pure darkness, and nice cool weather and he revived and revived enough from the spear going through his side and the nail holes and the crown of thorns and everything else that revived enough to remove the stone that took several people to put it in place and to disappear and, I don't know, wander off down the Sea of Galilee or something like that.

it really goes against the horrible realities of crucifixion, against the rigorous steps that Pilate and the leaders demanded to make sure that he was and that he was, in fact, dead.

The steps that they took to make sure that no one got in or out of that tomb. Others have suggested the disciples of Jesus stole the body.

on one level, you think that's pretty odd. I mean, Peter and James, Peter and John go to the tomb. All they discovered is folded bedclothes.

[13 : 31] So why on earth, I don't get this point, why on earth would they go in, steal the body and unwrap it all, first of all, take all the grave clothes off, put them in a pile on one side, fold them up neatly and run off with a dead, naked body?

I don't get that. Who does that? But more significantly, if they took the body, it would mean that these disciples began to risk their lives and in fact, did in fact go to death, give themselves up to death for something that they knew was in fact nothing more than an April Fool's joke.

A complete hoax. How else do you account for the dramatic change in the disciples after Good Friday if it wasn't for the resurrection?

The fact that they were utterly dejected, they were terrified after the death of Jesus, they did not have hope for a resurrection, they were ready to go back fishing, these were the guys who abandoned him, denied that they knew him, all took off.

They were scared of the authorities as we just read, the doors were locked, they were hiding in a secluded room, unwilling to believe the first reports of Jesus' resurrection.

[14 : 54] And yet in a matter of just a few weeks, these same men were overflowing with joy and with courage and ready to die for Jesus. Why? What had happened?

their own explanation is that the Jesus they saw dead came back to life. Now the evidence is there for sure, but doubting the resurrection is pretty common.

Strangely enough, the first person to doubt the resurrection was not a person opposed to Christianity, but in fact one of Jesus' chief supporters, a man called Thomas. He wasn't there when Jesus first appeared to his disciples and he came to him soon after.

Down in verse 24, it says, now Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came and so the other disciples told him, we've seen the Lord.

But he said to them, unless I see the nail marks in his hand and put my fingers where the nails were and put my hand in his side, I will not believe it.

[16 : 01] Unless I see it for myself, I won't believe it. I'll believe it if God shows himself to me.

Now the odd thing is that resurrection wouldn't have been a new idea for Thomas. He's an Orthodox Jew and they believed in everyone being resurrected to face judgment when God calls an end to this world as we know it.

But here he doubts the resurrection of Jesus. His response to the news is absolute. He makes demands in absolute terms.

Unless I see, unless I place my hands, I will not believe. He demands exhaustive proof rather than sufficient evidence.

A number of years ago, I was flying home from Canada and I walked up to customs, handed over my passport and after the awkward pause there of wondering if I've done anything wrong, the guy says, hmm, says here that you're a minister.

[17 : 13] I said, yeah, that's right. And he goes, right. Okay, so what would you say to a person who says to you, show me God and I'll believe in him? And, you know, I'm sort of sitting there going, oh man, I just want to go home.

And is this a test to see whether I'm actually a minister or, you know, somewhere else dodgy or is this guy a genuine, asking a genuine question? And I'm, you know, all these things are running through my brain thinking, is this a test so I can get home or what's going on here?

And I thought, well, best thing I can do is just go for broke and just give it to him and see what happens and hopefully I'll get home sometime. I said to him, great question.

And Jesus said, interestingly enough, if you see me, you see God. He declared to be, declared himself to be God himself and he did lots of miracles to prove it and no question about that.

He raised people from the dead, he healed people, he stopped water and storms and everything like that. And it's interesting that in some of those miracles, a particular miracle in case, was he actually raised this guy called Lazarus from the dead.

[18 : 23] The Jewish leaders put him in to the tomb four days later, Jesus comes along and in full view of everyone, he says, Lazarus, come on out. Lazarus came out and what they wanted to do to Jesus in that particular moment was actually kill him.

That's because seeing doesn't equal believing. And John chapter 20 says, blessed are those who don't physically see and yet believe.

John chapter 20 himself says that there is sufficient evidence that what John has written was enough that you might see Jesus and actually believe in him.

But in the end, it's a matter of the will. I said, God could appear to you right now. In fact, I could be God right now. And I could prove to you that I'm God right now.

And you could see me, but seeing doesn't equal believing because believing is a matter of the will. It's not just about the intellect. It's a matter of the heart and the will.

[19 : 30] And so I would encourage you to see that it might be a matter of the will of your heart of whether you actually believe the evidence or not.

I said, that's basically what I would say. And he said, fair enough, gave my passport and away I went. And this is what Thomas does here.

Thomas rejects the witness of 10 or more of his trusted friends. He dictates absolute terms to God about believing, believing, but he hasn't grappled with the fact that seeing is not necessarily believing.

Many people saw the miracles of Jesus, I just said, and yet they didn't believe. The Jewish leaders plotted to kill Jesus the moment Lazarus walked out of the tomb. There are further and deeper dimensions to believing than just simply seeing.

Belief in Jesus, belief in the resurrection comes down to a matter of the will. And so what happens with Thomas? Read verse 26 here with me. A week later, his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them.

[20 : 40] 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. When Jesus finally did appear to Thomas, he said to him, stop doubting and believe. The call from Jesus to Thomas was stop disbelief and believe.

Now Jesus was merciful to Thomas here. He came to him and demonstrated his resurrection and Thomas believed. And Jesus' intention was not that everyone everyone would see him and believe in the same way that Thomas would.

He didn't appear to everyone after his resurrection, but he did appear to well over 500 people at different times. Enough saw him alive.

And John, who wrote this biography, was one of those eyewitnesses. And this is what he says about how we come to see and believe. Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book.

[21 : 52] But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and thereby believing you may have life in his name.

What he is saying is that what is written in this biography of Jesus' life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection, is everything that you need in order to believe.

You don't need to know anything more than what is written in John's Gospel or the other biographies of Jesus to believe and to see. And so my first challenge is pick one up.

Maybe you haven't done that in a long time. Just pick one up and read it. What I think is fantastic about John 20 is, and it particularly strikes me, is the transparency of what John has written here.

The first followers of Jesus should have easily believed in the resurrection. But they were the first to significantly doubt it.

[22 : 54] The New Testament doesn't even try to cover up their doubting. And that's good for us. It's good for us to see that it's not easy to believe just as hard as it was then as it is now.

There's a transparency to it. If you don't find it easy to believe, that's okay. Of course, there are also those who refuse to look into the sufficient evidence for Jesus' resurrection because it's not a matter about having sufficient evidence.

It's more a matter of the claims that Jesus has made about himself and his mission. And this is the so what question. That is, it's not about the intellect, it's about the heart and the will.

There is a comfortable place of happy ignorance. There is a place of being happily a lifelong doubter as Benjamin Law has put it.

I'm happy to be a lifelong doubter. I'm happy to stay in this position is what he's saying. Notice what Thomas says when he realized that Jesus had come back to life.

[24 : 09] Verse 28, if you like, answers the so what. What's the significance of the resurrection? He says, my Lord and my God.

They're the first words that come out of Thomas' mouth when he touched his hands and put his, touched Jesus' hands and put his hand in his side. They're the first words that come out of his mouth. The first words were not about the resurrection.

It's like, how did you do that? Like, you know, how do you hold, how do you drink water with holes in your hands and what was it like three days in darkness? What was it like on the other side? Tell me about death.

It was a multitude of questions that he could have had but the first thing that came out of his mouth was the implications of the resurrection. My Lord and my God. What he's recognizing here is because of the resurrection everything that Jesus said about himself was true.

Every promise that he's made is true. He is God. He is the king of the universe. He is my Lord. He is my God. He is my boss. He is the judge of all humanity.

[25 : 17] He is God. And the resurrection means that what Jesus promised he must have delivered. He went to the cross on Friday taking upon himself the sin of the world so that we can have direct access to God and his resurrection proves that he was effective.

And I can have direct access to God because of his death on the cross. That's the answer to the so what question. The resurrection means that all human guilt and sin and shame has been dealt with finally and fully.

It means that death has not only been confronted but it's been conquered by Jesus. It means that new and true life can be experienced before death and eternal life after death.

It means that hope for better things has gone from the category of maybe to an absolute certainty. It means that a new heavens and a new earth where those who trust in Jesus will live forever like he lives forever is coming.

that is what Jesus offers those who put their trust in him for those who believe in him. We don't just see him but believe in him.

[26 : 35] And what that means is that Jesus is a lot more than just a decent fellow. The first communist not that I agree that he was the first communist he's a lot more.

He isn't just one option amongst many. Something incredibly unique and life changing and world view shaping happened on that first Easter Sunday.

Do you see it? Do you believe it? And so sitting here in 2015 we don't have Thomas' direct evidence.

We're sitting here a lot more like Mary and Peter and John at the tomb. There is sufficient evidence and either we see through it or we don't.

And what John has written here is these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[27 : 50] And so friends God has brought you here this Easter for this message for this bit of the Bible and for this story the resurrection of Jesus so that you might see Jesus so that you might believe Jesus and that you might have life in his name a life in Jesus that triumphs over death and beyond death.

And so my prayer for you and for us as a church here is that this Easter that you will now or that you might very soon by God's grace see and believe in Jesus and in seeing the resurrected Jesus and believing in him that you will have life that lives forever as he lives forever Amen.

Thank you.