

A Demanding Sceptic

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[0 : 00] On a Sunday 2,000 years ago, Jesus rose from the dead. However, as we shall see in our reading today, while Jesus conquered the grave, he still had to conquer the doubts and fears of his closest friends.

The human heart and mind are sometimes tougher, gloomier, and colder than the grave. Only an encounter with the risen Christ may open them up, and this makes it almost as miraculous as Jesus rising from the dead.

This is exactly what our portion today, the end of John, chapter 20, verses 19 and 31, portrays, by means of two events which happened right after Jesus rose from the grave.

We are taught three important lessons in this reading, about both our daily life and our life trajectory as Jesus' followers. The resurrected Jesus comforts the fearful.

He also convinces the doubtful. And the reason is not what people often expect or think. First of all, the resurrected Jesus comforts the fearful.

[1 : 13] Verses 19 and 23 portray an event on the same Sunday as when Jesus was resurrected. Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb, finds it empty, tells the disciples.

Then Jesus appears to her. She goes and tells the disciples again, I have seen the Lord. And yet, they do not seem to believe her.

They are gripped by fear instead, out of fear of the Jews. The Jewish leaders were after them. They did not want to end up on the cross just like their master had. So these brave men do exactly what brave men do in such situations, which is they bravely huddle together in an unknown location, shut the door close, and hope that nothing will happen.

The world history has just changed completely. Completely. But Jesus' closest friends either do not know it, or they are not ready to be its main protagonists.

On the same night, however, their world was about to change for good. Jesus appears suddenly out of thin air. He does not knock on the door. He just appears out of thin air among them.

[2 : 24] And they are suddenly even more afraid. Instead of fearing the Jews, now they are fearing Jesus. And so he does two things to allay their fears. First he tells them, I come in peace.

Peace be upon you. I am not here in judgment. Though that is exactly what they deserved. They knew full well what they had done. They had disappointed him by abandoning Jesus on the cross.

And their master was left alone. And they knew what they deserved. But he does not come to judge. And then Jesus tells them, touch me.

He wanted to make sure that they could touch him and understand that he was no phantom. He was not an apparition or something that they were making up in their minds because of their fear.

But it was truly him indeed. Now it is interesting that Jesus was in a glorified body. And he did not need to bear the signs of crucifixion with him.

[3 : 24] After all, a glorified body is perfect. It is physical, but it is perfect. And yet Jesus chose to have and bear the signs of the cross forever with him. For maybe two reasons.

One is to tell his disciples that it is truly me. But second, to tell them that the signs of the cross are not the signs of death, but the signs of victory over death.

And now I have won. Death has been routed forever. This encounter with Jesus has been inserted in the Gospel of John intentionally. Because, first of all, it tells us something important about the apostles.

That there were no dummies. You see, we portray them today in the modern world as if they were illiterate and ready to believe anything that was told them. But that is just simply not the case.

In fact, their skepticism is stunning. They have been with Jesus day and night for three full years. They have seen him miraculously heal impossible sicknesses instantly.

[4 : 24] They have seen how a cripple could walk straight after decades of lying down. And then they even saw once a man like Lazarus get out of the tomb after rotting in it for three full days fully alive.

And this tells us something important. That our modern day portrayal of the apostles is wrong-headed and not historically correct. They may not know a lot about theology, but there were no naive simpletons.

Now they saw the biggest miracle. And they still are in fear. But why did they not believe? Well, for maybe two reasons. Because, first of all, the apostles, like I said, they were first century Jews.

But like most of the people in that world, they knew that when a dead person is interred in the grave, he normally stays there. Death is the end. And secondly, and more importantly, they were molded by Israel's theology at that time.

Most of the Jewish schools, they taught that there would be a resurrection of the dead, a physical one, a bodily one. But that would happen at the end of time when the Messiah would arrive.

[5 : 37] And it would happen to the whole nation of Israel, not to just one person. When the Messiah came, he would change everything. He would basically destroy paganism.

He would rout the foreign invaders of Israel. He would purify Israel's hearts. And all Jews would be resurrected to eternal life. However, the apostles were completely disappointed.

This is not what had happened. Jesus had died. It was probably the end of a disappointing mission for them. So they did not expect him as a single person to arise from the dead.

Yet here Jesus was once again ruining their wrong expectations. His resurrection is real. And it is the harbinger of what will one day happen when he returns for his people at the end of time.

Now they see him and believe. His friends do not understand him completely yet. But they see him physically there. Their theology has been turned upside down.

[6 : 40] But now they see Jesus in a new light. His death was not the end. Nor was it a defeat as they had feared. Christ's death was actually the triumph of God.

His resurrection was the vindication of Jesus' mission. A brand new beginning. However, Jesus does not just appear to them to allay their fears. Nor does he just appear to them to basically say, Wow, this is me.

Can you see? Believe. And that is it. Now you can go to heaven because you believe in me. No. He is there not only to show them who he is. But also to give them a new life mission.

Something that they did not expect. This life mission is about living for Christ. It is about representing Christ to the world. But how can they do that?

They know their fears. They know their doubts. They know that they are not perfect. How can they convince the world about Christ when no one will see him? So he gives them two things.

[7 : 47] Or he does two things in order to give them the power to succeed. First of all, Jesus symbolically breathes on them. That is very important.

Because it is to show them that it is the Holy Spirit who will give you the strength to witness to other people. So that they are convinced about their sin and about Christ. It is the Spirit that will ultimately convince the world.

And second, the mission that he gives them is guaranteed in its success. It is authoritative. How do we know that?

He tells them, Whatever you forgive will be forgiven. Whatever you withhold will be withheld by God in heaven. Now this is interesting because whatever it means, and it is a difficult verse, it does not mean that it is the church that has the authority because of it being an institution.

This is language taken from the Jewish courts and from the synagogue. First of all, in the Jewish courts the judge would declare the accused either innocent based on the evidence and thus forgiven.

[8 : 57] Or he would consider him guilty as charged. And he would withhold his forgiveness. But this is language also used in the synagogue. Especially by the time when Jesus wrote this gospel which is by the 90s AD.

The synagogue had started to excommunicate as heretics all those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. There were heretics which had been living in Moses' day, they should have been stoned to death because of blasphemy.

Now Jesus, interestingly, turns the world history upside down. What he is saying is that it is not the world that judges the church. After he was resurrected, it is the church's message of Christ that judges or saves the world.

So on this night of the first Easter Sunday, Jesus appears to his disciples and allays their fears.

But not only that, Jesus also convinces the doubtful. Which is in verses 24-29, we go on to the next Sunday, right after the first Easter Sunday.

[10 : 10] There was one person who wasn't present with the other disciples when Jesus came and stood in the midst of them in that room. His name is well known even by those who don't know the Bible because of a stigma that he bears with him for more than a thousand years, the doubting Thomas.

Now this stigma is wrong because even though Thomas did doubt for a moment, this did not define his lifetime. And the Bible never calls him doubtful Thomas.

It is the later church that did. He was by no means a fearful soul. In fact, if you remember, by the middle of John's Gospel, when Jesus said he wanted to go back near Jerusalem in order to resurrect Lazarus, the disciples didn't understand what was going on, but they knew that he would be confronting the Jewish leaders and that meant certain death.

And Thomas was the one who said, let's go and die with him. So Thomas was not afraid to die for what he could see and touch. But he seems to have been a hard person to convince unless he sees evidence.

He was driven, unlike the apostles, by emotion. He was more driven by his mind. So Thomas says to the disciples, I wasn't here.

[11 : 29] I didn't see it. I won't believe it. Unless Jesus comes here, I touch his wounds. And unless I see basically the sign of the nails, the hole in the light, so the light shines through, I won't believe.

So he throws down the gauntlet for Jesus to take up. And the next Sunday, thankfully, when Thomas is with the others, Jesus accommodates his request. Again, he appears suddenly, without needing to open the door.

And he also knows what Thomas had said the previous week. And he tells him, look at me, touch me, and believe. Now, we are not told that Thomas touched Jesus' wounds and was convinced.

Even though what, that's what most of us, if not all of us, tend to think at times. Actually, John only tells us that it was enough for Thomas to actually see Jesus, standing there, talking to him personally, inviting him to touch him.

That was enough. The presence of the resurrected Christ was enough for Thomas to be convinced. And so, Thomas turns from his doubts into something completely different.

[12 : 41] He blurted out in total awe and adoration the clearest confession about Jesus' nature in all of the New Testament.

He looks at Jesus and says, my Lord and my God. Now, these words are not meant as an expression of amazement to God on high, but to Jesus in the room.

Thomas said to him, Jesus, my Lord and my God. You see, Jesus' appearance changed the disciples' worldview completely. Even though they didn't understand everything, suddenly they had greater clarity.

Suddenly they knew what the scriptures of Israel really taught about God and the Messiah. And Thomas' confession is not one of doubt at all, but of complete conviction.

Jesus is both human and God. He is the ruler of life and the creator himself. Thomas does not deny monotheism, but he sees it in a clearer, more complete light because of who Jesus was.

[13 : 50] Now, that's a statement that we know and we're used to. And for 2,000 years, we know this story. And so, we're not too surprised at who Jesus was.

But for Thomas to say that and for the disciples to believe what Thomas said was revolutionary, dangerous, almost blasphemous. Because if they said this sentence, Jesus is Lord and God, they would be confronted and they were confronted with two important fronts.

First, this was ranked blasphemy for the Jewish religious elites to say that a man was equal to God. It was the worst sin that could be committed against God.

And for that reason, like I said, you would be excommunicated from the synagogue, but not only that. By 90 AD, you would have been separated from your friends and family. They wouldn't talk to you and you would be officially dead as a heretical son or daughter.

But this also meant that you could not work anymore because most of the children would work in their parents' trade. And you would be separated mentally, physically, from your closest families and friends.

[15 : 06] It was the worst form of suffering and self-isolation while being alive. However, when John wrote his gospel, there was another front that was even more dangerous than what the Jews did to the heretics.

If you said, Jesus is Lord and God, you were going against the grains of the most powerful, most cruel empire on earth, the Roman one.

Interestingly, by the time when John wrote his gospel, Domitian, the emperor, had asked people to call him Dominus et Deus Noster, which in English would be exactly what John said, Lord, our Lord and God.

And so that meant that if you declare another person as Lord and God, you were committing high treason against the Roman Empire and you would be crushed. Normally, you would die by crucifixion.

Yet, Jesus, when he comes, he convinces the doubtful and before, he also gives comfort to the fearful. And the disciples are ready to believe and go forth in his name.

[16 : 19] and John also inserts a sentence from Jesus that the other gospels have not. Thankfully for us, he quotes Jesus as saying, you, Thomas, believe because you saw me, but happy and blessed are those who believe without seeing me.

And that's you and me. And that is, in other words, you and I are no lesser than the apostles for not being able to see Jesus. In fact, they saw him and they didn't believe.

And Jesus will bless us immensely for believing without seeing. You see, what Jesus said to Thomas was, Thomas, believing when you see is good, but believing without seeing is infinitely better.

Now, the purpose of the gospel is given in verses 13 and 31. Jesus convinces the doubtful and comforts the fearful, but the purpose and the reason he does so sometimes is misconstrued, is not what people think it is.

We have two misconceptions about these two verses, 13 and 31, the purpose of John's gospel and the purpose of what Jesus did. At first sight, the passage is absolutely clear.

[17 : 39] It's in two parts. All of this has been written so that we may believe in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. And by believing, we'll have life in his name.

But we have two misconceptions that we need to take care of before we actually understand this verse. And it's to do first with what Jesus does and why, and second with the meaning of the word life.

You see, when talking about Jesus and the resurrection, often in our world today, even as Christians, in apologetics sometimes, we speak as if Jesus is the one who is supposed to give us evidence for who he is.

And we speak in such a way because he does give evidence to his friends. That's important. He does comfort them. He does give them joy. He does come to make us believe. But it's as if we are the center and Jesus is revolving around us.

And the way we talk about when we give evidence about Christ, it's as if Jesus is on trial and about to be condemned by us who are the judges. Now, that's not what the New Testament is all about.

[18 : 49] And it's not how Jesus construed his ministry. It is Jesus who is the center. And we are the objects of his love.

It is not that we are the ones who invite him in our lives, although that is true. But it's more about you and me becoming part of his life. And so, his resurrection was not meant simply to all his disciples.

It was not by any means like the latest and biggest stunt that he had ever pulled off like a Houdini rising out of the grave so that finally they will believe. After three years of doubt, fear, they will believe.

No. Jesus died and was resurrected because it was the only way for us, the condemned, to be saved. And John says, he who believes in the Son, in Jesus, has life.

And he who does not believe is already condemned. Jesus came and died and was resurrected so we can have not only new life but a new meaning, to be his ambassadors in the world.

[19 : 55] And second, we come to the meaning of the word life. We often, for many reasons, misinterpret that word too. We think that Jesus came, died, was resurrected.

So if we believe this confession, when we die, we go to heaven. That's true. But that's only a very small part of what Jesus came to do and not even the most important one.

He didn't come to give us life after death. He came to give us life after death in this life, which is, when he came, you became new.

When he comes into your life, you're a new being, and now you're going to serve him in whatever you do, in the way you live. So it's not about what you do when you die in a disembodied state in heaven, but it's about what you do as you live for him on this earth.

When Jesus breathed on the apostles that night, he breathed on the rest of us as a church. And you know when exactly that thing happened for the first time?

[21 : 05] Adam, and in the same way, when God created Adam, he breathed on him, says Genesis chapter 2 verse 7. He breathed on him and gave Adam new life, and Adam became his representative on earth.

Adam then reneged his status because of his sin, and he lost his status as God's ambassador. And now Jesus says, when I breathe on you, you are the new Adam, you are the new humanity, and it's your mission to change the world.

So what do I learn personally, you and me? How do we apply this in our life? Well, first of all, doubts and fears are part of the human condition. Each one of us often identifies themselves as Thomas, or as the apostles.

We have our doubts, we have our fears, and we think we are hypocrites, and we feel as if we are not ready to serve the Lord, nor does the Lord want to use us.

In fact, sometimes we doubt the Lord himself. And yet, remember, doubts and fears are part of your human condition, and it's not that when you believe, Jesus dispels them forever, but it's that when we believe, Jesus is always there to make us not stumble over them, but overcome each and single time in his strength.

[22 : 28] And second, doubts and fears were experienced by Jesus' closest friends, and that's why this event is mentioned. If they were not immune, but God still comforted them, is he not going to do the same for us?

You see, Thomas, I'm sure, even to the end of his life, would have had his doubts, his fears. You know what he did? According to church history, he traveled for 2,500 miles all the way from Israel to India to a different nation, a pagan nation.

He didn't know their language, and he died there as a martyr. And there is a church since that time that identifies itself with Thomas. Why did he do that?

Because he knew that death was not the end. He didn't make money, he didn't become famous, he didn't live to a ripe old age. From that night on, though, Thomas did not allow his doubts to rule his life, but Jesus, the resurrected Christ.

And so, therefore, you and I have an important place in history. We have a unique opportunity today to change the world. Yeah, I know, it's funny, right? We, with our doubts, with our fears, with our weaknesses, how can God use us?

[23 : 42] Well, you know, guess what? That's exactly what Jesus did with 12 ordinary men, Paul included. If before you thought that your life and testimony didn't count or was unimportant, think again.

Within the Western civilization, a great clash is going on. It is about racism, hatred to fellow humans, political differences that lead to demonization of the other, cancel culture, failure to listen to one another, protests, fears.

As if that weren't enough, the coronavirus pandemic has changed the world forever. We've had, right now, we're going through the worst crisis in a hundred years, whether economically, politically, or health-wise.

It's a fearful new world, but you know what? Our call as Christians is to change it once more. So like Thomas and the other disciples, let's do it excitedly, not in our power, but in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray. Lord, we have our doubts and fears, so we come to you in this complicated life, so that you will allay those fears and doubts by the power of the resurrected Jesus.

[24 : 52] Lord, we believe, but do help us in our unbelief. And while we are weak, let our testimony be strong for you, so that we too, like those twelve illiterate apostles, two thousand years ago, may be used by you to change the world by starting with those around us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.