

Blessed are those who have not seen

Date: 31 March 2024, Easter Day

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: "Seven Signs in John"

Texts: John 20

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. It's what Easter is all about. And yet for many it's one of the most difficult things to accept about the Christian faith. My guess is that if I asked most Aussies about Easter they would say, "Yeah, we love the Easter story. It's all about new life. It's about the chance at a fresh start. It's about hope after disaster. A come-back against all the odds. Lazarus with a triple bypass, if that's your political persuasion. At the very least it's a good excuse for a long weekend!"

If I asked "What happened on that first Easter? Did Jesus really rise from the dead?" chances are most Aussies would say something like this,

"Did he really rise from the dead? No. But his disciples had a *spiritual experience* of Jesus. They had a sense he was still with them, living on in their hearts and guiding them. Over the decades these feelings of Jesus living on spiritually developed into the stories that he had been raised physically from the dead and these then found their way into the gospels."

I think people spiritualise Jesus' resurrection like this because that makes it safe. A spiritual resurrection might be great for you, but it need make no difference to my life, thank you very much. A Jesus who really did rise bodily from the dead? Well, that is confronting and uncomfortable. It would change everything.

But that is just what all the gospel writers claim happened. And if it's true it's at first terrifying but then the greatest source of comfort and hope. As a way of grappling with this claim this morning I'd like to look at the two people who John focusses on in his account of Jesus' resurrection - Mary and Thomas.

Thomas

Let's start with Thomas.

In verse 24 we read,

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 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."

Thomas shows us that the distance between the first disciples of Jesus and us is not so great as we might think. They knew, just as we do, that dead people don't come back to life. That is just not what happens. Thomas' question shows that when the other disciples say, "We have seen the Lord" he understands them to mean, "Jesus, who was dead and buried, we have seen him alive, in the flesh." They don't mean "we have seen him spiritually in our hearts". They are making a concrete, flesh and blood, truth claim. So Thomas says, "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’s a very modern statement. “Dead men don’t rise. Show me your evidence! I’ll believe it when I see it!” Thomas, if you like, is a scientist. He wants to see the evidence. The text notes his nickname was *Didymus*, which means “the Twin”. I can just imagine him thinking back to the body double pranks he used to play with his brother, and wondering whether that’s what Jesus is doing here.

A week later, Jesus shows up. Yes, there is something very different about him. He is able to pass through locked doors. His body is transformed, but it is still physical and still the one which had been nailed to a cross. “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.” As Luke records, “Touch me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.”

So, along with Thomas, we might ask the question - “You say Jesus rose from the dead. What’s the evidence?” There’s lots of good evidence for Jesus’ resurrection which we could explore. In fact I’ve got a 700 page tome here which does just that which you’re welcome to borrow. You’ll be pleased to hear that for reasons of time we won’t be doing that this morning. But there are copies of an article by the guy who wrote the fat book called, [‘The Resurrection of Jesus and the Constraints of History’](#).

While there’s good evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, it’s not enough to make you believe that it’s true. Why? Because Jesus’ resurrection means that Jesus is different from every other religious teacher. All other religious teachers say, “I will show you the way to God.” Jesus says “I am the way.” All other religious teachers say, “I will show you the true path”. Jesus says “I am the truth.” All other religious teachers say, “I will show you the way to life.” Jesus says “I am the life.” He says, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Thomas gets what Jesus’ resurrection means. When he sees the marks of the nails and the spear he falls down and worships Jesus. “My lord and my God.”

Jesus’ resurrection means that what he says does not belong in the realm of the private and subjective. No, it’s the truth, really true, for everyone, everywhere. Jesus’ resurrection signals his victory over death itself. He rises never to die again. He has broken the teeth of death and shattered its power. He is the living one who holds the keys to death. Earlier in John’s Gospel Jesus says that just as the Father has life in himself, so also he has granted the Son to have life in himself and he has given him authority to judge. If we’re to take the resurrection seriously we must face the reality that Jesus is Creator and Judge. He is, as philosopher John Moriarty puts it, the “truth I would surrender to.”¹

When Thomas sees it really is Jesus risen from the dead he knows he is face to face with the Lord God Almighty. So he must worship him. This is why lots of people want to spiritualise

¹ Cf. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/the-cross-and-the-machine>

Jesus' resurrection. Because if it's true it means that Jesus is God and we can't just live our lives however we want with no thought about him. To really believe that Jesus did rise from the dead means that we need to turn away from running life our own way. We have to surrender to him as the one who gets to tell us how to live, how we spend our money, what we do with our bodies, how we treat other people. We need to fall on our knees before him in worship.

Mary

That's Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus, but what about Mary?

Mary's encounter with Jesus shows the comfort and the hope that Jesus' resurrection brings. Mary is the first to meet the risen Jesus. In Jesus day the testimony of women was worthless in court. We still live in a world that is not very good at believing what women say. What an honour God gives to Mary Magdalene. She is the first to witness the resurrection of Christ and the first sent to tell of this good news of great joy.

St Paul calls Jesus' resurrection the firstfruits of the new creation. We see that theme of new creation in John 20. "Early on the first day of the week" echoes the 7 days of the creation week in Genesis 1. "While it was still dark" recalls the darkness over the surface of the deep before God brought forth light. The first man Adam was commissioned to be a gardener in Eden. Now, when Mary meets Jesus, she at first mistakes him for the gardener, as if to signal the New Adam, the firstborn from the dead is here. Jesus' own body is the first bit of the new creation, transformed, no longer bound by death and decay. His resurrected body is the first bit of creation that has entered into the glory with which God will transform the whole of the creation he loves.

As the dawn of the new creation Jesus' resurrection means that on the one hand all of creation matters because it is precious to God. He has united himself with creation in his Son for all eternity and will redeem it. So creation is worth fighting for. It's worth fighting against poverty and disease and the degradation of the environment because Jesus rose physically from the dead.

On the other hand Jesus' resurrection means that we can be content. We don't need to chase after the greatest sex, the best family, the greatest holiday because those who trust in Jesus are not going to miss out. All the delights and pleasures of this life are but faint and fleeting signposts to the joy of life with God in the new creation.

Jesus' resurrection means we can fight for creation because it matters, but we can also be content with the intermediate joys of life because we know creation is not all there is, the new creation is coming. For those who trust in Christ, death is not the end. There is life with God forever. This is the great hope that Jesus' resurrection brings.

Mary's meeting with the risen Jesus is so intimate. When he calls her by name, "Mary", that look of recognition is just beautiful. Earlier in John's gospel Jesus says that he is the Good

Shepherd. He calls his sheep by name. He goes on ahead of them and they follow him because they know his voice.

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

Mary knew Jesus when he called her by name.

Jesus calls each one of us by name. He calls us to follow him. And by faith we can know him just as intimately as Mary and Thomas knew him. Jesus said to Thomas, 'Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed.' That is you and me who believe in him now.

In verse 31 John says he has written his gospel that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing we may have life in his name. That is the message of Easter - that Jesus has risen. He is the king. He is the Son of God. He has triumphed over death. He promises life to the full, now and in the new creation. He is the Good Shepherd who calls us by name. In the end, all we can do is choose to believe or reject the testimony of the eyewitnesses. Mary brings the news to the disciples "I have seen the Lord!" Will you believe her words and so find life in Jesus name?