

As I stood here on Ash Wednesday Easter day seemed a long way off. But here by the grace of God we are. So often we focus on the stone and the empty tomb but on this Easter day I want to take us to these verses from John and through them to the issue of unbelief and faith.

At the centre of this passage is the strong statement of Thomas "I will not believe it." You can almost hear Victor Meldrew can't you.

1. The show must go on v19-23

The account takes us to the disciples gathered together. Mary Magdalene had told them v18 that she'd seen Jesus risen but there is no evidence of that having an effect on them. So that evening they were gathered in this room with the doors well and truly locked to keep out the same people who had arrested, imprisoned and killed their Master. Then, v19 suddenly there is Jesus amongst them. In the same way that the grave clothes could not hinder his body nor could the locked door. He stood among them and spoke peace for that was what his death and resurrection had achieved. Then he showed them the evidence that it was truly him not just the hands that were pierced as had been the hands of the two thieves but also the wound in his side which only he had. The effect on the disciples was marked as grief turned to joy.

But then he spoke peace again and told them that in the same way he had been sent by the Father to bring salvation to the world so he was sending them. He breathed on them a symbol of the promised Holy Spirit for whom later he would tell them to wait so that when he did come in power they would then go out through Jerusalem and Judea into Samaria and the end of the world and bring v23 the forgiveness of sin.

What was going on here was that Jesus was revealing himself as risen to his disciples not just so that they would know but to encourage and empower them to go on to do that for which he had chosen them...to make disciples. The show must go on. It hadn't ended with the death of Jesus and it hadn't ended with his resurrection. Nor does it end with this collection of 11 disciples.

It is by grace that God through his Holy Spirit makes us alive to himself and makes peace between him and us but it is not just done for our benefit and blessing but so that we may be used by him to draw others to Jesus.

Many of us will be familiar with the Round Table. It is an organisation for young businessmen and the first two of its aims are:

1. To Develop the fellowship among young men through the medium of their professional and business occupations
2. To emphasise the fact that one's calling offers an excellent medium of service to the community.

The organisation is there to benefit others. How much more the church driven by the sacrificial and servant example of Jesus. Our primary aim is to be a blessing to those who are not member of the church. Jesus died and rose but he made it clear to the disciples that the show must go on. Later he ascended but still in our day the show must go on.

2. I will not believe vs 24-25

As we read on we see that on that evening for whatever reason Thomas one of the 11 was not there when Jesus appeared. When they told him they'd seen Jesus he didn't believe it. Now we shouldn't be too harsh on Thomas here because Mary Magdalene had told all of them and it doesn't seem as if they had believed her. Certainly there was no change of action to suggest they had. Now Thomas' response to the message that Jesus was alive was "I will not believe". Thomas had seen Jesus crucified and he knew you don't make a come back from that. So his immediate response was I will not believe. He is of course not alone in that and down the centuries many have said the same that dead men don't rise. However as we read here Thomas left the door ajar to be convinced but because what he was hearing was so radical he would need some pretty good evidence. The evidence Thomas suggested was to see the nail marks and the wound in his side. That would be evidence enough.

3. Stop doubting and believe vs26-28

I used to enjoy reading the Perishers strip cartoon in the Daily Mirror. In one a little boy was being led by the hand by his bigger sister. He was saying, "I'm cold Maisie. I really am cold. It seems hard to have to get up and go to church in the cold. Other people are still in bed Maisie. It wouldn't be so bad going to church if it weren't so cold. At which point the sister turned on him shouting "Shut up stop whining and moaning about the cold and about going to church! God is listening to every word you say." To which the little boy simply replied, "Yeah and ignoring me completely as usual!"

Well it would appear that Jesus was listening to Thomas and certainly not ignoring him. As we read in v26, a week later he came again to the disciples, this time with Thomas among them and showed him the evidence that he said he needed! He showed Thomas that the risen Lord and the crucified Saviour are one and the same. This is Jesus who died and yet rose again and he called Thomas to lay aside his unbelief and believe.

The evidence was clear and overwhelming. We are not told whether Thomas actually touched Jesus' wounds but his statement of faith was vehement.

The evidence was placed before Thomas and he believed. We may often wish that our contact people could see Jesus because then they would have to believe. However, I am not so sure.

When it comes to the resurrection there is plenty of evidence to back up the claim that Jesus has risen.

Earlier this week we had an Easter egg hunt as part of the Easter Cracked presentation we did for local schools. They were challenged to find four eggs each of which had one clue on it as part of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

Clue 1 – the body was missing – Jesus’ followers couldn’t find the body and nor could the authorities. So what happened to Jesus body? There are a number of options:

Jesus did not die – very unlikely and a tomb is not the best place to recuperate with no food water or medical attention.

Body was stolen – by Romans. However there were severe penalties for letting prisoners escape, the guard would receive the punishment! Don’t know what happened when they let dead prisoners escape but it doesn’t make sense if they had the body not to show it.

Body was stolen – by authorities – certainly they had a motive, Jesus had claimed he would come back to life again – if they had the body they could make sure it stayed dead. But when Jesus’ friends claimed he was alive they did not produce the body!

Body was stolen – by his friends – they so wanted him alive again perhaps they took the body and pretended? Except that later when being threatened and even killed for saying he was alive they didn’t come clean and say “only joking...” Would they have died for a lie?

Clue 2 – The disciples changed. I love the bible. It paints people as being real. Once Jesus was killed all his closest friends, after a brief scuffle ran away. Later the bible tells us that Jesus friends hid and locked themselves away because they were so scared. Yet within a few weeks they were out on the street making a big noise and telling everyone that Jesus was alive! What changed them? They claimed it was seeing Jesus alive again and realising he was the Son of God and getting power from him!

Clue 3 – 500 and more witnesses. The testimony of Jesus alive was not just from a few close disciples who might have had a vested interest in peddling a lie but from more than 500 different people. How many do we need before we believe he rose.

Clue 4 – People still change. Easy to see this as taking place 2,000 years ago and 2,000 miles away but people still change! We see over and again the lives of people changed by the fact of the resurrection

Now I realise that this is not proof merely evidence which we have to sift for ourselves. Yet I and many others believe it is sufficient evidence to believe. My encouragement to anyone here this morning, or listening to this on download, who is in the position of Thomas saying I will not or I cannot believe, is to suggest you look again at the evidence and in Jesus’ words “ stop doubting and believe”.

4. Blessed are you vs 29-31

Thomas like all witnesses to the resurrection saw and believed. Jesus response was actually a question "Have you believed because you have seen me?" and as such it was a slight rebuke in that he hadn't trusted the testimony of his friends. Such an option would not be there for many others as Jesus knew but many would believe without having the opportunity to see the risen Lord.

John goes on in the next two verses to explain that as he points out that what has been written is so that people down the ages may see in a very different way through the words of the Bible and may believe. Here in the words of scripture is the means for us and our contact people to see Jesus risen from the dead and through that to believe.

There are two main ways in which we believe something. The first is through our own empirical observation and the second is through the testimony of reliable and credible witnesses.

The earth is round we know that but it was only when astronauts went into space could they see that the earth is round and confirm what was accepted. Their empirical evidence affirmed what credible Scientists had told us.

Thomas saw and believed. We today are not privileged as Thomas was and we have to believe on the basis of the testimony of those who did see Jesus risen from the dead.

This is what we will seek to do when we come to the Christianity Explained course in May. We will encourage people to read the gospel of Mark for themselves to see there the real Jesus who died and rose again and through that to believe in him. We will seek to be the reliable and credible witnesses using the witness of Scripture to help people to faith.

Out of that come two things. The first on this Easter day if you are a follower of Jesus is to praise God that he has opened your eyes to see and to believe the amazing wonder that the Christ who died for us rose to life and through that to know that we too one day will share his resurrection life.

The second is to realise that what God has done in our lives he can do for others and to continue praying for and talking with your contact people and to encourage them to look at Jesus through the gospels that they too may see and believe.

We live in a divided nation. I don't mean between the north and the south but between the haves and the have nots, that is between those who have faith and this Easter celebrate that faith and those who have not such and as a result for whom Easter is just a welcome holiday albeit at an odd time of year. As we gather together and celebrate Easter day and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, our thoughts, prayers and energies should be directed towards those who may not quite put it as Thomas did "I will not believe" but who nonetheless are dead, dead to God and whom God, through us, wishes to bring to new life in Jesus. Discover may be over but Easter day reminds us that there many in our country, in our county, in our town, in Chineham and in our circle of contacts who are yet to recognise Jesus as crucified Saviour and risen Lord. May God strengthen our resolve as

individuals and as a church to help people to “believe that Jesus is the Christ the son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).