

The Meaning of a Resurrection Faith
John 20:19-31
April 19, 2020

Two questions Easter raises for us is one, the ***meaning of resurrection***, and two, the ***place of doubt*** in our faith. The N.T. is pretty clear about the first, and Thomas helps us address the second.

So often we hear people say this about the after-death experience: it means going to heaven when you die. But is that really what the early Christians believed. Wright says: *resurrection was not a general word for “life after death” or for “going to be with God” in some general sense. It was the word for what happened when God created newly embodied human beings.*

Let's be clear, the disciples had trouble with the truth that Jesus was alive. Why! Well they believed that resurrection only happened at the end of the world. They pictured all the patriarchs, prophets and martyrs walking around alive. But, because that hadn't happened, they had trouble believing in a resurrected Messiah.

That's why they are still huddled in that room in Jerusalem. They are scared out of their minds! The doors are locked, the windows shut tight and they are all in the room except Thomas. Suddenly Jesus is standing there larger than life. He showed them the evidence that it was truly him: his scars are visible.

Now I wonder where Thomas went? Any ideas? One possible suggestion is that he is so devastated by events that can't get his life together. His world has turned upside down with the death of his Lord. And remember what sort of character Thomas was. He had already shown that he was a very down to earth, pragmatic man. He's the one who questioned Jesus about his going to another place. He said: *Lord we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?* Down to earth, direct, pragmatic, that's Thomas.

Perhaps the disciples persuaded him to join them when they told him about the appearance of Jesus in their midst. But he is adamant: *Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*

My hunch is that few of us, if any, ever live without doubt. It's simply part of our experience as Christians and is written deeply into the experience of God's people throughout history. It's just part of being human. We have said it many times that most of us, at some time or another, are just hanging on to faith with our fingernails. So, we can identify completely with Thomas and would gladly make him our patron saint.

What moved Thomas from doubt to faith? The following Sunday they are again locked away in their secret hideout, but this time Thomas is with them. And just as if someone has pressed the replay button Jesus once again slips through the walls and stands in the middle announcing peace. Thomas is asked by Jesus to secure his proof. Jesus says: *Thrust your finger in here; check out my wound with your whole hand. Don't doubt me Thomas, I am real.* Do you hear the tone of voice? It sounds to me loving, empathetic, endearing, and winsome. Is this not the same tone of voice trying to encourage us?

I know, I know, he had a huge advantage. Thomas saw Jesus with his own eyes. He had his proof standing right in front of him. We, on the other hand, have no such physical presence as proof. Jesus says to Thomas: *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. (John 20:29)* I suppose that's us Jesus is referring to.

Last year we visited the garden tomb in Jerusalem. We were able to walk right into the tomb, not a huge space, breath in the air, and feel the emptiness where Jesus laid dead for three days. He had not simply died and gone off to heaven as a soul or spirit. He had been resurrected a spiritual body. He was at pains to tell the disciples that he was not a ghost or spirit, but a real, living presence. In addition, his new body was able to defy the laws of gravity and atomic structures. He appears and disappears at will; no physical obstruction blocks his path. Yet he is recognizable as the Jesus they knew in life, can be touched, and eats the food offered.

This takes us to the very heart of the Christian faith. Without resurrection Paul says we are just as well to adopt the pagan

philosophy: “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”. Jesus opens up for us the hope of a real bodily existence in the life to come. In the meantime, may this hope energize us to follow our Lord and see life through his eyes. And may Thomas remind us that doubt is not the end but the creative basis of faith.

Let's close with the Psalmist's confident belief:

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage...I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure... You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Amen