**The first day of the week**

Text: John 20:1-29

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 53:1-10; John 20:1-29

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 309, 116b, ‘See what a morning’, 300, 117

**Series:** Occasional (Easter)

**Theme:**  After His resurrection, Jesus leaves His tomb, returns to speak to Mary and then appears to His disciples and then a week later, to Thomas.

**Proposition:**  Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

**Introduction**

I remember attending a lecture at University by the Russian Ambassador to the United Kingdom in early 1980 just after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (24/12/79). Back then we had all seen footage of the Russian tanks and helicopters attacking targets in the capital Kabul. The first question the Russian Ambassador was asked by one of the students after the talk was ‘why has your country invaded Afghanistan?’. To which the high-ranking Soviet official simply said, ‘we haven’t - your news agencies are lying to you’. His statement ended any possibility of further discussion or debate. If the information you have is wrong, then there’s nothing to say about an event that (presumably) never happened.

Six years later I travelled from England to Delhi via Moscow and Kabul. Why? It was a very cheap flight! When we landed in Kabul, I could see all the Russian military hardware, the buildings damaged by war, and I vividly remember having a Russian soldier point his Kalashnikov rifle at me as I waited to have my visa checked. Yes, the Russians had invaded Afghanistan, I could see the evidence with my own eyes. The news back in 1980 had been correct.

Perhaps this Easter you have, or you yet will, speak to someone about the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps they will say something like ‘*It never happened. Your Bible is lying to you. It’s just a myth, a fable, a silly story made up by the church or the disciples of Jesus*’. They might add ‘*I have never seen anybody who has died come back to life. Have you?*’ The answer is no. But we do know of people who have. Their eyewitness testimonies are recorded in Scripture for us. Our faith, brothers and sisters in Christ, is **evidence-based**.

Of central importance to the Christian faith is the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus. The Apostle Paul confirms this key reality: “*For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins*” (1 Cor 15:16-17).

As a church at Easter time over the past few years we have looked at the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus from Matthew (2014), Mark (2021) and Luke (2016). Today we look at John. All four gospels agree that when the women came to the tomb early on Sunday **it was empty**, but after that the accounts are very different. This is **not** what would be expected if the disciples had made up a story about the resurrection of Jesus, agreeing on the details and then presenting a single uniform story in the gospels. In verifying truth, it is vital to have evidence from at least two or three witnesses (Deut 17:6; Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1). Just as different eyewitnesses to the same event will remember and emphasise different details, so the gospel accounts are not the same. It is however possible though to connect all the accounts together plausibly as a time sequence of events.

This morning we focus on John’s gospel, continuing from where we stopped at the end of chapter 19 on Good Friday. John wrote his gospel so that “*you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (John 20:31). The historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus is critically important to the Christian faith. For people like you and me, believing that Jesus is the Christ so that by faith you have life in Him is more vital than anything else. So important that your life depends on the reality of this past event. Let’s look now at what John writes under four points:

1. Jesus leaves His tomb
2. Jesus appears to Mary
3. Jesus appears to His disciples
4. Jesus appears to Thomas
5. **Jesus leaves His tomb (v1-10)**

It was the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath. Friday and Saturday had gone, it was now early Sunday morning before first light when a group of women came to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. John only mentions Mary Magdalene, but we know from the other gospel accounts that Mary the mother of James, Joanna (Luke 24:10) and Salome were with her to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark 16:1). The two Marys knew where the tomb was because they had seen Joseph of Arimathea lay the wrapped body of Jesus in the tomb and seal the burial cavity which was hewn out of rock with a very large stone (Mark 15:46-47). This would have been rolled down a sloping groove and slid into place, to secure the tomb from grave robbers.

Despite having heard Jesus speak about His coming death and resurrection, Mary Magdalene clearly **didn’t expect** Jesus to have risen from the dead. She was not overjoyed at seeing the open tomb, but deeply troubled, assuming that someone had taken his dead body away. So she ran from the tomb and went to get Simon Peter and ‘*the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved*’ (John 20:2).

Only John’s gospel mentions this ‘disciple, the one whom Jesus loved’ but never explicitly reveals his name (e.g. John 13:23; 19:26). There were three disciples who were especially close to Jesus: Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1; Mark 5:37; 14:33; Luke 8:51). The ‘mystery’ disciple is clear not Peter, because we read that both men started running to the open tomb once the received the message from Mary. That leaves us with James or John. In John 21:22 Jesus speaks about the longer life of the ‘mystery’ disciple, and we know James was the first of the apostles to die (Acts 12:2). This, combined with the statement about the ‘mystery disciple’ being the author of this gospel, leaves little doubt that John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, is the writer of the historical account before us.

It was he who ran with Peter to the tomb, but was clearly faster on his feet because he got there first! He had a look into the open tomb, but did not go in at first. He could see the linen cloths that had been used to bind the dead body of Jesus lying inside. When Peter arrived, he went inside the tomb and saw the burial cloths. The face cloth that had been on Jesus’ head was folded up. Some have suggested that the resurrected body of Jesus rose up through the cloths leaving them exactly where they were. This is possible, although the main purpose of recording the details of the cloths seems to be to show: Firstly, that they had not been taken with the body of Jesus, and secondly, they had not been torn off and just left in a messy heap. Either of these would be expected if grave robbers had snatched the body away.

After Peter entered the tomb, John followed and he records that he ‘*saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead*’ (20:8-9). Like Mary, John was **not** expecting the resurrection, despite Jesus predicting it many times in his hearing (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34). On seeing the tomb where Jesus had left behind his burial garments, it seems that John now believed that a resurrection had taken place. Yet neither he nor Peter yet appreciated all that this meant. How could they grasp the full significance of the resurrection at that time?

It’s not clear exactly which Scripture they did not yet understand. The Old Testament alludes to the concept of the resurrection on the third day (e.g. Isaiah 53:10 that we heard earlier; Hosea 6:2, Jonah 1:17) but is not specific with details. The early believers like John, and Peter and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not make up the resurrection of Jesus in order to fit in with their theories on the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. Firstly they were absolutely convinced that Jesus was risen from the dead and then later they came to see the fuller meaning of what this means as Jesus explained it to them (Luke 24:26,27,44-47; Acts 2:25-32; 13:35-37). It’s the same for us. Firstly we must be sure in our hearts and minds that Jesus is risen from the dead, only then we can grow in understand about all that this means for us, both now and in the future. Let’s go back to John’s account now as we focus on the appearance of Jesus to Mary.

1. **Jesus appears to Mary (v11-18)**

Many Dutch surnames start with ‘van’ meaning ‘of’ or ‘from’. This refers to the place or area from where an ancestor originates. Mary Magdalene was from Magdala. In the Netherlands her name could have been Mary van Magdala. The equivalent in her culture in the first century was Mary Magdalene: ‘Mary of/from Magdala’. Magdala was a town in Galilee; the centre of local trade there. Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary from Magdala (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). Mary was a witness of the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:40); Matt 27:56; John 19:25), His burial (Mark 16:18; Matt 27:61), and as we’ve seen today the empty tomb (Mark 16:18; Matt 28:1-10; Luke 24:10). You may know that later church tradition identified Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50, but this connection lacks scriptural evidence.

After Peter and John had left, Mary was still outside the tomb where she was weeping. Then as she stooped to look inside, she saw two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They spoke to her saying “*Woman, why are you weeping?*” She replied with her understanding of what had occurred: "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him*" (John 20:13). Then as she turned around, she saw Jesus standing but through her teary eyes she did not yet recognise Him. On many occasions Jesus was not immediately identified by those He appeared to after His resurrection. This could have been due in some cases to grief or unbelief and/or a supernatural obscuring (Luke 24:16,31). Also, whilst recognisable, the resurrection body of Jesus was likely somewhat different in appearance (ref. 1 Cor 15:35-49).

Jesus then repeated the question asked by the angels ‘*Woman, why are you weeping?*’ and adds ‘*whom are you seeking?*’. It is not difficult to imagine Mary’s confusion at this point. As we have already noted: she was not expecting to see Jesus alive again. John records that she thought he was the cemetery gardener and that she assumed that he must have been the person who had taken the body of Jesus away. Then Jesus spoke her name ‘Mary’ and only then did she recognise Him, saying in Aramaic ‘Rabboni’ – meaning ‘teacher’. She heard His voice and then she knew it was really Him.

Remember that Jesus, the Good Shepherd had earlier said: “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*” (John 10:27). What Jesus then said to Mary is difficult to fully understand. "*Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father*” (John 20:17). This doesn’t seem to be a command not to touch His resurrection body. Matthew records that when people saw the risen Lord they ‘*took hold of his feet and worshipped him*’ (Matt 28:9). It seems most likely that Mary was clinging to Jesus as though she would never see Him again and He comforted her with the truth that His ascension would not take place for a while. She would see Him again before then.

Rather than remaining in the open tomb with Him, Jesus had an important task for Mary, saying to her “*go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’*.'" It’s incredible that Jesus entrusted what we could definitely say was the most important message of all time - “Jesus is alive” - to Mary from Magdala. She wasn’t anyone particularly special. She was not wise according to worldly standards, not powerful, or of noble birth (1 Cor 1:26). She was female and the Jewish law did not count the testimony of a woman as being valid; whereas Jesus highly valued women. Jesus was pleased to entrust the vital message about His resurrection to an ordinary woman just as He is pleased to entrust the same vital message to ordinary people like you and me so that we will go to others and tell them what we have believed.

1. **Jesus appears to His disciples (v19-25)**

It was still the first day of the week when the disciples met the resurrected Jesus for themselves; not in a tomb but in a room. John writes ‘*the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews*’ (20:19). The Greek word translated ‘locked’ literally means ‘shut’, although the tense (perfect participle) implies ‘remained shut’; hence ‘locked’ makes sense. We know that the disciples feared the Jewish authorities who had plotted to put Jesus to death. All the disciples left Jesus and fled when He was arrested (Matt 26:56). Peter was so fearful of being identified as a follower of Jesus that He denied His Lord three times (John 18:15-18; 25-27).

Jesus came into the room, where the disciples were gathered, in some miraculous way. We don’t know whether He supernaturally came through the walls or whether He opened the doors. However He entered, He came and stood among them saying the words of the conventional greeting “peace be with you”. These words are full of grace; addressed to a room full of people who had literally left Him to die alone for their sake. They really didn’t deserve such kindness, compassion and love.

Brothers and sisters, when Jesus greets us face to face in the New Heavens and New Earth as being His righteous (adopted) brothers and sisters, we too will not deserve His kindness, compassion and love either. How many times have you and I deserted our Lord and Saviour in favour of self-interest, self-preservation, pride or fear? Yet our Lord says “*in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). Jesus is full of grace and truth, and He is alive!

He presented the evidence of His physical body by showing the disciples his hands (where the nails had been driven through) and his side (which the soldiers had pierced with a spear). John, who wrote this gospel, was there and he had already believed in the resurrection on seeing the empty tomb (20:8) but here was further proof that Jesus was physically alive. The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord (20:20). The Greek word translated ‘glad’ means to rejoice. Here the NIV translation ‘*the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord*’ fits both the original language and the occasion.

Jesus then repeated His gracious greeting ‘Peace be with you’ and commissioned them saying “*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you*” (20:21). He breathed on them collectively, as a group, and said “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” (20:22). It is best to understand this bestowing of the Spirit as a foreshadowing of the coming of Spirit on the church at Pentecost. The Apostles, as co-founders of the New Testament church, together with the Old Testament prophets (Eph 2:20) are given the delegated authority of Christ to go out and proclaim His person and saving work. As founding representatives of the church they have authority to forgive the sins of some and to withhold forgiveness for others through the message they proclaim accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean that individual people, whether ordained ministers or church members, have power to make declarations about the specific spiritual state of others: ‘forgiven’ or ‘not forgiven’ – pronouncing absolution of sin like a Roman Catholic priest. It does mean, brothers and sisters, that as disciples of Christ who have received the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, God works through our proclamation of the gospel to forgive the sins of some, and not to forgive the sins of others. The gospel message we speak is grounded in the resurrection of Christ. In the words of the Apostle Paul “*we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?*” (2 Cor 2.15-16).

1. **Jesus appears to Thomas (v26-29)**

Thomas, the disciple called the Twin (Didymus in Greek) had not been present on the day when Jesus rose from the dead. John records that it was ‘eight days later’ when the disciples were again together inside with the doors locked, and that this time Thomas was with them. The method of counting the days in Bible times included the present day, so ‘eight days later’ was a week later (ref. NIV) when again the disciples were gathered together on the first day of the week. This was the next Sunday after ‘Easter Sunday’. Already a pattern was emerging of the disciples meeting together on the first day of the week. This is the practice of Christians gathering together on a Sunday which we see continuing through the book of Acts (e.g. 20:7) and onwards through mainstream church history to today.

Thomas’s response to the other disciples’ report of the resurrection has earned him the infamous name ‘doubting Thomas’! ‘Disbelieving Thomas’ would be an accurate description of the disciple who until then had not yet himself seen Jesus alive after Christ had died and been buried in the grave. For Thomas, the eyewitness testimony of the other disciples was simply not sufficient. He refused to believe without direct physical personal experience. Our text gives the impression that the sight of the body of Jesus was sufficient proof for Thomas, even though Jesus invited him to do exactly what he had required as proof…to put his finger in the nail hole, and his hand into the wound in his side…See the humble sympathetic compassion of Christ, offering his risen body to a sceptical man for close examination.

Notice that there is no rebuke to Thomas for demanding proof, just the imperative, the clear command ‘*do not disbelieve*’, literally do not be (and continue to be) disbelieving, but believe. Well, did Thomas believe or not? [Pause] We know that he believed, because he speaks a powerful confession: ‘*My Lord and my God*!’

Today, all of us are like Thomas before he met Jesus in the flesh, whether we have doubt about the resurrection of Jesus Christ or not. We too have only the eyewitness testimony of others, like John the gospel writer, upon which to decide whether Jesus really is alive.

The Bible reveals that Jesus appeared to many different people after His resurrection and before His ascension…over a period of 40 days. The Apostle Paul writes (in 1 Corinthians 15:6a) that after appearing to Peter and then to the twelve disciples … “*He appeared to more than 500 at one time*”. The Apostle Peter, speaking to the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost says in Acts 2:32 “*This Jesus God raised up again, to which**we are all witnesses*”. Peter had seen the evidence of Christ’s risen body with his own eyes, as had many, many others.

But why should **we** believe the reports of these people who lived almost 2,000 years ago? Why should **you** trust these people from a different country and culture who report a type of event that none of us have ever seen…a body dead for three days coming alive again? Here are some reasons: The lives of these disciples were completely transformed after the resurrection of Jesus. The disciples were radically changed from being scared, scattered and sceptical to joyful, bold and courageous. Within weeks of Christ’s death the disciples were, with great power “*giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 4:33)

Any and every effort was made to discredit them: The chief priests even bribed the soldiers who had guarded the tomb to say that '*His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep*' (Matthew 28:13). Yet so convinced were the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead that nobody could shut them up. They, with many others who believed on Christ, then and since, were willing to be beaten, thrown to lions, tortured, crucified, burned alive, stoned to death, sawn in two, or killed with the sword. If they had indeed stolen Jesus’ body themselves and knew him to be dead, why bother? If they had not really seen him, but just manufactured a myth to start up a new cult called the Christian church, why sacrifice so much for a falsehood? The truth is that these disciples knew that Jesus was alive. They knew that the resurrection of Christ from the dead was a physical reality. More than all of this, the Bible records the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a **historical fact**…everything in the Bible is ‘God Breathed’ – It comes to us directly from the God who never lies, but always speaks the truth.

Perhaps you are someone here today who is not sure whether Jesus is really still alive…. because you’ve never seen him in the flesh! John wrote his gospel “*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (John 20.31) That’s likely why he included an account of what happened a week after Thomas had so clearly expressed his sceptical doubts. Perhaps you wish you could have been one of those who saw the risen Lord. But even if this were possible, it would not guarantee that you would believe.

Brothers and sisters, friends, God has given us all the evidence we need in the Bible so that we will not doubt the resurrection of Christ. God has preserved the eyewitness testimonies of many people so that we will not be disbelieving but believing. John writes in v29: *Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*." We who believe but who have not seen the Risen Jesus with our own eyes are blessed with life in Him, with the gift of the Holy Spirit and with His call to proclaim the gospel to others. In v21b Jesus says to his gathered disciples “*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you*”. So as we go about our day to day lives in the name of Jesus. proclaim: He is Risen, He is risen indeed!

AMEN