

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Doubts about the resurrection?

Jesus offers convincing proof.

Scripture: John 20:19-31

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April 24, 2022

Opening Hymn: At the dawning of salvation [248]

Choruses: Jesus Is Risen From The Grave (Childer) [254] and I believe [the creed]

Closing Hymn: Thine be the glory [258]

Does it matter if you profess those beliefs
that are central to the Christian faith?

Does it make a difference if you trust
In doctrines like the Trinity,
The Virgin Birth,
Or the resurrection of the dead?

At my last church I knew an older gentleman
Whom I will call Keith.

Keith had been a church member for over 50 years.
He had been ordained an elder.
At one time he had been Clerk of Session.

During my time as his pastor,
Keith's wife was afflicted by dementia.

What started out as tiny lapses of memory,
Became a debilitating disease.

Keith dutifully (and lovingly) cared for her through her illness.

But the weight of this burden took a toll on his body
His mind, and his faith.

At one point he confessed to me,
"Steve, I'm not sure
that I believe in the resurrection anymore."

I realised he was under a lot of pressure.
Keith had a front-row seat to suffering.
And while retirement was supposed to be relaxing
He was not working full-time as a nurse.

I knew he was at a spiritual low.
And so when he told me he was wavering
in his belief in the resurrection,
I told him God's faith
was more important than our faith.

I didn't want him to tie God's salvation
To his own confidence.

Now I've reflected on this response over the years,
 And if I were able to repeat the encounter
 I think that I would respond to it differently.

While I may have saved him from fretting about his own salvation,
 my 'pastoral' response
 insulated him from the incredible consolation
 that trusting in the resurrection brings.

A wiser Steve might invite him
 To bring these doubts to God
 And ask God to rekindle his faith.

For today's lesson makes clear that Jesus wants us to believe
 That he literally rose from the grave.

PAUSE

For those who were with us on Easter, last Sunday,
 Today's Bible passage continues the story of Jesus and the disciples
 With two different post-resurrection appearances.

"The first takes place on the evening of Easter Day,
 an appearance of Jesus to his disciples,
 when Thomas is absent.

The second narrates an appearance of Jesus
 to his disciples a week later,
 when Thomas is present."ⁱ

In that first appearance
 Jesus mysteriously appears among the disciples
 Who are gathered behind locked doors.

After greeting him, the first thing Jesus does
 Is show them his hands and his sides.

[You may recall that because the crucifixion
 Took place on the day before the Sabbath,
 The Jewish leaders asked Pilate to have the legs
 Of those crucified men broken
 (to hasten their deaths)
 And have the bodies taken down.

But finding that Jesus was already dead,
 They didn't break his legs.

Instead one of the soldiers
 Stabbed him in the side,
 rupturing the membranes around his heart and/or lungs
 And bringing out a sudden rush of blood and water.]

The first thing Jesus does after greeting the disciples
 Is show them the scars from his execution:
 his hands and his side.

Jesus wants them to understand clearly
 That yes, he died,
 And now was truly alive.

We are told that the disciples were overjoyed.

Of course, as was already mentioned
 Thomas was not present that evening.

And when the other disciples shared their joy
 About encountering the dead but now risen Jesus,
 He refuses to believe.

We aren't told why.

We aren't told that he thought they ate something bad
 And were all hallucinating,
 Or that he was suspicious that Peter had cooked up
 Some sort of conspiracy that the others had bought into.

Thomas simply tells them he needs to see things for himself:

“Unless I see the nail holes in his hands,
 put my finger in the nail holes,
 and stick my hand in his side,
 I won't believe it.” He said.ⁱⁱ

And so he remains unconvinced for an entire week.

But the next Sunday evening ,Jesus reappears again:
 again among the disciples,
 Again behind locked doors.

After greeting them all, he invites Thomas
 To take a close look at his wounds, his scars.

Jesus it seems, though absent, had heard Thomas' concerns,
 And made another special appearance
 to clarify what had happened.

With this appearance,
 Thomas doesn't need any more convincing.
 Thomas doesn't need any more evidence.

He simply utters “one of the great Christological confessions
 in the New Testament.”
 “My Lord and my God!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Not everyone believes in the resurrection.

Some of the greatest Biblical scholars of a generation
(those in the Jesus Seminar)
Argued that:

“it never happened.

There’s no historical evidence for it...

[And they argue further

that Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t really matter.]

Christians can still celebrate Easter

with its symbolic message of hope and new life.”^{iv}

But if you pay any attention to the Gospel of John,

It is clear that the resurrection
is a fundamental concern of Jesus.

Not only does he show off his scars to his disciples.

He makes an additional appearance among them
So the entire group can affirm this event.

But why? Why is this so important?

Why is it so important for us to affirm together
What we sang earlier:

I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in One
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again.^v

The resurrection means that everything has changed.

In the words of writer and theologian C. S. Lewis:

“The New Testament writers speak

As if Christ’s achievement in rising from the dead
was the first event of its kind
in the whole history of the universe.

He is the ‘first fruits,’ the ‘pioneer of life.’

He has forced open a door that has been locked
since the death of the first man.

He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death.

Everything is different because He has done so.

This is the beginning of the New Creation:
a new chapter in cosmic history has been opened.”^{vi}

The resurrection is an incredible source of consolation and hope
 When the world around us
 seems to be spiralling downward:
 Floods, fires, wars, pandemics.

The resurrection is an incredible source of consolation and hope
 When our own personal lives are marked by:
 Guilt and regret, disease and death.

On Easter Jesus has inaugurated a new beginning that tells us
 That sin, death, and the Devil are not the winners.
 Jesus has conquered
 and in his power,
 We will too.

Now you may be thinking.
 "I will believe too
 if Jesus shows up for me like he did for Thomas.
 If Jesus lets me touch those scars on his hands and side."

What you should know is that it is possible to believe
 Without this sort of encounter.

While Jesus came back to convince Thomas,
 He speaks to the generations of those that follow saying:

"Even better blessings are in store
 for those who believe without seeing."^{vii}

May we believe and be blessed. Amen.

ⁱ Arland J. Hultgren "John 20:19-31" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 595

ⁱⁱ John 20:24 MSG

ⁱⁱⁱ John 20:28 NIV

^{iv} Los Angeles Times , March 11, 1995. "The Jesus Seminar Under Fire." 21 Apr. 2022, www.str.org/w/the-jesus-seminar-under-fire.

^v "This I Believe (The Creed)" Ben Fielding | Matt Crocker

^{vi} C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1947) 236–237. Hedges, Brian G. "3 Reasons the Resurrection Matters." *Christianity*, 17 Apr. 2014, www.christianity.com/god/jesus-christ/3-reasons-the-resurrection-matters.html.

^{vii} John 20:29 MSG