

# John 20:19-31

Thomas

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Very occasionally something may happen to us that's so delightful that we find it hard to take in. When we find the love of our life, perhaps, and that person loves us back. Or when we land a job that we had set our heart on, or get accepted into the college we really wanted to go to. If it's something we wanted perhaps more than anything in the world, we may find ourselves almost unable to believe it's happening. I hope you've experienced that on occasion in your life: that feeling of sheer joy, free from all worries and doubts. It's a rare thing, and it's wonderful when it happens.

In a way that's what happens with Thomas, but in his case, mixed in with it, is the fact that he missed out on the big event. Maybe there's just a little resentment at seeing the joy of the others over something that he was left out of.

I have to confess that I have a sneaking sympathy with Thomas. As I've said, he's the one who wasn't there when all the other disciples saw the risen Jesus, and he refuses to believe until he *has* seen him. But would the others have done any better in his place? During Jesus' ministry they kept misunderstanding whenever Jesus talked about his death and resurrection. Peter even rebuked Jesus for foretelling his own death, only to be rebuked by Jesus in turn. When Jesus was arrested, the disciples ran away, leaving him to be tried and executed on his own. So is Thomas really worse than the others?

In fact, I often think that Thomas would do very well as a modern disciple. These days people are much less willing to embrace a simple faith than previous generations were. They want proof, scientific evidence, before they'll believe something. Well, maybe not horoscopes or superstitions, but anything to do with religion. For many people, science is the new religion, and Christianity has to be subjected to the same rigorous investigation that might be applied to a hypothesis in physics, or, for that matter, to a new theory in history or any number of other subjects.

I don't say that's bad. My father used to say that the truth can stand up to scrutiny. If Christianity is true, we as Christians shouldn't be afraid of inquiry. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? If he did, what harm will it do if people ask questions about it, even display a little skepticism? Even if they refuse point blank to believe it, they won't make it untrue. On the other hand, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we as Christians shouldn't continue to assert that he did. Of course, that would make our faith meaningless, but there'd be no point in trying to sustain it if we knew it was false.

Perhaps the first question to ask is this. If Jesus *didn't* rise from the dead, is Christianity still sustainable? Paul answers that question at some length in his first letter to the Corinthians.

*...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people.* (1 Cor 15:14-19)

Christ's resurrection is a cornerstone of our faith. Jesus refers to it many times during his ministry. If, after all, he wasn't raised from death, then he was wrong, indeed deluded, on this point. That would cast very serious doubt on many other areas of his teaching — certainly his claim to be the Son of God, his proclamations about forgiveness, eternal life and much more.

You may have heard of the “floodgates” analogy that’s sometimes applied to the Bible. The argument goes that the Bible must be totally infallible because, if you once accept that there’s a single mistake in it, the whole edifice crumbles and we can’t trust any of it. That, to my mind, is to overstate the case. But in this instance, if Jesus is wrong about such an important prediction as his own return from the dead, it undermines his entire teaching to the point of collapse. And if we’ve based our whole life and beliefs on something that turns out to be completely wrong, no wonder Paul says that we’re to be pitied more than all people.

However, if we accept that Jesus needs to have been raised from the dead in order for Christianity to be true, the next question is: was he? Just because we as Christians need it to be true doesn’t make it so. We must ask ourselves, then, on what basis we believe that it *is* true. The Bible says so, of course. More than that, the fact that Christianity survived those early years after Jesus’ death points toward it.

It seems clear that the disciples genuinely believed Jesus was alive. It would be very difficult – even impossible – to sustain that claim in the face of fierce persecution if you knew it to be false. Of course, they might themselves have been deluded. But if that were so, something must have made them believe that Jesus was alive. And I find it impossible to accept that they could have been convinced of it, if it weren’t true. Thomas does us a great service there. He’s no softheaded sentimentalist who believes what he wants to hear. He needs proof. And he’s not going to be satisfied with anything less.

Various theories have been put forward to explain how the disciples came to believe in Jesus’ resurrection, on the assumption that it didn’t really happen. One is a kind of mass hysteria or shared delusion. It doesn’t ring true for me that that could happen at all, still less that the people concerned could go on believing it for the rest of their lives.

Another theory is that the disciples simply couldn’t accept that Jesus was dead — in other words, they *wanted* to believe he was alive, so they *did* believe it. Well, I’d like to believe I’m a millionaire, or a great sportsman, or a movie star. I have a sufficient grip on reality to know that I’m none of those things. I’d like to believe that a number of people I’ve known and loved are still alive; but I know perfectly well that they aren’t. People with healthy minds don’t believe things just because they’d like them to be true — at least, not things that are objective facts. We might think we’re better looking and smarter than we really are, but we don’t think we’re Napoleon or a poached egg.

The next question we might want to ask is this: if Jesus *is* alive today, how do I know he is? Even if the resurrection took place, Jesus only returned to earth for six weeks or so before being taken up to heaven. Is he still alive now, and if he is, does he have any influence on my life?

In answer to that we have the books of the Bible written by Paul and others to the early church. We have church history down the centuries. And we have the testimony of Christians who are alive today, including those we know personally. But in the end it has to come down to subjective experience.

To be a Christian in the fullest sense involves more than just believing a creed and certainly more than just living a good life. It’s about having a relationship with a living person — Jesus himself. We can talk to Jesus, listen to him, praise him, ask for his help and guidance, just enjoy being with him. Christians who do these things know that there’s someone there who’s responding, even though they can’t prove it scientifically.

If only one person believed they were in touch with Jesus, if a few hundred or even a few thousand, it might be possible to dismiss them as cranks. But there are millions of Christians worldwide, to say nothing of those who’ve lived during the last two thousand years. Are they all wrong? I don’t believe so.

You may be listening to this, thinking, “I already accept that Jesus is alive. I don’t need to be convinced.” Even so, it’s good to revisit our belief occasionally. We might ask ourselves: Do I really know exactly what I believe and why I believe it? Could I explain it to someone else?

Then again, maybe we *are* a little like Thomas after all. It’s not that we don’t believe: like Thomas, we may have been as loyal a follower of Jesus as anyone for years. But when it comes to such a major miracle as the resurrection, perhaps there’s the occasional niggling doubt. What if it didn’t really happen? How do I know it *did*?

Jesus rebuked Thomas for doubting. But he didn’t tell him he was unworthy to be a disciple any longer. Instead he showed him the wounds on his hands and side. It was a response of gentleness and love.

We may consider that we’ve failed Jesus in the past — if we have, we’re in good company. All of his original disciples failed him at one time or another. But Jesus never gives up on us; he always gives us another chance. Whenever we turn away, God is always there waiting to welcome us back.