

GOD'S LOVE IS STRONGER THAN YOUR DOUBT



Scripture:

Revelation 1:4-8

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



We have seven weeks in this Easter Season leading up to Pentecost. Many people in the church believe these are the most important seven weeks in

the whole year, more important than Advent leading up to Christmas. Surprising?

THE RESURRECTION

That is because without the resurrection and the appearance of Jesus after his crucifixion there would be no Christianity in existence today. It would just have been a sad story about a miraculous Messiah-like man who was put to death for becoming a political threat to the Roman and Jewish leaders. The name of Jesus would have faded away and his memory long gone without the resurrection and his appearance and commissioning of the disciples.

Do you recall before the resurrection how down trodden and scared his disciples were? Most of them, except John and the main women disciples, were most likely running around hiding and dashing so the Romans wouldn't catch and crucify them, too.

Their adrenaline was probably pumping very hard and only calmed down when Mary Magdalene announced that the tomb was empty and that Jesus had appeared and spoken to her. Then they all (except for Thomas) gathered together in an upper room to figure out what to do next, when Jesus came and breathed the peace of the Holy Spirit onto them.

He waited a week before he met with them again and this time Jesus directly addressed doubting Thomas' unbelief. Jesus took the time to meet the needs of Thomas by showing him his hands and his side. He needed Thomas to spread his ministry, so Jesus commissioned him to spread the Good News along with the others after that eventful night.

DO YOU DOUBT?

What do you think of all this? Do you doubt?

**William Shakespeare said this about doubt:
"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose
the good we oft might win,
by fearing to attempt."**

This could apply to doubt in your (and my) faith as well. When you doubt, your lack of faith may be preventing you from experiencing the good you could have in your life by attempting to have faith. Doubt gives you an excuse to not expand your spiritual development, and puts your faith in a static state, not advancing or enhancing your life. Yet many of us let our doubts become obstacles to fully experiencing a life of faith.

What would you say if a pollster called you up on the phone and asked if you believed Christ was resurrected? According to a Rasmussen telephone survey published on Easter Monday, seventy-five percent of the one-thousand they telephone polled believe Christ rose from the dead, only fifteen percent do not and ten percent were not sure. Surprised? I was!

Is it impossible to believe that Christ could truly rise from the dead?

Steph Curry's favorite verse is "Remember, nothing is impossible with God." Is it too incredulous to think an angel could have been in the tomb?

HARD TO BELIEVE?

There are some other features to this story that are hard to believe.

For example: It is extremely radical to believe that a woman was given the important job of announcing the news that Christ was not in the tomb. And it seems even more surprising that it was written down that way in the scriptures. There are valid reasons to believe that women were included in Christ's three year ministry on earth, but many of the details about their work and support of him were not written in the scriptures.

Yet, this, the announcement of the most important event in human history, Christ's resurrection, was given by a woman! (Which actually is consistent with the radical liberating ways of Christ.) Remember previously that he, a Jewish Rabbi, talked to a Samaritan woman at a well. She then became the first evangelist. He healed a hemorrhaging (untouchable) woman, and set free a woman accused of adultery. These things were very radical in those days. Jesus often found ways to raise up the status of women in a time when they were severely oppressed.

The status of women was demonstrated by the reaction Peter had to Mary's announcement. When Peter and the disciples heard that Jesus had appeared to Mary in the garden and gave his first post resurrection instructions to her, the disciples did not immediately accept her news. Peter had to run and check out the empty tomb himself. Even after that, they didn't have a big party to celebrate publicly or tell the Roman leaders, "I told you so!"

They kept the Good News very quiet at first because Jesus told them to. Until Jesus appeared to the rest of them and gave instructions over the next

few weeks, the disciples weren't sure how to respond to the news of his resurrection. In the next seven weeks before he ascended to heaven there were many appearances and instructions given. We will be addressing them in the next six sermons.

GOD'S LOVE

Today we look at how God's love is stronger than doubt. Jesus was so willing to do all he could to help Thomas with his doubt because he loved him so deeply. Jesus did not get offended that Thomas doubted. God understands our doubts and our need for proof.

I found Marcus Borg's examination of the resurrection helpful in thinking about our doubts and skepticisms.

Marcus Borg was a very progressive theologian and Bible scholar and he concluded that we "can say this with certainty about the meaning of Easter... that it is twofold: Jesus lives and is Lord."

Borg explains that both convictions (that Jesus lives and is Lord) are grounded in experience, not just hearsay. Some of Jesus' followers experienced him after his death as a figure of the present, not just of the past. And they experienced him as a divine reality, "one with God."

VISIONS

Many of these experiences were visions. Paul's experience of the risen Jesus was on the road to Damascus. This event is described three times in Acts 9, 22, and 26, and referred to by Paul in Galatians 1. It was clearly a vision that happened a few years after the death of Jesus.

In First Corinthians 15, Paul refers to his experience on the road as belonging in a list of other visions of Jesus, such as Peter's, many of the disciples, James, and five hundred people at the same time. Visions are about "seeing," as the word implies. Often visions involve seeing and hearing a person in bodily form and can even include a sense of touching or being embraced.

But visions do not always include seeing a bodily form. As Acts describes Paul's vision of the risen Christ, Paul saw a brilliant light, but not a bodily form. Then a voice identified the brilliant

light as Jesus. Paul confidently reports in First Corinthians 9:1, "I have seen the Lord."

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

In addition to visions of Jesus, there were non-visionary experiences of the same presence and power that his followers had known in Jesus during his life on earth. The gospel of Luke said, "The Spirit of the Lord" was upon him, and his followers continued to experience the same Spirit even after his death.

And there was something about these experiences that led to the second meaning of Easter in the gospels and the New Testament. Not only that Jesus lives, in the present and not just in the past, but that he is "Lord," a divine reality, one with God and having the qualities of God.

Paul refers to the risen Jesus in Acts and in his letters as "Jesus is Lord." So also in the story of Thomas in today's passage, when Jesus appears to him, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

Studies suggest that about half of surviving spouses will have at least one vivid experience of their deceased spouse. But if they do, they do not exclaim "My Lord and my God," as if their spouse is now Lord and one with God. But there was something about the experiences of Jesus after his death that led to this conclusion that this was our Lord and our God appearing to them. They were experiences of the sacred and not just "ghostly" experiences of a dead person. But exactly what did they see, a body or a spirit?

A PHYSICAL REALITY?

A physical body resurrection means fleshly, molecular, protoplasmic existence. But the risen Jesus was not initially a physical reality, yet by the time he appeared to Thomas he seems to have become physical enough to touch at that point.

But how if he was risen physically could Jesus suddenly appear in a locked room (John 20)? He journeyed physically on the Road to Emmaus with two of his followers for a couple of hours and was not recognized, and when he was finally recognized, he vanished (Luke 24).

The resurrected Christ appeared in both Jerusalem and Galilee, and appeared to Stephen in his dying moments (Acts 7). He appeared to Paul in or near Damascus as a brilliant light (Acts 9). And according to Revelation Chapter 1, Jesus appeared on an island off the coast of Turkey. If these

scriptural descriptions of Christ's post-resurrection appearances are not about Jesus being restored to his previous life as the same physical being, then what do they testify to?

SPIRITUAL OR MYSTICAL

Some biblical scholars who have analyzed his resurrection don't approve of viewing the resurrected Jesus as "spiritual" either. They say the spiritual explanation gives his resurrection less significance than it deserves. It's "just spiritual" assumes it was not truly real. Yet the ancient understanding of "spiritual" considered it a reality that was more important, than the space-time world of our ordinary everyday experience.

In ancient days the resurrection of Jesus would have fit well into the realm of what was understood then as "spiritual" or "mystical."

Currently in our modern era, Reverend Borg believed that the resurrection of Jesus was possibly all three: spiritual, mystical and physical.

He concluded that "The central meaning of Easter is not about what exactly happened to the corpse of Jesus. Its central meanings are that Jesus continues to be known and that he is Lord. Clearly the tomb couldn't hold him.

Benediction:

May the loving power of God, which raised Jesus to new life, strengthen you in hope, enrich you with his love, and fill you with great joy in the faith!

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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He's loose in the world. He's still here. And he's still recruiting for the kingdom of God, because he died loving you.

Greater love has no one than this than to lay down his life for his friends. Amen