

Believing without Seeing?

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- [0 : 00] Well, perhaps you've heard the phrase, seeing is believing. Seeing is believing. It's the kind of thing people say when they are unconvinced, to say the least about something they've been told.
- We were getting a flight once, and as we were waiting in the airport, I went to fill up my water bottle, and on the way back, walking the other way towards me was George Osborne.
- For those of you born this millennium, he used to be the chancellor, what feels like a long time ago now. I told Susie, and she said, really? Are you sure?
- Now, she could well have said, seeing is believing. I'm not going to believe until I've seen him. Now, we didn't see him again, but it turns out we were on the same flight as Ed Balls.
- He was once education secretary. It wasn't the same as seeing George, but seeing Ed convinced her at least that it was plausible that the two of them were in the same building.
- [1 : 09] Normally, we trust what we're told, don't we? We don't question everything. But if what we're told seems a bit out there, or it's a big claim, or it has significant implications for our lives, then we are more cautious.
- Show me, don't tell me. Right? Seeing is believing. And that's not wrong. And that's not wrong. Today, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. He is risen.
- That's the claim at the heart of the Christian faith, that on the third day after he was put to death, Jesus rose bodily from the grave. And that certainly counts, doesn't it, as a huge and significant claim.
- If it's true, then life as we know it can never be the same. And there is nothing else we can do but live for him. If it's false, then those of us who do live for him are living a lie, and it's a waste of time.
- And there's no in-between. Right? There's a claim about history that either did or didn't happen. Either George and Ed were at the airport, or they weren't.
- [2 : 27] Either Jesus Christ rose from the dead, or he didn't. And the fact that most people today don't find themselves in a church celebrating his resurrection reminds us that this is still a sticking point.
- Seeing is believing. You say he's alive, but, well, I don't see him, and so I don't believe. And for us as Christians, that can knock our confidence, can't it?
- We believe he did rise again. But if we're honest, sometimes we don't really want to bring it up just in case somebody knows something we don't. Or maybe it's less certain than we've been told or we feel that it is.
- And so we go on sort of half-living the Christian life because we're not fully convinced that the resurrection can take the full weight of our lives.
- A little bit like kind of stepping, tiptoeing onto ice that we are worried might break under us, rather than treading confidently on solid ground that could hold us up.

- [3 : 34] Well, if you're not sure today, and you are feeling not as confident, you're not alone. Because John tells us about a man called Thomas who also wanted more.
- All right, how's this for an ultimatum? Listen to this. The other disciples told him, we've seen the Lord, but he said to them, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.
- We tell ourselves, or we like to tell ourselves, people were just more gullible back then. They weren't as cynical. They were more superstitious. Clearly, they were no more easily convinced of somebody coming back from the dead than we are today.
- The others say Christ is risen. Thomas says, seeing is believing. Show me, don't tell me. But this morning, friends, we're going to see how that changed for him, and how it can change us, therefore, wherever we stand with Jesus today.
- Firstly, then, let's see the claim. They saw the Lord. Now, we're focusing just on these verses at the end of chapter 20, but there's not just one sighting of Jesus post-resurrection.
- [5 : 02] So, Peter and John have gone to the tomb, and the body is not there. Mary sees Jesus himself in the garden of the cemetery and speaks with him.
- And so, she also says, I have seen the Lord. And then, as we read that evening, even more people saw him, the disciples, at least 10 of them, minus Judas and, of course, Thomas, who wasn't there, were in a locked room, we're told, out of fear.
- Now, I guess if people knew that they followed Jesus, they feared that they would suffer the same torture and execution as he did. But even after Mary has told them, I've seen the Lord, they're not prepared, right, for what happens next.
- Have a glance at verse 19. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you.
- Suddenly, he is there in the room. We're told, verse 20, he showed them his hands and his side. That is, the holes in his hands where the nails had been that had hung him to the cross and the wound in his side where the spear had pierced him.
- [6 : 24] Then the disciples were glad, we read, when they saw the Lord. In a moment, we're just going to tease out a few of the threads and see what that means for them and for us.
- But just now, I want us to pause and drink this in. The bare fact, this simple truth, that they saw the risen Lord back from the dead.
- His same body with the scars. This same Jesus who they had walked and talked with over the past three or so years.
- The same Jesus who they had seen dragged away to be stripped and beaten and humiliated, given a show trial, sent to carry his cross and be crucified.
- The same Jesus who they know had died and been buried. This same Jesus is now standing with them in a locked room, walking, talking, breathing, showing them his body.
- [7 : 35] Friends, this is their first-hand eyewitness testimony that Sunday, verse 25. We have seen the Lord.
- Whatever you think of their claim, that claim is the basis of the Bible and Christianity. that is where the first followers of Jesus planted their flag.
- This is what we and two billion Christians across the world are celebrating this Sunday, that Christ is risen and they saw him back from the dead.
- Why does that matter so much then? Well, just to pull on those threads, firstly, because he comes in peace. It's no coincidence that those are the first words Jesus says to his people in his resurrection.

I just think what else Jesus might have opened with. Didn't I tell you? Or, why did you leave me? No, no guilt, no telling off, no shame, only this, peace be with ye.

[8 : 50] He does have a lot to say to them. We read elsewhere that he spent the next 40 days teaching them about the kingdom of God, but right now, this is the first thing he wants them to hear on Resurrection Sunday is what he left them with the night leading into Good Friday.

Peace, I leave with ye. My peace, I give ye. Not as the world gives do I give. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

He doesn't want that to wash over them, does he? He says it again, verse 21, Jesus said to them, peace be with ye. And again, the following Sunday, verse 26, Jesus came, stood among them and said, peace be with you.

The risen Christ comes bringing peace to his people. And friends, verse 20 makes clear that that peace flows from what he did in those three days.

When he had said, peace be with you, he showed them his hands and his side, the wounds that prove his suffering and death, the living body that proves his resurrection. His dying and rising again gives us peace in a world that is confused and hostile to the king and kingdom that we serve.

[10 : 12] What confidence and security then this Sunday gives us through his death and resurrection to unlock the doors, open them wide, and step back out into a world that doesn't see and doesn't believe.

that peace, that security and confidence is ours today, brothers and sisters who believe in him. Don't let your heart be fearful, troubled, threatened, but confident, secure, and at peace for he is risen.

He also sent them out with the Holy Spirit. Jesus says to them, verse 21, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending ye. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit.

And now generally people would say that they didn't receive the Holy Spirit for another 50 days at Pentecost, but Jesus breathing on them pictures what would happen on that day when the Spirit, the breath of God, would fall on them.

That's all to come, but the point here is that one of the first things Jesus confirms in his resurrection is that he is sending them out in the power of the Spirit.

[11 : 33] That's what the peace is for, so that they wouldn't be paralyzed by fear when he sends them back out through the bolted door and into the world that they're hiding from. Now, in the first place, this is for those guys in the room, the first witnesses, the apostles or the twelve, they're the ones who saw him, right, firsthand, in person.

So their witness is unique. We can't replicate it. None of us have seen Jesus in the flesh standing in front of us as they did, so whatever we know about the resurrection today depends on what they saw.

So by sending them out in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is kick-starting the spread of that message to the rest of the world and to generations to come. The resurrection isn't the kind of thing that you have to have been there to get it.

It's something that Jesus is determined will be shared and spread. And the rest is history, as they say, because here we sit 2,000 years later and 3,500 miles away from where they sat, and we are celebrating this fact, the resurrection of Christ, along with Christians, brothers and sisters, on every inhabited continent of our globe.

So friends, no sooner had Jesus been raised than he wanted you to know about it. He sees this as part and parcel of the same mission he was sent into the world to do.

[13 : 18] As the Father sent him, so he sent them. So don't think that it's by accident that we're sitting here today or that you're hearing this.

It is by design of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And of course, if you believe the news, then he sends you out too in the power of that same Holy Spirit to share and to spread the apostles' witness.

We have seen the Lord. And that matters lastly because of the news of his resurrection comes with an offer. Verse 23, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.

If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. The point isn't that those individuals had the power to decide who was forgiven and who wasn't. Rather, it's as people responded to the good news that they shared that their sins would either be forgiven or not.

Which is an incredible offer, isn't it? Just think of the lengths that people go to to try to get forgiveness from God. In the Middle Ages, famously, people paid a lot of money to try to get God to forgive them.

[14 : 38] People go on pilgrimages. People do special ceremonies or rituals. Sometimes that involves animals being sacrificed. Sometimes that involves self-harm.

When all the time God offers human beings complete, unconditional forgiveness simply by putting our trust in what Jesus has done for us by dying and rising again.

If we're Christians today, it's a reminder that this is the only reason we are forgiven our sins. Nothing that we can do or say can add anything or take anything away from the death and resurrection of Jesus because he has done it.

Our sins are forgiven if our trust is in him. if you know you're not a Christian here, know that as you hear today about Jesus coming back from the dead, that isn't only a historical claim for you to weigh up, though it is that.

It is also an offer from God with eternal consequences. Believe in the resurrection, trust in the one who was raised, and you will receive full forgiveness for all the wrong you have ever done or ever will do, because Jesus will have died and risen for you.

[16 : 06] So that's the claim, and that's why it matters. They saw the Lord, therefore we can have peace in our heart, hear the good news, and be forgiven of all our sins when we put our trust in him.

And that's three of many really important and wonderful things that Christ's resurrection secures for us who believe. But that's just the thing, isn't it?

Is this all too good to be true? Well, now let's meet Thomas, the disciple who wasn't there when the others saw the Lord, who didn't hear all this, and therefore didn't believe.

He only believed when he saw. This is our second point. Let's hear him again, verse 25, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

Perhaps you know people who say things like this, perhaps you are a person who says something like this. I want to believe, but I have to have more.

[17 : 18] You've told me that these things are true, well, show me, seeing is believing. well, friends, if that's you, I think Thomas' words are of great encouragement because they are included in the gospel.

Jesus knew people just like this. And whoever we are, it's of great encouragement because Jesus was gracious to him, proved himself to Thomas, and put his doubts to rest.

See, what Jesus does now is done just for Thomas and people just like him. the others in the room have already seen it, but the passage points out, verse 26, that this time Thomas was with them.

And Jesus does exactly what he did the first time, but purely for his benefit. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, peace be with ye.

Thomas does not get a lesser or watered down version. He actually gets more, doesn't he? Try to put yourself in that room, okay? Imagine this.

[18 : 26] Imagine, you have said, unless I am able to actually put my fingers into Jesus' side, I discount everything that you told me about him.

Then Jesus said to Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands. Put out your hand and put it in my side.

Don't disbelieve, but believe. Imagine that. Thomas had said seeing wasn't enough. He raised the stakes. I want to touch him, put my finger into the hole where the nails had been.

But Jesus rises to meet his doubts. See, Thomas' demands are not beyond the reach of the evidence. As if Jesus showing himself to the disciples was just an illusion, just a trick of the light.

As if when they put out their hands they would see it was just smoke and mirrors or a hologram. No, Jesus can be touched. His wounds can be felt.

[19 : 35] His body is real. The evidence bears up under Thomas' heightened scrutiny. He doubted what he had been told. He put the resurrection to the test.

But Jesus put his doubts to rest. And he says to Jesus, my Lord and my God. Of course, Jesus isn't here for us to see and touch now.

The point is that our faith isn't a guess. It is not wishful thinking. It is a historical claim that is backed up by proof. Jesus clears even the highest bar when he offers his resurrected body to be poked and prodded by a skeptic.

And that skeptic, faced with the living evidence, can't help but believe. Not as a surrender to mysticism or emotionalism, instead of reason and experience, but as a rational surrender to what was right in front of him.

So that peace and forgiveness and that offer and invitation of God are not too good to be true. It's just true. They are good because it's true.

[20 : 55] Let Thomas' turnaround encourage us, brothers and sisters, that our faith in Jesus has real-world substance. It's credible. It carries weight. It can be tested and inspected and researched, and it will stand up to questioning.

We do not have to be afraid of people who have questions, people who doubt, people who disbelieve, because the gospel comes with proof, and Jesus can put those doubts to rest.

And friends, if you're not convinced, well, don't let this be the end, but the beginning. Let me invite you to test it. Don't write off the resurrection just because it doesn't fit into the way you think the world must work.

Have you ever wondered why the resurrection is believed by so many people throughout the world and some of the most intelligent people who have ever lived? It's the basis of any research, isn't it, that you test your hypothesis.

You don't write the conclusion before you've tested the data. So test Jesus' resurrection on its own terms. Does it stand up? I or others here would love to have that chat with you and maybe give you somewhere to start.

[22 : 09] So do you come and find us if that's you. We'd love to talk with you about that. But finally, we come to Jesus and John's invitation to us today, which is there in verse 29 and 31, believe without seeing.

Jesus said to Thomas, have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Jesus does now what actors call breaking the fourth wall. He's speaking directly to us as readers, we who live in other times and other places who weren't there to see him in the flesh, who don't get to touch the risen Lord Jesus, and yet believe in him.

And hear what he says to us today. He blesses us. Blessed are they, brothers and sisters, who live by faith and not by sight.

Now, does that mean, after all, that Jesus does want us to have blind faith? Well, no. In fact, that would contradict the very reason John wrote his gospel. Just glance at verse 30 and 31 with me and see.

[23 : 23] Why did John write his book in the first place? Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written 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.

In other words, John wrote down what it is we need to see and know in order to believe in Jesus. His gospel is to give us a window to look through and see what they saw.

You know, the fact that we haven't personally seen or touched the risen Lord Jesus doesn't take anything away from the fact that they did. And if they did, then he is risen and alive whether we have personally seen him or not.

Like watching a GoPro video. Do you do this on YouTube sometimes? This is what I spend my free time doing, watching people skydive and hang glide and cave dive and all sorts of things that I would never think of doing.

But they stick a camera, don't they, on their helmet and they film it and it's marvelous. And you never stop to think, do you? I wonder if that place really exists. Or did that guy actually do that?

[24 : 47] No, as you are watching, you're seeing what they saw and believe that it happened that those places do exist because they have left us a reliable source, a reliable window to look through.

That's what Jesus means when he blesses us for believing without seeing, not blind faith, but faith that's based on the first-hand eyewitness testimony of those who were there.

Faith that sees through their eyes what we can't see with our own. In a sense, that should have been enough for Thomas too. Jesus implies that with his question, have you believed because you've seen me?

It's interesting, isn't it? We wish so much, don't we, so much that we had got to be there. But the twist is that Jesus actually says it's more blessed to be where we are now, not needing to touch and see before we rest the whole weight of our life on him.

Brothers and sisters, do you know how blessed you are to know Jesus in the way you do today. Peter was the first person to get into the empty tomb on Resurrection Sunday.

[26 : 08] He was there when Jesus showed them his hands and side. But as he writes to Christians in his first letter, he talks about the tested genuineness of their faith.

Though you have not seen him, he says, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter had seen Jesus, but he says that these believers are truly blessed who love him without ever having laid their eyes on him, and who don't need to before they rest their faith in him and are saved by him.

And Peter does not say or think, does he, that they should be envious of him. You guys have it all, he says, without ever having stepped in the tomb or seen him in his resurrection.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Brothers and sisters, we are truly blessed today as we rest our faith and hope in the risen Lord Jesus founded on this testimony.

[27 : 30] And friends, if you're here this Easter Sunday and don't yet believe, this is where to begin. Press into it. Take up this testimony, this gospel, read it for yourself, see the real Jesus through the eyes of those who were there to see him.

Don't leave what you've heard here today because again, the reason this is all here for us is not an interesting puzzle of history or to itch our curiosity or even to persuade you of a fact.

John says it's so that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, have life in his name.

That life is a quantity of life, it's life that never ends. But more than that, I think it is a quality of life, life in relationship with our creator, life as God designed and created it to be, and that is in this world now as well as in the world to come.

Jesus called it life in all of its fullness. We've considered a few threads of that life this morning, peace in our hearts, the forgiveness of our sins, to live each day in the power of the Holy Spirit and to live with a purpose, to spread and to share the best news that the world has ever heard.

[29 : 00] We haven't even touched on the gift of prayer or the love that we have in the family of God's people, the church, or the hope we have that when we die, one day we will be raised just as Jesus was raised in a new world in which there is no sadness or suffering or fear or death anymore.

Easter Sunday holds out this promise of life to us which becomes ours simply when we rest the whole weight of our lives upon Jesus through faith in him.

John wants you to have that life today friend and so do we his people. When you read the gospel see through their eyes believe in Jesus and have eternal resurrection life through his resurrection for you.

Let's pray and praise him for that just now. Let's pray. Lord we praise you that you have overcome the grave defeating death and with it crushing our sin.

Lord we praise you that you took all our sin and failure into that grave with you and left it there when you rose never to be remembered never to be dredged up again.

[30 : 31] We thank you for your grace in having shown yourself to your people even when they doubted you. Lord we confess in our hearts we believe help our unbelief.

Lord we pray that you would help us your church to live with that peace and confidence that your resurrection gives us to live and speak for you in a world that doesn't know you. We thank you for that gift of the Holy Spirit that you pour out upon us in your resurrected life.

We thank you that he lives with us and empowers us to live for you. And Father we pray for those here today who as yet don't know this life that we have. And Lord we pray that even if it is the beginning that you would set them on that path to eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and that they would know that new path to that living hope that comes through him.

These things we pray in Jesus name. Amen.