

RESPONSES TO THE RESURRECTION

We are a week on from Easter Sunday, when we celebrate the greatest miracle that ever happened. The shocking and sudden death of Jesus at the hands of Roman executioners – crucified in agony on a cross. His burial in a tomb. And three days later the miracle of his resurrection; not from the brink of death, but from death itself.

Easter is at the very **epicentre** of the Christian faith.

The doctrine of the death and resurrection of Jesus is not an optional extra for a bespoke faith – or a make-your-own spirituality.

Without Jesus' resurrection there is no good news at all.

“Christianity is in its very essence a resurrection religion. The concept of resurrection lies at its heart. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed.”
(John Stott)

“The Christian story is precisely the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into his own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him. It is precisely one great miracle. If you take that away there is nothing specifically Christian left.”
C.S.Lewis

It is the very core of the gospel:

Paul to Timothy:
“Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel...”
(2 Timothy 2:8 NIV)

If there is no resurrection – there is no gospel. There is no Christian faith. There is no life after death.

But why is it so important? What **DOES** it mean? What is it all about?! And what is your **personal** response to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

What has it got to do with you?
What has Jesus got to do with you?

“If Jesus rose from the dead you have to accept all he said, if he didn’t rise from the dead then why worry about anything he said...If Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything.” (Tim Keller)

This is a big old doctrine. It's a big statement. It's either the greatest truth, or the most fantastical lie you have ever heard. If it is true, it demands a response – if it is not true, you must dismiss Easter, and Christ and Christianity.

And in Jesus' day, people responded very differently to the news of Jesus' death and resurrection. I would like to look at three of the responses this morning. I would like to look at three characters in the bible and their response to Jesus. I think that, as we look at these individuals, we may well see something of ourselves – our thoughts, our feelings, our reactions – in them.

1) Thomas the doubter

John 20:24-29

Thomas has had a bad press over the years. His name has become synonymous with being a doubter. We refer to “doubting Thomas”. But I feel a certain amount of sympathy for him. According to the gospel accounts (there are four different accounts of Jesus life and death and resurrection in the bible – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – we call them the gospels...) on the first Sunday of the resurrection Jesus appeared to some

women, to Peter and John, to a couple walking to the little town of Emmaus, and to ten of the apostles. But Thomas missed all this.

John 20:24-25

His is the kind of doubt that springs from hurt and disappointment. He does not want to be duped. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and then Jesus died. Thomas is traumatised. Nothing makes sense. He is lonely and scared. He isn't going to be easily talked into having faith in Jesus again. He has opened himself up to all that before and it has ended in bitter disappointment and a deep dose of doubt.

Thomas is very much of the school: "I'll believe it when I see it!"

So, as the other disciples and followers of Jesus tell him that they have seen the risen Christ, his response is one of considerable scepticism. You may have seen a double. An apparition. His twin. A ghost. Maybe it's a psychological phenomenon of grief.

So I won't believe it's actually Jesus – the Jesus that I watched die on the cross – unless I can see the nail prints in his hands. I want to put my fingers in the holes. I want to touch his side where I saw the sword driven in.

Thomas isn't even saying, I'll believe it when I see it. Even that isn't enough. He is saying, "I'll believe it when I see it and when I touch it and when I feel it."

A week passes and then this:

John 20:26-28

A week of wondering, and questioning and remembering. Thinking about what Jesus has said and done while he was alive, mulling over the claims of the others to have seen the resurrected Lord...

This may be you. You look at others, at Christians, who claim to know Jesus and follow Jesus. You see their exuberance and their excitement. But you are not so sure. You want a little more evidence..

And all the time Thomas is in this position, wrestling with his doubts.

I think I understand doubt and scepticism. I think I have a fairly sceptical nature. If someone calls me from a call centre, offering me some great new product or service, I invariably do not want to know. If I pick up the phone and hear a long silence, followed by a click and a man with an Indian accent telling me that his name is Dave and he is not trying to sell me anything, I have to admit to you that I hang up. I delete unsolicited emails, I don't click on links, I don't read circulars, I don't like cold callers, I'm not on Facebook, I'm sceptical about so-called experts, and I find certain things that are done in the name of Christianity and Christ distasteful and incredible – literally not believable, and sometimes stupid.

Sometimes I wrestle with doubts and questions. I have a lot of questions that I want to ask God when I see him.

But as the German-born theologian, **Paul Tillich, states: “Doubt is not the opposite of faith, doubt is an element of faith.”**

Or to put it in a slightly more colloquial way: “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith.”

It gets you wriggling and it gets you moving.

So Thomas – doubting sceptical Thomas - finds himself, after a week of thinking and questioning - in front of Jesus. He gets to touch the nail prints and he gets to put his hand in Jesus' side – and seeing the risen Jesus before him, he draws the only conclusion that he can draw – he falls to his knees, and he says: **“My Lord, my God.”**

Jesus you are who you say you are – you alone have the power to forgive sins, you are the Messiah, the Son of God – and I bow down before you in reverent worship.

My Lord, my God.

Jesus' response comes straight to us this morning:

John 20:29

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Maybe you can understand Thomas. Maybe you are a doubter. You are sceptical. You are not sure you believe everyone else's report about Jesus. How will you respond to Jesus and his challenge to you to believe, even though you do not physically see him?

The gift of God to Thomas is FAITH. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

2) Cleopas the disillusioned

Luke 24:13-35

Cleopas and his unnamed companion are walking to a village called Emmaus on resurrection day – and as they are walking and discussing everything that has happened, Jesus – now raised from the dead, comes and walks alongside them. For some reason, they do not recognise him.

The couple are in a state of disappointment, and disillusionment and dejection.

Jesus asks them what they are discussing.

17: "They stood still, their faces downcast."

21: They had hoped that he would be the one who was going to redeem Israel.

Things had not turned out the way they had expected.

25-27: Jesus challenges them and their unbelief. He then starts to explain to them from the scriptures that the Messiah needed to come and to suffer and die and be raised again. They have failed to grasp and understand the full message of salvation and rescue and redemption – they have failed to understand Jesus' mission, his teachings and his words – but now he gives them a bible study they will never forget and traces and works his way through the law and the prophets, explaining everything to them.

There is a bigger picture. You may not understand it. All you see is your part, your page, your story. You know the environments you have moved in and the experiences that you have had of church and Jesus.

Maybe along the way, things have not turned out the way you expected. Maybe you are left seeking to understand, and yet you are left with **a downcast face and disillusioned heart**.

The gift that came to this couple was the gift of REVELATION. Revelation from scripture, revelation from the bible, and direct revelation – all of a sudden - of who Jesus was. Their eyes and their understanding are opened and all of a sudden they see and perceive Jesus as if for the first time.

It can be like that for us. For you. This very moment Jesus knows where you are. He knows the road that you are walking along. He knows the state of your soul. And whatever our state, he still meets us with his own person framed in the beautiful context of his word – the scriptures.

ALPHA course – chance to examine and explore the scriptures.

God's gift to the disillusioned – a fresh gift of REVELATION

3) Peter the denier

John 21

21:9 – A charcoal fire – reminiscent of the fire in the courtyard where Peter had denied Jesus.

21:15

And three times the question: “Do you (truly) love me more than these....?” Echoing and repealing Peter’s three denials of Jesus.

21:19

The call again: “Follow me.”

Jesus had said in Luke 12:9

“But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.”

Peter has denied Jesus before men. His just desert would be perdition. To be disowned in heaven.

But Jesus’ answer and response to Peter is one of forgiveness and grace.

Have you turned your back on God? Wandered away from the faith of your childhood, or youth? Life happened, things drifted, a vibrant faith in Jesus feels like a distant memory.

Perhaps you find yourself in Peter’s camp. Peter the denier. You deny me and I will deny you – Jesus says. And then he breaks his own rules as he offers grace and forgiveness and a new start for Peter. And the words that he has spoken to Peter before, in the early days, in the heady day – “Follow me” – he now repeats. He now reiterates.

Sat-Nav – recalculating route. Getting lost. Taking wrong turns. And then starting from here.

What is on offer here is the grace of God. It is the ability of God to forgive you and give you a fresh start. Even when you have denied him, turned your back on him and everything you know and deep down believe.

Jesus walks us past our failures. And all of a sudden, there is bread and fish and a fire, and the words come again, this time with greater strength, with less naivety on the part of Peter, with more texture and grounded in a deeper reality. "Follow me."

Maybe when we started out, we were full of youthful excitement and vigour and faith. I will never leave you Jesus. I will always follow you. I will give my life for you. And then we get hit for six by death and disillusionment and our own weakness and failings. And we walk. We wander. We run in the opposite direction.

But Jesus – the risen Christ – having conquered sin and death – comes to us after our denials, and our wanderings, after it all, he comes to us, he looks at us, he asks us if we love him, and deep down we know that we still love God, we really do love God, though we have been mad at him for a while – and he calls us again. "Follow me."

This was the cry of the prophet Hosea to a wayward people:

'Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. ² After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.'
Hosea 6:1-2

The resurrection of Jesus is a meaty, massive, momentous doctrine. But it's also personal to you and to me.

In the three characters of Thomas, Cleopas and Peter, we see direct responses to the resurrection of Jesus – from someone

who is full of doubt, to someone who is dejected and disillusioned, to someone who has denied Jesus.

All of them are radically changed following an encounter with the risen Jesus.

And we can be too.

"For if you **confess with your mouth** that Jesus is Lord and **believe in your heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved."
(Romans 10: 9-10 NLT)

What will your response be to the risen Christ?

Community group discussion points:

1. Read John 20:24-29 together. What was Thomas' initial response to the news of Jesus' resurrection?
 2. Why do you think he doubted – how do you think he felt?
 3. Paul Tillich, states: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith, doubt is an element of faith." What do you think of this
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statement? How should we process our doubts and questions as part of a faith community?

4. In Luke 24:13-35 we read about Cleopas and a second disciple as they walk to Emmaus. What are some of the emotions that they have in the story?
 5. What are some of the ways that we can become disappointed or disillusioned in our Christian walk? How do we process these emotions without becoming cynical or giving up our faith?
 6. Two of the things that changed their outlook were a better understanding of scripture/the bigger picture and a fresh revelation of the risen Christ. How might we experience these things for ourselves? Be real!
 7. Peter denied Jesus 3 times. Consider how Jesus reinstates Peter (John 21) – how does he do this?
 8. In what ways are we like Peter? When we lose our way or take a wrong turn how can we obey afresh Jesus' call and invitation to follow him?
 9. Which of these three characters do you most identify with and how can you respond afresh to the risen Jesus?
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