

Let's begin by reading John 20, the apostle John's account of the resurrection of Jesus.

John 20:1-31 - Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹ but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. ¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." ²⁴ Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." ³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Near the end of this passage, Jesus has a conversation with one of his disciples, a man named Thomas, who John tells us was not present the first time Jesus appeared to his disciples, and as a result, Thomas tells them that he will not believe unless he sees Jesus with his own eyes. When Jesus appears this second time to the disciples, he seeks out Thomas, saying, "*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*" Those words – stop doubting and believe – are powerful words that I want to use to frame my sermon this morning. I believe the Easter story, of the death and resurrection of Jesus, brings to us three things that I believe God wants us to stop doubting and believe:

1) Believe that Jesus is the risen Messiah, the Son of God, God in the flesh

I want you to put yourself in the shoes of the disciples on that Saturday, the day after Jesus has been crucified. You have spent the last 3 years of your life following around this man who you are convinced is something special. In fact, you're pretty sure He is the Messiah, the Christ, the one who has been sent by God to save the Jewish people from Roman oppression and restore Israel to national prominence. You've watched him perform miracles, teach incredible truths, and carry himself with an authority that is otherworldly. You have left your home, your jobs, and in some cases your loved ones to travel around with Him, sharing about God. **You have wagered big on this Jesus.** And now, just like that, He is dead. Apparently, you were wrong. Apparently, Jesus is not the Messiah.

And that is just from the disciples' perspective. The stakes after Jesus' death were actually much bigger than just that Jesus might have come to free Israel from Roman persecution. Consider some of the claims that Jesus has made:

John 2:19 – predicts his resurrection

John 3:13-18; 4:13-14; 6:50-51; 8:23-24; 10:27-30; 11:25-26 – those who believe in him will have eternal life; those who reject him will be condemned and die in their sins

John 4:25-26 – he is the Messiah

John 5:19-27 – He is the judge and gives life

John 6:35-40; 8:23-24 – He has come down from heaven, and all who believe in him will have eternal life

John 7:16-17 – He speaks God's words

John 8:46 – He is without sin

John 8:58 – He is the eternal God

John 18:36 – He is a king from another place

Jesus has claimed some pretty outrageous things, things that no sane person would claim. **Imagine if I claimed any of these things!** But now He is dead. After his death, there would have been ample reason to dismiss him as a pretty unique character, but in the end a fraud who went the way of everyone else – to the grave.

But what if He rose from the dead? What would that mean with regards to Jesus' claims?

The resurrection is the central event of the Christian faith, and I believe that there is ample evidence for believing it to be true. That is where I want to begin, because many of you may be like Thomas, doubting the historical accuracy of Jesus rising from the dead. If that is you, I encourage you to listen with an open mind, because as far as I can tell, there is only one man who claimed these sort of things about himself, died, and then, it is claimed rose from the dead, never to die again. Let me give you seven pieces of evidence:

First of all, you have to understand the culture in which Jesus died. Jesus was Jewish, and most **Jews** believed in a future general resurrection of the righteous, all together at the last day; some Jews did not believe in life after death at all. No Jew, however, believed in the possibility of an individual rising from the dead in the middle of history. And what about the Greco-Roman world? The **Greeks and Romans** did not believe in bodily resurrection; they believed that the afterlife was the liberation of the soul from the body. They believed that the body was corrupt, so who would want to be resurrected and trapped in a body? Resurrection was undesirable for the Greeks and Romans. This is why Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 1:23**, *“but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”*

This is so important to understand, because many skeptical people toss out there “well, 1st century people lived in a prescientific age,” with the implication being that people were more likely to believe that someone could rise from the dead. A simple cultural study shows that to be a naïve statement, or as CS Lewis called it, “chronological snobbery.” Neither the Jews nor the non-Jewish people would have believed in a tale of someone rising bodily from the dead in the middle of history, never to die again. So, just in case you thought people might more readily believe in miracles such as the resurrection in those days, they didn’t. They may have been prescientific, but they were not stupid. **The point is that if the disciples had made up the resurrection story, no one would have believed them.**

Secondly, in the decades before and after Jesus’ life and death there were dozens of messianic movements – people who it was believed would liberate Israel from their Roman oppressors. In almost every case, the messianic leader was killed, and after the leaders’ death, each of these movements collapsed. In fact, I am fairly positive none of you can name any of those would-be Messiahs. There is only one messianic leader who was killed and then had his movement result in a world-changing revolution. That was Jesus. **If he had really died, along with all the other failed Messiahs, who would write His biography? Who would worship and follow a man who claimed to be Messiah but whose career was cut short by a shameful death?**

Well, you say, maybe Jesus somehow survived the crucifixion. Jesus was whipped with 39 lashes from a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them, as well as pieces of sharp bone. He was so badly injured that he couldn’t even carry his cross. He was crucified, dying slowly by asphyxiation. A spear was thrust in his side, water and blood flowed out, and then he was laid in a solid rock tomb. **The third proof of the resurrection is that if he had only merely survived, and stumbled out of the grave as a mostly dead man, that would not have inspired anyone.**

Maybe Jesus died and was buried and over time the legend grew like a game of telephone until people began to believe that he had really risen from the dead. But the fourth proof is that the accounts claim that there are eyewitness alive who witnessed the resurrected Jesus. For instance, Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (25 years after Jesus’ death)**: *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, **most of whom are still living,***

though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,* ⁸ *and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.* Notice that first of all, Paul is saying that he has received this from others; it appears to have been an early creedal statement. And secondly, Paul is saying, you can check with people who witnessed it. There are still eyewitnesses alive when the accounts are written.

Fifth reason – If Jesus really was dead and the disciples made up the story, there would have been a simple solution: check the tomb and produce the body. But you can check the tomb. He's not there. All the Romans or Jews needed to do in order to stop the movement was to produce Jesus' dead body. But they couldn't produce a body, because he had risen. And the disciples couldn't have stolen the body without the guards being executed for their failure to protect the dead body.

Maybe you still think the disciples made it up. Why? What was their motive? The sixth proof of the resurrection is that most of them were killed, and all of them were persecuted, as a result of proclaiming Jesus as Lord in a culture where Caesar was Lord. As early as weeks after the resurrection, we have the early chapters of Acts, where the transformed apostles are preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus and being persecuted and martyred for this message. So if you believe they made it up, what was the motive? To die a horrible death? If they had made up the story of the resurrection, how is it possible that none of the disciples admitted this under persecution? They had been transformed from cowardly doubters and abandoners to men who feared no one and were devoted to Jesus even to their own death.

Lastly - And even if they had made it up, why write a story that has women as the first eyewitnesses? Mark records their names (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome), saying once again that this is historical account. Why write accounts in which the early church leaders, like Peter, come off looking like spineless cowards? Consider **Celsus**, a 2nd century Greek philosopher who wrote against Christianity. He wrote that the gospel accounts can't be true because the written accounts are based on the testimony of women, and we all know that women are hysterical. The gospel writers never would have written in the women as eyewitnesses unless it was true. And he would have had the apostles believe at once, not be skeptical.

I could go on and on but I hope you get the point. The evidence for the resurrection is very strong.

Before I move on, let me just say a word about doubts, because there are two kinds of doubters. There are doubters who aren't really open to having their mind changed; they just like being contrary. But there are other doubters who truly just require more evidence, and that is to be commended. Thomas was known as doubting Thomas, but I want to commend him for his doubts, and I want to commend those of you who are skeptical and don't just take the words of others. He could hear the testimonies of the other disciples, and you could hear the testimonies of others and their experiences of God throughout this series. But Thomas was not content with secondhand faith. He wasn't content just to believe because of the experiences of others. He wanted to experience Jesus for himself. And once he experienced Jesus for Himself **Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"** He is the first to recognize Jesus as God. And notice that Jesus does not correct him, saying that there is only one God. He receives the worship, because Jesus is God the Son, the eternal God in human form.

As great as it is to hear the testimonies of other people about their experiences with God, eventually it comes back to you. Do you know God? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you know His forgiveness, His peace, the freedom that is found in knowing Jesus? Do you believe this for yourself? Do you know in your heart that He is good, that He loves you, that He is powerful enough to overcome anything in your life? Or are you just living on secondhand faith, believing in the testimonies of other people but not having a testimony of your own?

***Romans 10:9-10** - That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

Stop doubting and believe that Jesus is the risen Messiah, the Son of God, God in the flesh

2) **Believe that in Jesus is found eternal life**

Think again about those disciples on Saturday and the depth of despair they must have felt. Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah, and now he was dead. These disciples had bet big on Jesus as the Messiah, and now seemingly they had lost big. We find out later the disciples were locked away in a room out of fear that the same fate would befall them. They were utterly crushed and afraid. **Death can be that way for us. So final, so cruel, so utterly devastating.**

John 20, as well as the rest of the New Testament, testifies to this incredible fact: Jesus overcame death. He defeated the grave. He was flogged, abused, crucified, spear stuck in his side, laid behind a tomb, sealed with a stone, guarded by Roman guards, and yet on Easter morning the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive again. And because of that, that great mystery, death and what lies beyond the grave, has been solved.

Just as Jesus explained at the tomb of Lazarus, death is not the end for those who believe in Jesus:

John 11:23-26 - *Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am **the resurrection and the life**. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Because Jesus rose again, those who believe in him will never die:

1 Corinthians 15:19-22 - *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. ²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the **resurrection** of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive*

Jesus is called the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Just as the firstfruits of the harvest promises a greater harvest to come, Jesus' resurrection promises that there will be a greater resurrection of all who die in Him.

1 Corinthians 15:55-58 - *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Death has lost its sting, the grave has lost its victory. Hallelujah! Now for those who know Jesus, death is like falling asleep and waking up in eternity with God.

Philippians 1:21 - *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

And more than that, Paul writes that we should always give ourselves fully to serving God, because nothing we do is in vain; everything matters.

Matthew 10:42 - And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

If you do not believe in God, or that there is anything after death, there has to come a point of existential dread, where you ask yourself what it is all for. What difference does it make if you're going to be dead and gone, and in 100 years no one will remember your name? What's the best you can hope for? Your name on a building? Your invention or contribution in a history book?

But because of the resurrection, we know that everything we do matters eternally.

Certainly at this time, the coronavirus is on everyone's mind, and we are all hoping that someday a scientist will discover a cure, or a vaccine, that will save those who are at risk of dying. But the reality is that any medication or cure will only postpone the inevitable. Even if someone does not die from the coronavirus, they will still eventually die. What we really need is for someone to give us a cure for death. And in Jesus, we have that cure.

Are you certain about what will happen when you die? Because of the resurrection, you can stop doubting and believe in life everlasting for all who have repented and trusted in Jesus for salvation.

3) Believe that God is good and that He loves you.

Maybe you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Maybe you believe in life everlasting. But the cross and the resurrection also challenge us to stop doubting the goodness and love of God, and to instead believe that God is good and that He loves you.

In my experience, one of the biggest reasons people reject God is because of the terrible things that they have experienced or witnessed, and not understanding how a good and powerful God could allow such things to happen. Why, God? Why do you not answer my cries for help? Why did you allow such abuse, brokenness, and pain in my life? Ultimately, we know that you may never receive a satisfactory answer to why you suffered your specific injustice in this life. But when you look to the cross and the resurrection, you receive an answer. On the cross, you have

what appeared to be God at his most evil and his most unloving. What could be worse than the innocent, sinless Son of God being unjustly executed while His all-powerful Father in heaven turns his back, even as His Son cries out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Think of how you would respond if your child cried out to you for help as he was being abused, and contrast that to how God responded. Seriously, what kind of father would turn his back on his suffering son like that? God has never appeared more evil and unloving as he did at the cross, allowing his innocent son to be unjustly abused and executed.

But now, with the benefit of hindsight, we look back and we know that the reality was that God was never working more for good than He was at the cross. At the cross, God gave His Son to be sacrificed, and His Son willingly went to His execution, because the only way for a sinful and rebellious humanity to be restored to a right relationship with God and to have eternal life was for a sinless sacrifice to take on the sins of the world. On that cross God was taking on himself the punishment for all the things we had ever done wrong.

At the cross, facing enemies who wanted him dead, friends who had betrayed and denied and abandoned him, mocked by onlookers, He proved His love and goodness once and for all by staying up on the cross, saying “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” Out of the worst evil – the unjust execution of the innocent Son of God – God brought the greatest good – the salvation of the world. When he seemed so unloving and evil, God was in reality never more loving and good as He gave His Son for the salvation of the world.

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

In your life, you will go through experiences if you have not already that cause you to question the goodness of God, to question whether God really is a God of love. You will wonder how it is possible that a good God could allow such evil to exist, or how a loving God would allow His child to suffer so horribly. You will struggle to even comprehend what possible good end God might have in all this evil. But the cross and the resurrection show us that even when it appears that God is not at work, that God is absent, or that God is allowing evil to triumph, that He is very much at work, bringing good out of even the worst possible evil.

Romans 8:28-39 - "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he

might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God is good. And you are loved. Interestingly enough, twice in this chapter there is a reference to "the disciple whom Jesus loved," which is John's way of referring to himself. I am the one Jesus loves. I am God's beloved. What would it mean for that to be how you see yourself? Brennan Manning, in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, writes "More pleasing to me than all your prayers, sacrifices, and good works is that you would believe that I love you."

I believe, God. I believe that you are good. I believe that in this evil and suffering I am experiencing that you are at work, bringing an even greater good. I believe that you love me, that you are for me, and that nothing could ever separate me from your love for me. This morning, Jesus' words to you are: Stop doubting and believe. Stop doubting, and believe that God is good. Stop doubting and believe that He loves you.

There can be any number of other things about God that He might be challenging you to stop doubting and believe today. But whatever they are, the risen Jesus confronts us with the need to stop doubting and believe. Believe that He is the Messiah. Believe in life everlasting. Believe that God is good and that He loves you. That is the good news of Easter.

As John ended this chapter: *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

If you do not know Jesus but would like to, you can pray something like this from your heart to His:

Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.