

Do Not Disbelieve But Believe

John 20:19-31

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 16, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ This morning, for obvious reasons, our focus is on **the Resurrection** – the Christian claim that in first-century Palestine, a certain Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a Roman cross; but rose from the dead three days later; and appeared to many witnesses; before ascending to the Father; where he awaits to return again at the end of this present age.
 - It's a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. The Apostle Paul argued in his first letter to the Corinthians that if you were to deny Jesus's Resurrection or the reinterpret it as any less than a historic event involving a bodily resurrection, then you've completely invalidated the faith (cf. 1 Cor. 15:17). There is no Christianity without a true bodily resurrection of Christ.

- ❖ **But because it's so fundamental and non-negotiable, the Resurrection has become a stumbling block for many.** To hear me say that to be a Christian requires believing in the Resurrection sounds as preposterous as saying it requires believing in the Easter Bunny. **What many non-Christians hear us saying is that, to be a Christian, you have to suspend rational judgment and believe in the imaginary.** You have to disregard the factual and buy into the fanciful. And they just can't go there.

- ❖ There's a show on Animal Planet about Sasquatch researchers called ***Finding Bigfoot***. It's doing well. It's one of the network's all-time top performing series. And these researchers are totally serious about their work. They have an actual organization, the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO), and they call themselves cryptozoologists. **You might think it's a parody, but these guys are not kidding.**
 - Animal Planet has received plenty of criticism for airing shows like this. They have another one about mermaids. Critics say these shows are ruining the network's credibility. But one of the Bigfoot researchers took offense to being put in the same category as mermaid hunters. **These guys are utterly convinced that they're not dealing in the category of the fanciful but the factual.**

- ❖ Now I'm certainly entertained by these guys, but I'm in no way convinced. I don't take them seriously. You probably don't either. **And yet we have to realize that's exactly how many people see Christians today who believe in the Resurrection.**
 - Unless I see a Bigfoot. Unless I can touch one. Unless I can examine its carcass and study its bones, then I can't take a Bigfoot seriously. It's just imaginary. It's mythical. It's not real. I'm sure you'd feel the same way.
 - But do you realize that's what people say about the Resurrection? They can't take it seriously unless they see the Risen Lord with their own eyes and touch him with their own hands. **They need empirical proof.** And clearly this kind of skepticism is not just a modern phenomenon. Thomas said something similar in our passage. He said he had to see and feel for himself.

- ❖ How about you? *What would it take for you to believe in the Resurrection?* Some of you feel like you need that kind of proof. You've been struggling to believe in Christianity. Miraculous claims are hard to swallow. You feel like you'd believe if God would make it as plain as he did for Thomas. If he were to give evidence as compelling as it was for Thomas.
 - But then there are those of you who have pretty much always believed Jesus rose from the grave. You've never doubted. But now you're starting to realize that, in the eyes of many, you're no different than the Bigfoot guy. Let that sink in. It's important to come to grips with that. But don't worry.
- ❖ The Apostle John was well aware of this human tendency to want to see and touch something for yourself before you're able to believe in it. **But he tells us in v31 that his purpose in writing his Gospel is to make it possible for you to believe in Jesus and his Resurrection – even without seeing it for yourself.** And he give us good reasons to believe. Let me draw your attention to three as we walk through our text: 1) The transformation of the apostles, 2) The testimony of eyewitnesses, and 3) The testimony of Scripture.

The Transformation of the Apostles

- ❖ Let's start by considering the radical transformation of the apostles from a huddle of fearful, frightened men into a band of glad, merry men. From being locked down in a house out of self-protection to being sent out into the world laying down their lives over a message that they would not compromise or deny.
 - Plenty of people doubt the Resurrection happened. **But no one questions whether the apostles existed, or denies their zeal for the gospel or the traditional accounts of their martyrdom for Christ.** All (except John) had their lives brutally ended, and no one really challenges that. Look at Thomas. Tradition has maintained that he transformed from a despondent doubter to a devoted disciple-maker who took the gospel as far east as India and laid down his life there. How did that happened?
- ❖ Any historian worth his salt will have to give an explanation. Something happened. People don't change from such extremes unless something significant happened to them. There has to be some explanation. **Was it a mass hallucination?** Were the apostles so overwhelmed with grief, were they so sleep deprived over those three long days, were they intoxicated drowning their sorrows away – that something made all of them equally delusional?
 - **Or did they conspire together behind locked doors to conjure up a story of a resurrection?** Was this all an elaborate scam to perpetuate a man-made religion? Did something happen to persuade these men to keep this story going, even as they faced their own execution for not backing down? What happened?
- ❖ John is trying to tell us. It wasn't a hallucination. It wasn't a conspiracy. It was an appearing. Here in vv19-23 he tells us that an appearance of the Resurrected Christ is what happened to the apostles. Jesus appears to the Twelve less two (Judas was dead; Thomas was absent), and by the end of this encounter, he talks about sending them out as his apostles (lit. "the sent ones"). That's what an *apostle* is – someone sent on mission directly by Christ.

- ❖ So what changed these men? Look back at our passage, and I think we can point to three things: **a)** They saw the resurrected body of the Lord, **b)** They experienced the comforting peace of the Lord, and **c)** They received the empowering Spirit of the Lord.
 - Look back at v19. The disciples saw something spectacular. That's made clear. **We're told it occurred on the evening of the first Easter Sunday.** Earlier that morning, Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb. And after Jesus appeared to her first, she ran off to tell the disciples that she had seen the Lord (v18). But that information didn't change them. We find them huddled away behind a locked door fearful of the Jewish leaders who already captured and killed their master.

- ❖ **Now the mention of the door being locked not only highlights their state of mind, it highlights the glorified nature of Jesus's resurrected body.** His new body doesn't appear to be governed by the same physical limitations that we have. John is making the point that Jesus entered that room without opening the door (he reinforces the point in v26).
 - Understandably, this leads them to believe they're seeing a ghost. In Luke's account, it says they, "*thought they saw a spirit*", so Jesus says touch me and see. "*For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.*" (cf. Lk. 24:37-39) And then he went on to eat a piece of broiled fish to prove he has a body with flesh and bones.

- ❖ Again it's not the same kind of body we have now. **It's a glorified body. That's the kind of body you get when you're resurrected.** So Lazarus, for example, was raised to life back in John 11, but he wasn't resurrected. He didn't have a glorified body. He couldn't walk through a locked door. His body was still subject to decay and death. It was going to die twice! But one day Lazarus, along with all the saints who share in the Resurrection, will be raised with a glorified, imperishable body just like Christ's. Paul has a whole discourse about the nature of our future resurrected bodies in 1 Corinthians 15.
 - **But the point here is that Jesus's Resurrection was not merely spiritual.** He didn't just appear in spirit. The Gospel writers go at length to emphasize that the disciples weren't just seeing a hallucination or an apparition. **They could see his scars! Ghosts don't have scar tissue.** It was their master back in a body with flesh and bones.

- ❖ So one thing that changed these men was a sight of the resurrected body of their Lord. **Second, it was a profound experience of the comforting peace of their Lord.** It's popular during this time of year for churches to do a sermon series on the last sayings of Jesus – "*Father, forgive them . . . Today you'll be with me in paradise . . . Why have you forsaken me? . . . It is finished, etc.*" Those are some of his famous last words on the Cross, but here we have his famous last words in the Resurrection – "*Peace be with you.*" (vv19, 21, 26).

- ❖ That might sound like a generic greeting, but given the context, this offer of peace has a greater significance. Think about it. **Since their last encounter with Christ, the disciples were not just gripped with fear – but with shame.** They were shouldering a heavy weight of guilt for having abandoned their lord. They deserted him when he needed them the most.

- ❖ So put yourself in their shoes. Jesus suddenly appears in a locked room standing before you and your fellow deserters. You're afraid. Not because you think you're seeing a ghost. **No, you're afraid of what he's going to say to you.** You feel so horrible for what you did and didn't do. **But lo and behold, the first words out of his mouth are not "Shame on you" but "Peace be with you."**
 - Can you imagine what that did for them? Just think how those words transformed them. **The One Person who had every right to be angry (wrathful) at them was instead showing them grace.** Offering them peace. A blood-bought peace that he secured by dying for their sins, making forgiveness and reconciliation possible.
 - That experience of the Lord's peace explains how the disciples go from being described as fearful to glad. *"Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord."* (v20b) And that's not *glad* as in a relief that they weren't punished. **No, that's gladness as in great, abounding joy.**

- ❖ So a sight of the Lord's resurrected body and a profound experience of his comforting peace contributed to their transformation, **but thirdly, their life change could not have been possible without receiving the empowering Spirit of the Lord.** Look at v21, *"Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."*
 - How was Jesus sent by the Father? What aspect of his sending is being highlighted? He tells us in v22. Jesus was sent in the Spirit. **He was sent on mission filled and led by the Holy Spirit, which is why he promises them the same.** *"And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."*

- ❖ There's a lot more that could be said about this verse and how it relates to Acts 2, but I'll just say that I think his breathing on the disciples was *not* the impartation of the Spirit himself but a symbolic promise of the soon-to-be gifted Spirit, who falls on them seven weeks later during the festival of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2.
 - So not only do they have a life-changing encounter with the Risen Christ and a life-changing experience of his blood-bought peace – **the apostles receive a life-changing regeneration by the agency of the Holy Spirit who indwells in them and in all who believe in their gospel.**

- ❖ Now v23 could be a sermon in itself, so all I'll say here is that even though it sounds like something Jesus taught in Matthew 16 and 18, the context here is not about the church's responsibility to discipline its own members (like in Matthew). **The context is about the church's mission and evangelism.** The church is founded on the witness of the apostles and their Spirit-filled mission to proclaim the Resurrected Lord and his blood-bought peace offered to all who receive it by faith.
 - **Friends, if you want to be forgiven of your sins, if you want the same peace that the apostles enjoyed, then receive their message with faith.** Believe in their resurrected Lord – considering their transformed lives as evidence that they *are* telling the truth. That he is risen. He is risen indeed.

The Testimony of Eyewitnesses

- ❖ So the transformation of these frightened men into faithful apostles is a compelling reason to believe Jesus didn't stay dead but appeared to his disciples and utterly changed them. Our second reason to believe the Resurrection is because of the testimony of these eyewitnesses.

- ❖ **When you're dealing with ancient history, the only way to verify that an event took place is through eyewitness testimony.** How do we know Julius Caesar really crossed the Rubicon? There's no video evidence. There's only the testimony of eyewitnesses who were there, who saw it themselves. That's how history works. You depend on eyewitnesses.
 - But of course the difference is that you can see people crossing the Rubicon today. But we don't see anyone being resurrected today. That's what makes the Christian claim all the more difficult to believe. **But in the end, I'd have to take eyewitness testimony seriously, especially if attested to by a large number of witnesses.**

- ❖ Imagine if a friend told you he went camping last weekend, and while on a hike he saw a Sasquatch pass in front of him on the trail. He swears he saw it with his own eyes. Now I'd be highly skeptical. **But if I wanted to verify such a fanciful claim, what would I do? I'd look for eyewitnesses.** I'd ask if there was anyone else hiking with this friend. Was there anyone else on the trail who saw the same thing?
 - Taken at face value, I'm not inclined to believe such things. But if twelve eyewitnesses came forward and testified to the same thing, that would get me thinking. And if 500 credible eyewitnesses say they also saw it, I'd have to rethink my belief system (my plausibility structure) when it comes to Bigfoot.

- ❖ That's how I approach the Resurrection. **At face value, I'm not inclined to believe a man could rise from his tomb after being dead three days.** But I can't deny that there were plenty of eyewitnesses. Paul wrote that after appearing to the Twelve, Jesus "*appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive*" (1 Cor. 15:6).
 - So if there are five hundred eyewitnesses to an incredible, spectacular event – then no matter how implausible I might assume it to be – **I have to at least consider the possibility and be willing to revisit my plausibility structure.** And for those of you still struggling to believe or still skeptical towards Christianity – that's all I'm asking for you to do. Be open minded.

- ❖ I know it's hard to believe something you can't see or touch. **But I hope you realize you have a sympathizer in Thomas.** We often assume it was easy for ancient people to believe in a resurrection. As if they were primed to believe such miracles. But Thomas's reaction demonstrates that ancient people also demanded empirical proof before they'd let themselves believe in a resurrection.
 - **If you think about it, for an entire week, Thomas was exactly in your shoes.** He'd never seen a resurrected Christ. All he had to work with was the eyewitness testimony of the apostles (of which he was not yet included). And yet he refused to accept their testimony. He demanded to see for himself with his own two eyes.

- ❖ **It's common nowadays to valorize Thomas as one who refused to blindly believe, who's not afraid to doubt and asks the tough questions.** But we mustn't ignore the obvious rebuke in Jesus's words in v27, "*Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."*"
 - I believe the point of our passage is to argue that you don't need to physically see Jesus to be a believer. The testimony of eyewitnesses is enough. It's sufficient to make you wise for salvation. **So Thomas didn't need to see Jesus physically to be a believer. But he did need to see Jesus physically if he was going to be an apostle.**

- ❖ That's a qualification to be an apostle. **When they were choosing a replacement for Judas in Acts 1, they said it had to be someone who was a witness to the Resurrection (1:22).** That's the reason Jesus accommodated Thomas's demand to see with his own eyes.
 - And once he did, the eyes of his heart were opened to recognize Jesus for who he truly is. The first words out of his mouth were, "*My Lord and my God!*" To call him "Lord" (*kyrios*) could just be sign of respect, but to call Jesus "God" (*theos*) is an unquestionable affirmation of divinity. It was a genuine confession of faith. And a very personal one. **You don't have genuine faith unless Jesus is more than just a Lord and a God. Only until you can say he's *my* Lord and *my* God.**

- ❖ If Thomas was going to be an effective apostle, he needed to see Jesus with his own eyes. But my point is that you don't have that same need because you don't have that same calling. You're *not* called to be an apostle. **You're called to be a believer, and you don't need a Resurrection appearance for that to happen.**
 - So what do you need to become a believer? **You need to believe the testimony of the eyewitnesses.** You need to trust their testimony as credible – that they really did see the Risen Lord; that he really did die for sinners on the cross; that all he promised about the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Spirit and the hope of eternal life are true. And they're true because he's alive!

The Testimony of Scripture

- ❖ But of course we can't interview any of the eyewitnesses today, so where do we find their testimony? In written form. Recorded for us in Holy Scripture. That leads us to our third reason to believe in the Resurrection – the testimony of Scripture.

- ❖ John was the last surviving apostle and his Gospel was written last. Most think it was written sometime in the last decade of the first-century. He knew after his death there would be no more living eyewitnesses. **So I think vv29-31 is John's way of signaling a transition from faith based on sight to faith rooted in apostolic testimony recorded in Scripture.**
 - Let me read to you starting in v29, "*29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*
30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31but 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."

- ❖ So in case, future generations would feel their faith was somehow inferior and inherently weaker than that of the original disciples who were all eyewitnesses to the Resurrection – **Jesus says it's more blessed to believe based on what is written.** It's more blessed to believe in the Resurrection because you understand what Scripture teaches, because you accept the overwhelming evidence coming from first-hand eyewitness accounts. It's more blessed to believe that way than to believe only what you can empirically prove.
 - **You're not at a disadvantage because you live in the 21st-century and not the first.** Because you didn't get a chance to see it for yourself. Jesus says you're actually advantaged. You're blessed. As Paul would say, you've got the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). Or as Jesus would say, "You don't need to see me risen from the dead. You've got the Prophets and Apostles, listen to them." You've got the Scriptures, read it.

- ❖ There's a parable Jesus tells in Luke 16 about **a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus** who both die, but the rich man ends up in Hades being tormented while Lazarus is carried off to be comforted in Abraham's bosom. Figuring out the location of where they are is not the main point. The point is the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus over to give him some relief, but the rich man is told there's a great chasm between them that can't be crossed.
 - So he begs for Lazarus to be sent to his father's house to warn his five brothers, *"lest they also come into this place of torment."* ²⁹*But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'* ³⁰*And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'* ³¹*He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'*" (Lk.16:28-31)

- ❖ Do you hear what this is saying? **If you don't hear the apostolic witness of Scripture and find it credible, then neither will you be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.** You'd probably look upon the Resurrected Christ and still find a way to doubt (cf. Mt. 28:17).

- ❖ Now some of you might disagree. You're thinking, "If someone could show me video evidence of the Resurrection or any modern day miracle, then I'd totally be a believer."
 - But how are you so sure? **Not that long ago I watched a documentary on why the Apollo moon landings were all an elaborate hoax.** There are people who think the government faked it. But that's ignoring not only the testimony of living eyewitnesses – from the astronauts themselves to all the technicians and operators involved – but also all the video evidence available. We have it on tape!
 - But no matter what you show them, they'll find a way to explain it away.
What that tells us is that unbelief is never just a matter of the intellect. It's fundamentally a matter of the heart.

- ❖ **Unbelief is like an iceberg. The rational objections that doubters and skeptics tend to throw out are only the tip of the iceberg.** There's so much more to unbelief under the surface, deep in the heart.

- **Unbelief in the Resurrection** (or in the gospel itself) **doesn't just come from a lack of something in the mind** (be it answers, reasons, or more information) **but from the presence of something in the heart.** I'm talking about a deep emotional hesitance (or even hostility) to the truth that Jesus is alive and sitting on a throne and coming back one day to judge the living and the dead.

- ❖ Let's be honest, if later tonight a Middle-eastern man, dressed in 1st-century attire, with scars on his hands and side were to suddenly appear out of nowhere, inside your locked apartment or dorm room claiming to be the Risen Lord – the question I'd be wondering is not if you can believe in the Resurrection now but **do you want to believe in the Resurrection?**
 - Because if you accept the Resurrection as true; then that means Jesus is alive today; his claims to be the Son of God and God's Anointed King are true; his teachings must be learned and obeyed; he has every right to tell you how to live your life! **All of that is true if the Resurrection is too.**
 - If you don't want that to be true, then I'm sure you'll find an excuse. You must've been dreaming. You haven't been getting enough sleep. You were just seeing things. **The point is seeing a man risen from the dead may not be enough to make you a believer.**

- ❖ But that's why John wrote his Gospel. That's why he recorded these various signs of Jesus, including his Resurrection. That you might read and believe.
 - Seeing a miracle has the power to create wonder and intrigue. But reading the Scriptures and soaking in the Gospel has the power to create in your new life and give you new eyes to see and believe that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*
 - Open the Scriptures and you'll meet a Messiah who gave his life that you might have life in his name. Read the Gospels and you're introduced to a Savior and King who you actually want to be alive and in your life.