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OVERCOMING DOUBT

John 20:1-10, 19-20, 24-31

By

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Easter Sunday

Overcoming Doubt
John 20:1-10, 19-20, 24-31

In our study of First John last Sunday we looked at the subject of assurance of salvation. The enemy of assurance is doubt, and so I thought it would be helpful on this Resurrection Sunday to take a look at the problem of doubt and how to overcome it.

Every thinking person sometimes wrestles with doubt. That is true not only for thinking Christians, but also for atheists and agnostics. Sometimes they wonder, "What if I'm wrong? What if there really is a God? What if there is life after death and I have to stand before God?" And, every thinking Christian sometimes wonders, "What if Christianity is *not* true?" For some, the doubts are relatively minor and fleeting. For others, the doubts are deep and disturbing. But wherever you're at on the spectrum, if you've been a Christian for very long, you have gone through times when you struggled with doubt.

While there are many different sources of doubt (we'll look at some in a moment), there is one answer that undergirds them all. I have often come back to it when I am working through my doubts. The apostle Paul said that the entire Christian faith rests on this single foundation, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Cor. 15:13-19). If that fact of history is true, then our faith has a solid footing in spite of difficult matters that we may never understand fully in this life. But, if Jesus Christ is not risen from the dead, then the strongest faith in the world is useless, because it rests on a faulty foundation. In Paul's words (1 Cor. 15:17), "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins."

If you want to examine a subject, it's best to go to an expert. The most famous expert on doubt is the man whose name is always linked with it, Doubting Thomas. Perhaps it's unfair that he has to wear that label, since all the apostles doubted the resurrection of Jesus at first (Mark 16:11; Luke 24:10-11). But, Thomas was the last holdout, so he gets the title. His story shows us that...

To overcome our doubts, we must rest upon the reality of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Thomas was what I would call a sincere doubter. Not all doubters are sincere. Some use their doubts as a smoke screen to hide behind their sin, which is the real issue. If one area of doubt is cleared up, they will quickly duck behind another, because they don't want to submit to the Lord. These people do not need more evidence to believe. They need to turn from their sin.

But some doubters are sincere. They truly believe in Christ, but they are plagued by honest questions. They are submissive to God and want to do His will, but they can't just close their eyes and take a leap of faith. They need evidence to clear up the doubts. Thomas was that kind of sincere doubter. His story reveals that...

1. Sincere doubt can arise from multiple causes.

There are many causes of doubt. I am going to limit myself to exploring some of the causes of Thomas' doubts. Perhaps you can relate to these sources of doubt as well.

SOME REASONS FOR THOMAS' DOUBTS:

A. Personal failure coupled with our personality may lead to doubt.

All of the disciples had failed Jesus on the night of His arrest and trial. Most notorious was Peter, who denied the Lord three times. All of the eleven had promised Jesus their loyalty, but they all deserted Him when He was arrested.

Thomas, along with Peter, had been outspoken in his loyalty to Jesus before the crucifixion. In John 11:16, when Jesus wanted to go to Bethany, near Jerusalem, to raise Lazarus from the dead, the disciples objected that it was too dangerous. But Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." He was a pessimist, but at least he was loyal to the point of challenging the others to be committed to the point of death. But then he had joined the others in running away when Jesus was arrested. That failure led Thomas into depression and doubt.

It wasn't just Thomas' failure, but failure coupled with his personality, that led him into deep doubts. Peter had failed in a big way, too. But Peter was a buoyant, optimistic sort who felt badly

about his mistakes, but who could bounce back more quickly. But Thomas was a conscientious, loyal, but gloomy type who did not commit himself to something lightly. To commit himself to Jesus and then go back on his word affected Thomas deeply.

We're all wired differently and so it's important to know yourself so that you can be on guard against your areas of weakness. Usually, by the way, our areas of greatest strength are also our areas of greatest weakness. A man such as Thomas, who is loyal and conscientious, who takes commitments seriously, is also more prone to depression and doubt when he fails.

B. Disappointed expectations may lead to doubt.

A second factor that caused Thomas such deep doubts was the disappointment and shock he felt as he watched Jesus die. Even though Jesus repeatedly told the disciples in advance that He would be crucified, it didn't sink in. When Thomas saw the badly mangled body of Jesus on the cross, it sent him into shock. His emphasis on the wounds of Jesus (John 20:25) shows how deeply it affected him. The bloody holes in Jesus' hands and feet, the gory spear wound in His side, and Jesus' disfigurement from the scourging and the crown of thorns, haunted Thomas in the week after the crucifixion and fed his doubts.

In the same way, whenever we face deep disappointment and shock because of some tragedy or unanswered prayer or something that doesn't go as we had expected, we're vulnerable to doubts. You begin to think, "If God is a God of love, then why did this happen? Why didn't He answer my prayers?" Before long, you've joined Thomas in doubting the Lord.

C. When God works in ways that we do not understand, it can lead to doubt.

Thomas lacked understanding with regard to the Lord's departure (see John 14:5). On the night before the crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them and that He would come again to take them to be with Him. He told them that they knew the way where He was going. But Thomas wasn't the type to keep quiet if he didn't understand. So he blurted out, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?"

I'm glad he asked because Jesus' reply was, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (14:6). But if you put yourself back into that situation, with all of the confused emotions of that night, and with the disciples' still limited insight into Jesus' death and resurrection, you can see how Thomas would still be confused about what Jesus had meant. He lacked understanding, which led to doubt.

John 20:9 states, "For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead." In fact, none of them understood why Jesus had to die, let alone rise from the dead. Jesus rebuked the men on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:25-27), "And He said to them, 'O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?' Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures."

Many of our doubts stem from the same cause: we do not understand the Scriptures. Frankly, there are many hard teachings in the Bible, some of which we won't resolve until we are with the Lord. We have to trust God, even when we don't understand. In John 6:60, many of those who had followed Jesus turned away when He taught some hard things. Jesus even asked the twelve if they would go away also. Peter gave the great answer (John 6:68-69), "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God." I have come back to that answer many times when I have struggled with doubt due to a lack of understanding. If Jesus is who He claimed to be, where else can I go?

D. Separating ourselves from fellow believers, especially when we are depressed, can deepen our doubts.

Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. We don't know for certain why he was gone, but a likely reason was his depression. The last thing he wanted at a time like that was to be around other people. So he wandered off by himself to brood over the horrible events of the previous few days.

Then to add to his misery, when he finally did see the others, they told him that they had seen the risen Lord! How would you

feel if you missed church because you were depressed and doubting and we all told you, "Hey, you really missed a blessing! It was the greatest church service in the history of FCF!" Great! That really encourages you, doesn't it! But even though other believers may irritate us, the fact is, we need them. Whenever we separate ourselves from the fellowship, we make ourselves vulnerable to doubt.

I've not covered all the causes that cause us to doubt. But whatever the source of your doubts, the solution is the same: to come back to the basic fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. If that is true, then even though you may not understand everything, with Thomas you still must bow and acknowledge Jesus to be your Lord and God.

2. To overcome our doubts, we must rest upon the reality of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

A. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is a reality.

Many books have been written to substantiate the historic validity of Jesus' resurrection. But let me briefly mention four reasons in John 20 that prove Jesus' resurrection to be true history, not a myth or wishful thinking.

(1) The empty tomb substantiates Jesus' resurrection.

One incontrovertible fact, with which both the disciples and the Jews agreed, is that the tomb was empty. If not, when the disciples began proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus a few weeks later (which was the central point of their preaching), the Jewish leaders could have simply marched to the tomb, produced Jesus' dead body, and the disciples would have been laughed out of town. But clearly they couldn't do it because the tomb was empty.

There are several ways to account for the empty tomb. Jesus' enemies could have stolen the body. But they had no motive for this. It was to their advantage to leave it right where it was, which is why they had Pilate put the Roman guard and seal on the tomb. If they knew where the body was, they could have produced it and silenced the disciples' preaching.

Another possibility is that the Roman guards stole the body. But again, they had no motive to do so. They weren't concerned about this Jewish religious trial. The Jewish leaders, who were

scrambling for ways to explain away the resurrection, didn't accuse the soldiers of taking the body or of allowing it to be stolen.

A third possibility is that the disciples stole the body. The Jewish leaders tried to promote this theory by bribing the Roman soldiers (Matt. 28:11-15). But there are many reasons the disciples could not have moved Jesus' body. The tomb was secured by the Roman guards. The soldiers wouldn't have fallen asleep on watch, because the penalty was death. The stone at the tomb was large and heavy. Even if the soldiers had been sleeping, the noise of a group of men moving the stone would have awakened them. Besides, the disciples were too depressed and confused to try anything like grave robbery in front of a Roman guard. Even if, through bribery, they had managed to remove Jesus' body, they would not later have risked their lives to preach the resurrection.

Nor would they have suffered beatings and threats if it had been confirmed that someone else had taken Jesus' body, which was the first thought of the women who visited the tomb early that morning (John 20:2, 15). All we know of the character of the witnesses as well as the fact that they did not yet understand the Scripture that Jesus must rise again from the dead (John 20:9) militates against them knowingly promoting a hoax. The empty tomb is a solid piece of evidence that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead.

(2) The grave clothes substantiate Jesus' resurrection.

Mary Magdalene didn't look very carefully when she first came to the tomb. She saw the stone removed and assumed that Jesus was gone. So she ran to tell Peter and John, who ran to the tomb. John got there first and stood at the entrance looking in. Peter, in his usual blustery manner, went right in and saw (20:6, Greek = "to gaze upon") the grave clothes. Then John entered, saw (Greek = "to see with understanding") and believed.

The presence of the grave clothes proves that the body was not stolen. In their haste, grave robbers would have taken the body, grave clothes and all. If for some reason they had wanted to strip the body, the clothes would have been strewn all over the tomb. But Peter and John saw them left in an orderly fashion, as if Jesus had passed right through them. Remember, these were not men

wishing so fervently for a resurrection that they perhaps saw what they wanted to see. These were men who did not understand or believe at first. The evidence convinced them, even as their testimony of the evidence should convince us.

- (3) The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus substantiate His resurrection.

John lists four appearances of Jesus after His resurrection: To Mary Magdalene (20:11-18); to the disciples except Thomas (20:19-23); to the disciples, including Thomas (20:24-31); and, to seven of the disciples, by the Sea of Galilee (21:1-25). Paul mentions several other appearances, including one to over 500 at one time (1 Cor. 15:6-8). J. N. D. Anderson, formerly Professor of Oriental Laws and Director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at the University of London, wrote (*Christianity Today* [3/29/68], pp. 5, 6.),

The most drastic way of dismissing the evidence would be to say that these stories were mere fabrications, that they were pure lies. But, so far as I know, not a single critic today would take such an attitude. In fact, it would really be an impossible position. Think of the number of witnesses, over 500. Think of the character of the witnesses, men and women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, and who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence—and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply wouldn't make sense.

The varied circumstances of the appearances and the different personalities of the witnesses militate against hallucinations or visions. Whether Thomas actually put his hand in Jesus' wounds is not stated, but Jesus made the offer and Thomas was convinced (John 20:27). The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are a strong evidence of His bodily resurrection.

- (4) The changed lives of the witnesses substantiate Jesus' resurrection.

As already mentioned, John calls attention to the fact that none of the witnesses was expecting a resurrection. Mary Magdalene thought that someone had taken Jesus' body (20:2, 15). The disciples were fearful and confused. Thomas was depressed and doubting. But all were transformed into the bold witnesses of the Book of Acts because they became convinced that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. They were so convinced that the resurrection was true that many of them went on to martyrs' deaths.

So there are solid reasons to believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a real, historical event.

B. The risen Lord works with us to bring us from doubt to faith in Himself as Lord and God.

I'm so glad that Jesus didn't remove Thomas from being an apostle because of his doubts! It's helpful to see how the risen Lord brought Thomas from doubt to faith.

First, it is instructive that the Lord picked a time to appear to the other disciples when Thomas was not there. He could have waited until they were all together. Perhaps He wanted to let Thomas hit the bottom before He revealed Himself, so that Thomas would come to a deeper appreciation of his need for Christ. Sometimes He allows us to go through a time of struggle to show us our own weakness and our need to depend totally on Him.

Second, Jesus came to Thomas when he was back together with the other disciples. He was teaching Thomas his need for the body. He did not intend for us to separate ourselves from one another. He wants us to learn and grow together.

Third, Jesus confronted Thomas' unbelief and challenged him to believe. Jesus' words (20:27) reveal that He knew everything that Thomas had said when he was alone with the other disciples; "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." He wants us to know that we're really never apart from His presence, even if we are not aware of it. He confronts us for not believing in such a Person who knows our secret thoughts.

Fourth, Jesus pointed Thomas to Himself as the object of faith. He did not exhort Thomas to believe in the unseen God, but in the visible, risen, touchable Lord Jesus. If you are struggling with

doubts, read the gospels and ask the crucial question: “*Who is Jesus Christ?*” Read about His miraculous birth, His penetrating teaching, His amazing, but documented miracles, and how He fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies. When Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God,” Jesus did not rebuke or correct him for overstating things. Rather, He commended Thomas’ correct perception and faith (20:28-29). No devout Jew could have done that unless, as Thomas proclaimed, Jesus truly is Lord and God.

Jesus also gave further confirmation of His resurrection to Thomas and some other disciples by the Sea of Galilee (21:1-23). After that event, John wrote (21:24), “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.” There is adequate evidence to believe.

Fifth, note that Jesus promised blessing to all who did not see Him, and yet believe (20:29). That applies to every one of us. John goes on to say (20:30-31), “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” If you will believe in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, you will have eternal life in His name.

Conclusion

Does the evidence about Jesus’ resurrection clear up all our doubts about God and the Bible? No, nothing this side of heaven will do that. But it does provide a solid basis for intelligent faith in those times when we struggle with doubt. Jesus alone is the risen Savior. He wants each of us who have not seen Him to be believing, not unbelieving. He wants each of us to recognize that He, our Lord and God, died in our place, taking the penalty we deserved for our sin. He wants us to join Thomas in believing worship, proclaiming, “My Lord and my God!”

If you wait to trust in Christ until all of your doubts are cleared up, you will go to your death alienated from the Savior. There is more than adequate evidence to support a reasonable faith that Jesus Christ is the risen Savior. The question is, Will you focus on who Jesus is and trust in Him as your Savior and Lord?

Application Questions

1. How can a person know whether his doubts are sincere or whether they are just an excuse? Are sincere doubts sin?
2. Is biblical faith a “blind leap”? If not, how does it differ?
3. Is it possible to live without faith in something? Are materialistic humanists purely rational? How can we witness to them?
4. Why is it crucial to base our faith in the fact of Christ’s resurrection rather than on our personal religious experience?

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