

The Resurrection of Jesus: *Believe it or not*

John 20

“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.”

Introduction: If you’ve ever walked through downtown Hollywood near Highland and Hollywood Blvd, you may have walked past a museum attraction that caught your eye, offering the intriguing tag line: **believe it or not!** (Out of curiosity, how many have been to a “Ripley’s: Believe it or not museum, in Hollywood or SF or somewhere else?). In **1919**, **Robert Ripley** brought artifacts from his travels around the world, and with funding from William Randolph Hearst, began his profiting off of the oddities he found. Ripley’s goal: *“Built upon the adventures of Robert Ripley and his travels across the globe searching for **extraordinary people, unusual artifacts, and unbelievable things**, Ripley’s embraces the spirit of discovery.”* What he claimed and hoped would be TRUE stories that people would see and believe, although some of the extraordinary claims have been debunked. In the 1920’s and 30’s, most people had never been overseas, did not have quick access to information, and were starved for news outside of their experience. Today, though we have an overload of information and access to a supercomputer that spits out live data in seconds, we still have intrigue about things we haven’t experienced, don’t fully understand, or find hard to believe.

This proliferation of information has NOT helped us figure out what is real. We are bombarded with news stories that are slanted to one side of an ideology or another. We are told by politicians that everything is secure and getting better or that we should be afraid of everything. With the growing use of AI, a technologically driven object can make it look like ANYONE is saying ANYTHING, and we aren’t always able to determine if it’s true or not! Determining what is true is difficult, and thus being convinced of what we believe seems impossible.

People always will say what they think but will DO what they believe. You may not even KNOW what you believe, but if someone observed your life for 2 weeks, they could give you a report and be surprisingly accurate about what you put your faith in. **Easter is a bit of a microcosm of life**, since what you believe about the resurrection will determine your present and future. That sounds like an audacious claim, one that Ripley would be proud of, but what I hope is that everyone here today will have to make decision of belief, or unbelief, when it comes to Jesus’ **life, death, and resurrection**. In fact, the book of John is written for this purpose, according to **John 20**:

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ 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.

This was written by the apostle John after he recorded the events of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, what we observe and celebrate today. What we want to see this morning is that Jesus showed Himself after the resurrection to strengthen the belief of His followers, but also so that those who never see Him, never touch His hands, never see the empty tomb with their eyes, never observe the cloth that bound His body will be blessed with belief, and that by believing, we will have life eternal in Him.

A CONTEXT OF THE RESURRECTION:

John 20 paints a picture of several individuals who saw the empty tomb or came into contact with the risen Jesus. But it's important to understand what has just taken place to understand both their reactions, but also hesitations with what they saw, or did not see.

For the closest followers of Jesus heading into the crucifixion on Friday, there was a mixture of **fear, disappointment, sadness, terror, and disbelief**. Far from the pictures of pastels and bright sunshine, the events leading up to Easter were dark and painful. When Jesus came into Jerusalem on **Palm Sunday**, it came at the cheers of the masses, hundreds of thousands of Jews welcoming in their supposed King with palm branches and shouts of "**Hosanna**" ('save us now!'). Following this, Jesus spent Monday and Tuesday possessing the Temple mount, putting the religious leaders to open shame, answering all of their questions and posing questions to them that they could not answer. All of this pointed to the fact that **Jesus was the Messiah, the great liberator of the Jewish people from a foreign power**, in this case the Roman nation. As this group huddled together on Thursday night to celebrate Passover, the last thing on their minds would be the extreme and painful death of their Rabbi and teacher, but were instead hopeful to get placed in powerful positions and gain leadership over the choicest parts of the coming kingdom. Even though Jesus had JUST SAID what was going to happen (read **Luke 18:31-34** - *He said He's be delivered up, mocked, spat on, flogged and killed, but would rise again* - this was 2 weeks before!), we often hear what we want to hear when it comes to things that are said, especially in terms of God's Word.

But their ignorant bliss came to a grinding halt. As they were sleepily praying with Jesus in a Garden, the group was accosted by one of their own, the **betrayor named Judas**, who came with a great crowd with swords and clubs and the enemy, the chief priests and elders of the people (Matt. 26:47). All of a sudden, their world and belief system changed. Peter tried to show bravado, but Jesus told him to put his little knife away. Exactly what Jesus said would happen, DID HAPPEN. As His disciples scattered, Jesus was arrested, moved from leader to leader (six different times), was condemned, spat on, flogged, and led to a place called Golgotha. In the meantime, their leader in Peter denied vehemently three times that he even knew Jesus, and as day broke on Friday, Jesus was lifted up just above the gathering crowds on a cross, a device used to put down sedition and was the ultimate design to bring forth maximum pain for as long as possible to dissuade ANYONE to revolt against Rome.

Jesus was taken down off the cross before sundown on Friday evening (which is why the soldiers were going to break His legs but found He had already died - John 19:33) as **Shabbat** would have begun, and there would be little activity from Friday night to Saturday night, which meant Sunday morning was the first opportunity Jesus' followers had to come to His burial place. This meant that all of His disciples had over 24 hours to think, to try to make sense of what just happened. *How could this happen? What now? They had banked everything on this man, and His death caught them by surprise.* This is why what happened on Sunday morning changed everything, not only for the disciples, but for us as well.

FIRST WITNESSES AT THE TOMB

John 20:1-18

While day was beginning to break on Sunday morning, **Mary Magdalene** made her way to the tomb where Jesus was laid. Mary had a deep love for Jesus since He had freed her from **seven demons** (Luke 8:2). She came to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body with spices and ointments (Luke 23:56; 24:1), since Jewish custom was not to embalm, but to wrap and spice up. What she had no knowledge of was that in the meantime, the Jewish religious leaders had also commissioned a group of soldiers to guard the tomb and seal the stone (which had

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already been placed there (Matt. 27:60). But to her surprise **the stone had already been taken away**, the result of an earthquake and an angel coming down and rolling it away (Matt. 28:1-4 - an event that drove the soldiers away and prompted the leaders to pay them off to lie and create a story of the disciples coming and stealing the body - Matt. 28:11-15). Mary's first instinct was to **run and tell the disciples, prompting two of them to run to the tomb themselves.**

Peter and John (who never refers to himself in His own gospel account) came to the empty tomb, and were convinced of Jesus' resurrection by what they **saw and DID NOT SEE**. John beat Peter to the tomb, but Peter went in first (had to win something!). What they saw changed everything. They did NOT see a body, or a scene where a body would have been snatched, but rather one of calm, with the cloths Jesus had been wrapped in lying there and the face cloth folded. Both men left the scene, but Peter still had questions, prompting another interaction (1 Cor. 15:5) before He was fully restored by Jesus (John 21:15-23). But for **John, he saw and believed!** He had not connected the dots of Scripture yet, but seeing the scene of the stone rolled away and Jesus being gone caused Him to believe the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene was given a direct interaction with the risen Christ! She lingered at the tomb after the boys left and there she saw **2 angels** sitting in the tomb and they asked why she was weeping. She believed someone had actually come and taken the body away, not yet understanding the reality of the resurrection. **Then Jesus approached her and asked the same thing, adding "whom are you seeking?"** In her confusion, Jesus simply said, "**Mary**", at which she finally recognized Him, immediately clinging to Him. But Jesus said something new to her and instead of having her linger there in tears of joy, He redirected her. He was NOT like Lazarus who continued to live on, but Jesus was now focused on **His ascension, which would come in a few weeks time.**

Jesus' resurrection was seen and sure for those who followed Him. For His disciples, it was cause for them to **believe**. For Mary, it was a cause for **joy and reason to share**. Jesus' resurrected body was the same but different. The stone was NOT rolled away so He could get out, but for His followers to see He was not there. He had a body, but it was not immediately recognized by even those who knew Him the best, but was also able to be hugged and clung onto. But Jesus was not done strengthening the **belief of the rest of His disciples.**

REAFFIRMING THE DISCIPLES

John 20:19-29

On Easter Sunday evening the rest of the disciples were huddled in fear in a room with all the doors locked (20:19). They were **afraid**. If the religious leaders could kill Jesus, the One who raised Lazarus from the dead, what hope did they have! It was here that Jesus **appeared before them**. Apparently in His resurrected body Jesus could walk through walls and doors! He said, "**Shalom**" and showed them His hands and side, which apparently still showed the scars from the torture He endured days earlier. At this, they were **glad** and recognized Him as their LORD. But Jesus did not simply reaffirm them, He **redirected them**. They were going to move from a **frightened huddle to a courageous force, by receiving the Holy Spirit and armed with a message of the forgiveness of sins!** The resurrection was a message of **FEARLESSNESS**, since it signaled that even death could not stop the gospel, but physical death only ushers in eternal life, which is the greatest joy of our heart.

When death is no longer the greatest fear we are truly free to live obediently. It was these scared men that would preach boldly at Pentecost, would endure suffering, would preach

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relentlessly, and would die confidently. It was also these men that turned the **upside down**: *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus”* (Acts 17:6-7) When Christ is our greatest joy, death is no longer our greatest enemy, for to live is Christ and die is gain (Phil. 21). But there was still one who was unconvinced - *there’s always one in every group!*

Thomas had missed the whole experience and instead of believing what had taken place, he said, *“UNLESS I SEE in his hand and the mark of the nails and place my fingers into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I WILL NEVER BELIEVE!”* (John 20:25) **Can you relate to this at all?** True faith and belief is hard, since faith is defined as the *substance of things hoped for and EVIDENCE of things unseen* (Heb. 11:1). Perhaps Thomas was not the doubter but the realist of the group, the one who represented most people who will “believe it when they see it”, not wanting to believe some fantastical story that seems too crazy to be true!

But Jesus did not let Thomas linger in his frozen unbelief. **8 days later**, in a similar scenario of locked doors and a holy huddle, Jesus appeared once again (I wonder if He loved sneaking up on the disciples!). This time He went right after Thomas, calling Him to **touch His hands and sides**, and to stop **disbelieving, but rather to believe!** Thomas then uttered one of the sweetest and clearest declarations of belief in Jesus, *“My Lord and My God!”*, recognizing Jesus as both Messiah and Divine God. Thomas was affirmed, he believed and he continued to follow.

But this is NOT where the story ends, because though Jesus showed Himself to those who already followed Him in the resurrection, He had another group in mind as well. To this group, He said, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? **Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have believed.**”* This is the group I want to talk to for a few minutes to close our morning.

CALLING TO BELIEVE – OR NOT

Easter is about belief, particularly what YOU believe. It is a time that should strip away all the noise and cultural additions and leave us bare before a holy God. The reality of life is this: **we are sinners and we have offended a holy God and the consequence is that His wrath is poured out on us in just and fair punishment.** There is a large church on the East Coast today that gathered a massive crowd and wanted to introduce them to Jesus, but did not want to offend them, so they left out words like *sin, blood, or resurrection.* Why? Because it would make someone feel like an outsider. But here is the reality this morning: *I am more concerned about the fact that your sin and mine have offended a holy God than if the message of salvation is offensive to you!* In fact, the message of the gospel IS offensive, but it is also the most **loving, gracious, merciful, and glorious message we could ever receive.** And it is all wrapped up into the message of the resurrection.

The problem we have is NOT that we don’t think we’ve sinned, we simply don’t think our sin is bad enough to warrant eternal punishment, especially if there is any kind of cosmic curve or grading scale (let’s be honest, we’re not nearly as bad as _____). But the Bible and our own consciences betray that thought. We know that we have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory and our nagging **guilt and shame** tell us that something is wrong that needs to be made right. This is where **belief comes into play.**

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What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Does it simply mean to hear and understand the story of Easter?

There were plenty of people in Jesus' time that saw Jesus, heard His teaching, experienced His miracles, and rejected Him, even while the Jewish leaders out of envy (Matt. 27:18) and pride (John 11:48) wanted to kill Him. This was for good reason because just like us, they had to do something about Jesus and could not let Him continue on. They believed in the sense they saw Him, but did not place their belief IN HIM.

So what does it mean to believe? Here is what **Romans 10:9-10**, *"9 because, 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. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."*

Notice a few things about belief here: 1) In order to believe, we must first recognize that we need saving, not in general, but specifically because of OUR sin.

2) This speaks to two sides of the same coin - one, being made righteous or declared righteous, which is positive, and the other is being saved, which is negative since we are saved from wrath because of our sin.

3) We **believe convictionally** (heart) that God raised Jesus from the dead! *Why such an emphasis on the resurrection?* Because in the resurrection of Jesus, is tied up ALL that Jesus claimed to be and demonstrated, while on earth. Jesus was **validated** in the miracles He did, like showing power over nature, disease, and death. It also **vindicated** His death on the cross, where He became sin for us, substituting Himself where we should have been, and God poured out His wrath so that Jesus could be an atonement for us. If Jesus had merely died, it would have been a tragic story of a mythical hero, but His resurrection showed that God was satisfied with His sacrifice, and His resurrection signaled a conquering of sin and death. It signaled that He was **glorified** as He would ascend to the Father and sit at His right hand as KING and LORD.

4) We confess with our mouth **Jesus is Lord**, meaning two hugely important things: **One**, He is the only one who could save us and we cannot save ourselves through ANY amount of works or good things. **Two**, there is a transfer of loyalty, a turning from our sin, and repenting of it. We yield ourselves to Christ and become His follower, turning from all of our **self-righteousness, self-trust, and self-justification**.

But that is the **objective part of belief**. As Peter believed and was restored from his denial of Jesus, he wrote this years later, which speaks to us today:

1 Peter 1:8-9 - *"Though you have not seen him, **you love him**. Though you do not now see him, you **believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory**, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls*

You see, belief in Jesus is not simply about getting out of hell or punishment, it is **gaining Jesus**, whom we now love, find our joy in, and seek to glorify. Belief is not simply understanding facts, it is yielding our lives to the object of our belief. I can say *I love my wife*, but that will show true if I actually treasure her, value her above all, forsaking all others. This is what belief in Jesus is. It is trusting that He loved us so much that He willingly went to the cross, substituted Himself for us, took our shame and guilt, bore the wrath of God, so that we could have His righteousness. In that, we have a new relationship with Him which now shapes the rest of our life, both here on this earth and eternity to come.

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So the big question this morning is this: ***Do you believe it...or not?*** Are you willing to turn from your sin and shame, from being under the wrath of God and deserving of punishment to a reconciled, forgiven, whole, restored relationship with God through Jesus? The call is to believe. Turn away from the life you are currently living. Yield yourself to Christ. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, and God will see the blood of Christ shed on your behalf and give you His righteousness and save you. May this be the day that you know you are saved.