

If you could meet anyone and ask them one question, who would it be and what would you ask? Well, imagine if you could ask God a question. What would you ask him? Throughout January, we've been thinking in our services about big questions that often get asked of the Christian faith. Is Jesus the only way? Why does God allow suffering? How can we believe the Bible? And today we're thinking about the question: is there life after death? It's a pretty important question to be clear on since this is an issue for everyone of us in this room. Statistically 100% of all people die.

In order to help answer the question, we're going to look at what the Bible says. I realise that might be considered by many as a stupid thing to do! But it seems to me that it's the best thing to do. That's because we believe that the Bible isn't just an ancient, irrelevant book – but a timeless, truthful word from the God who made life and is much more knowledgeable about things than we are! So in looking at the Bible, we're seeing what he says, rather than simply what we think. It couldn't be more relevant to listen to what the God of the universe has to say! In case you wanted to do some more thinking about the Bible, that's the subject for next week's talk – so you'll have to come back then.

But according to what God says in the Bible, the short answer to our question is 'yes'! Death will not be the end for us, because death wasn't the end for Jesus. In other words, Jesus Christ really did die, he really did rise and he really can get us through death to a joyful new life that will last forever.

Now as I say that, I'm aware that when it comes to the Christian faith, people often think of it rather like the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland: 'I can't believe that', said Alice. 'Can't you,' the queen replied in a pitying tone. 'Try again - draw a long breath and shut your eyes'. Alice laughed – 'But there's no point trying,' she said, 'one cannot believe impossible things'. 'Well

I dare say you haven't had much practice,' said the queen. 'When I was your age I always did it for half an hour every day - why sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!' For many people the idea of believing in a God who created the universe, walked the earth in the person of Jesus, who died and rose again – well it's just fantasy. It's the stuff of make believe, like Harry Potter, Santa Claus & the Tooth Fairy. But the gospel writers were not writing fanciful myths – in fact they actually claim to be recording real history. So we're not talking about **myth**. And nor are we talking about **metaphor**. You sometimes hear people talking about a loved one who has died, being with them in spirit or looking down on them from above. It's not that Jesus physical body remained in the grave but his memory lived on in the hearts and minds of his hearers. Resuscitation is when someone hits death and comes back from it. Reincarnation is the belief that someone hits death and comes back as something else. Resurrection is when you go through death and out the other side. What we're talking about the actual, physical, real, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ has not been physically raised from the dead, '**our preaching is useless and so is your faith**'. In fact, he goes on to say that if the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not true then '**our faith is futile and we're still in our sins**'. If Jesus is not alive then we are wasting our time.

Well in chapter 20 of John's biography of Jesus' life there is an account of a sceptic called Thomas. He was not a man prone to blind leaps of faith – he wanted hard facts and evidence. And so, after the other disciples told him that Jesus had come back from the dead, Thomas said v25, 'Oh, I always knew he could do it!' Not quite! He actually said **v25**. Thomas wanted to see (and touch!) before he believed. This man came to be known as 'Doubting Thomas'. He was sceptical about Jesus and he wanted to look into things personally before committing himself. And it maybe that you can relate to him. I'm actually very grateful that this account is in the Bible

because I was a Thomas! As a 16 year old growing up in a non-Christian home, when people tried to persuade me to become a Christian, I wanted evidence. But one of the ironies about 'Doubting Thomas', however, is that a more appropriate description would be 'believing Thomas'! A week later in v27, Thomas got the evidence he was looking for as the risen Jesus stood in front of him and said, **'see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe'**. All Thomas could do in response was to say to Jesus, **'My Lord and my God'**. This hard-nosed sceptic was now convinced in the resurrection of Jesus. His doubts blown out of the water. The question is: what happened to bring this man from doubt to belief? It seems to me that Thomas discovered 3 things that totally changed his mind and his life. Discovering these things has had the same effect on me. Maybe they will do so for you too, if they haven't already.

❶ Faith in Jesus is reasonable

You have probably heard or said at some point, 'I'll believe it when I see it', or 'seeing is believing', as if sight is the only thing that satisfies our desire for evidence. So when I told my friends that I'd met a pretty young lady who wanted to marry me, they said 'I'll believe it when I see it'! But when we think about it, there are lots of things we believe without sight. Last year, a new planet, similar to the size of the earth was discovered. Now I've never seen Kepler 186f with my own eyes, yet I have no doubt about its existence because I believe the testimony of those who have seen it. I have never personally investigated all the data on climate change or examined all the information about evolution. We take all sorts of things on trust from people who are more in the know than we are. Seeing is not always believing.

After Thomas acknowledged that Jesus was his risen Lord, Jesus says something striking to Thomas in v29. Thomas saw Jesus with his own eyes but we can't. I can't show you the physical body of Jesus today. It's not like one of those TV shows where a surprise guest is brought out from behind the curtain to a shocked audience! We live 2000 years after the events that

John is describing. But it's important to realise that what Jesus asks for is not faith without evidence but faith without sight - and they are two totally different things. 'Blind faith' is faith without sight *and* without evidence. However, we are asked to believe the witness of those who did see. Therefore, faith in Jesus is not faith without evidence, but faith based upon evidence. There is good evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. John's biography is a good place to look if you've never investigated these things for yourself. We may not be able to see the physical risen body of Jesus, but Thomas and many others did. I mean, there are some things that happen in the world that would be utterly unbelievable if it weren't for eye witness testimony. Some of the things that the Nazis did to Jewish babies is very hard to believe. But there are people who saw it and survived to tell the horrific stories. Jesus dying and rising again would be totally ridiculous if it weren't for eye witnesses who saw it. And history records for us that Thomas went from doubter to believer to preacher to martyr. He was so sure of what he had seen that he, like many of the disciples, died for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. Thomas came to see the 2 things that others had discovered earlier on in the chapter.

The 1st discovery was that **the tomb was empty**. Have you ever had the experience of going to a place expecting to find something, only you realise it's not actually where you thought it was? This happens to me with keys, you go to the place you think your keys are, but they're not there. They're in your wife's handbag! Well at the start of chapter 20 Mary Magdalene went to the tomb expecting to find Jesus' dead body. But it's not there, **v1-2**. Now Mary hadn't got the wrong tomb. We read in another gospel that she saw where Jesus was buried. And here she was going to visit the grave of her friend. She hadn't got the wrong place, but she had got the wrong idea. See Mary thought the reason that the tomb was empty was because someone had stolen Jesus' body. We've seen what she cried out in **v2** – and she says a very similar thing to the angels in **v13**. But no-one had taken Jesus' body. The tomb had a huge stone in front of it, and soldiers to

guard it. And anyway, grave robbers wouldn't leave the grave clothes behind – they were the most valuable thing to steal. No, the reason the tomb was empty was because of the 2nd discovery... **The Lord is alive.**

As Mary was standing outside the tomb crying she saw 2 angels who asked her what seems to be a very silly question in **v13**. Isn't it obvious why she is crying? Imagine going up to someone at a funeral and asking 'excuse me, why is everyone around here so sad?!' Mary is crying because in her mind Jesus is dead and he has gone. That's what she thought – but she was wrong. He wasn't dead and gone – he was alive and he was there! She turns around and sees Jesus but maybe because of the tears in her eyes and the sadness in her heart she doesn't realise that it's him. And then Jesus asks the same question as the angels, **v15**. See it's not a silly question at all. It's a very sensible question because there is no need for her tears. Jesus' dead body had not been taken away. He was alive & well. And standing in front of her! Of all places and of all moments in time, Jesus' empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday was not a place for crying. It was a time and a place for rejoicing. And her sadness very quickly turns to joy at the sound of one word in **v16**. He doesn't say, 'Mary, I'm alive, I've done it!' He simply calls her name. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name and his sheep know his voice. In **v16**, Mary is hearing her shepherd calling.

And imagine how she felt when she discovered that the person she was talking to was not the gardener but the Lord. Not only was her friend alive but death had been defeated. The Lord is alive. That news changes everything. Not just for Mary then, but for everyone here today. Because Jesus is alive, we can be certain that our death will not be the end of our lives, but if we have trusted in him it will be the beginning of our new lives with him in heaven. The tomb is empty. The Lord is alive. Faith in Jesus is reasonable.

② Faith in Jesus is relational

In the middle of the 19th Century, a Vicar called William Haslam got up to preach one Sunday and amazingly got converted by his own sermon! What he realised in the middle of his talk was that faith in Jesus is not just intellectual or cultural but real and personal. This is how he later described his conversion: 'As I went on to explain my text, I saw that the Pharisees and Scribes did not know that Christ was the Son of God who came to save them. As I preached, something was telling me all the time, 'you are no better than the Pharisees yourself'. I do not remember all I said, but I felt a wonderful light and joy coming into my soul, as I began to see what the Pharisees did not. Whether it was my words or my manner or my look, I know not; but all of a sudden a local preacher, who happened to be in the congregation, stood up in the middle of my sermon, put his arms up and shouted out in a Cornish manner, "the parson is converted! Hallelujah!" In a moment his voice was lost in the shouts and praises of three or four hundred in the congregation. Instead of rebuking this extraordinary brawling as I would have done at one time, I joined in the outburst of praise'.

Now it's much better if people become Christians before they become Vicars! But Haslam's experience shows us that true faith in Jesus is so much more than simply knowing the facts. There is a world of difference between knowing about someone and knowing them personally. The same is true with Jesus. Some people may have encountered Jesus socially through their family. Perhaps their parents were Christians and the Bible stories are familiar - but faith has never become personal. Others may have encountered Jesus culturally through church. Going to the occasional service, Christmas and Easter, weddings and funerals - but faith never got personal. You know the C of E (Church of England) this is more C & E (Christmas and Easter)! Well when Thomas was confronted by the evidence standing in front of him, he responded by saying to Jesus, **v28**. That's why he could beat death and offer life because he is the God who made life. Now that's a staggering thing for a Jew like Thomas to have said – that the person of Jesus was not just

God, but HIS God. And it shows us that his faith was not just reasonable; it was relational. It moved from an intellectual engagement with the facts to a personal adoration of Jesus. Jesus was *his* Lord and *his* God. If ever there is an appropriate response to Jesus, this is it. And I suppose the question is: How do you relate to Jesus? It's been said that Christianity is not so much a religion but a relationship. A relationship with the God who made you that will last beyond this life and into the next. That relationship is what Jon and Holly have experienced for themselves and long for Elijah to enjoy himself one day. And that is only possible because Jesus is alive...you can't have a relationship with a dead person. Faith in Jesus is reasonable, it's relational and lastly...

❸ Faith in Jesus is radical

Before I became a Christian, I used to think that the Christian faith was totally irrelevant. A bit like a chocolate teapot - sweet but useless! How does the death and resurrection of a Jewish carpenter 2000 years ago, 2000 miles away possibly have any relevance for you and me now? I want us to see 2 radical consequences as I close:

➤ Peace

I don't know if you noticed as we read it earlier, but Jesus says 'peace be with you' 3 times (v19, 21, 26). Now that was a 1st Century greeting – a bit like – 'nice to see you'. But Jesus is saying much more than 'hi' to his pals here. It's actually very significant, not just because he repeats it 3 times, but because he follows it by showing them his scars (v19, 26). It's as if Jesus is saying peace is now with you and my scars are the proof. And the peace that Jesus is talking about is not just a nice warm feeling. It is a spiritual reality. We don't naturally have peace with God. In fact, naturally we are at war with God. That's because either politely or aggressively we take God gifts and ignore him. We live as if we in charge when actually God has every right to be in charge. The Bible calls that sin and whilst sin might be fun for a while, it does not come cheap. The consequence or price of sin is separation from

God in this life and the next. But when Jesus died, he paid that price as he experienced separation from God in our place. It's been said that he paid a debt he himself didn't owe, to satisfy a debt we could never pay. And when Jesus rose, God was showing that the price had been paid and for all those who trust in Jesus' death and scars – we will not experience separation from God, but rather enjoy peace with God. That's the first radical consequence – peace. The second as I close is:

➤ Life

Read v31. According to the one who made life, life is not about earning lots of money, having a fulfilling career, raising a loving family. Those are good things to enjoy in life, but they are not the purpose of life. Knowing God is what we were made for. That is real life. And according to one writer, living without a relationship with God is like living as a caterpillar when you were made to be a butterfly! Is there life after death? Yes. Because the great enemy, death has been smashed to pieces by Jesus on the first Easter Sunday. He is alive today and offers real peace and true life to all who put their trust in him. We started by thinking about asking God one question. But I want to suggest to you that God asks each of us a question too. What will you do with the death of my Son?