

Blessed are the Skeptics

John 20:19-31

Good Easter morning! This is an Easter like none other. One friend said it well this past week. She said, "I like that folks are experiencing what it means to be 'entombed' for this season before they celebrate a freedom and resurrection."

I've been thinking about how our lives might be different once this season of distancing and staying-at-home is over. So this past week I took an informal survey of several people (both within Faith and in the community). I asked, "How do you want your life to be different when this season has passed?" It might have to do with your routine, your priorities, or something internal.

- * One person said: "Minus the social distancing, I wish life could always move this slow. With less pressure. It's as if everyone has been given permission to take their foot off of the gas."
- * Another person said: "One thing I'm kind of hoping for at the end of all this virus stuff is for us to emerge to a kinder world. I'd love to see people in solidarity with one another instead of all the divisiveness." As well, she said, "Some of the many things I'd like to **be** when this is over is more curious (especially when it comes to other's needs and suffering and ways I can help), more observant (particularly of delightful things), more grateful, and humble."
- * For me, this season of distancing has reinforced for me the value of healthy, life-giving relationships. I hope that once this season is over I am a better husband and dad and brother and friend to the people in my life. I want to be less passive (i.e. more active) in reaching out to people I care about.

Different people mentioned different issues, but the commonality, it seems to me, is that ***everybody wants an upgraded quality of LIFE***. We all want a full, satisfying life. We don't merely want to ***exist***. We want to ***experience fulness of life***.

Now the question becomes, "How do we actually experience that type of life?" Just wanting a full and satisfying life doesn't make it so. If you're like me, you can remember times in your life where you've thought, "From this point forward, I'm never going to be the same. . . this experience has changed me forever," only to realize a few weeks or months later that nothing had changed.

Today we are going to talk about how we can experience a full, satisfying life. Since this is Easter morning, you probably aren't too surprised to hear me say that understanding and believing the resurrection of Jesus is vital. The New Testament tells us that those who trust (put their confidence) in the death and resurrection of Jesus experience a quality of life like no other.

This morning we are going to consider a fascinating passage of Scripture in John 20 that describes how a man named Thomas came to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. After he believed, Jesus spoke to him about the type of life that he and others could experience.

One thing we'll see is that when Thomas was first told that Jesus had been raised from the dead, he had the same reaction as everybody else: he did not believe it (see Luke 24:11). He thought it was "too good to be true." If you find the idea that Jesus was literally, bodily raised from the dead to be too fantastic to believe, you are in good company.

We'll first talk about the faith of Jesus' original followers; then we'll talk about how a person today (over 2,000 years later) can have faith. In John 20:19-29 we have an example of:

Faith in Jesus based on irrefutable evidence (John 20:19-29).

Beginning in John 20:19 we read that the evening after Jesus was resurrected, He appeared to the disciples.

19 When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first *day* of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and *said to them, "Peace *be* with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus didn't require that the disciples take anybody else's word that He'd been raised from the dead. He gave them first-hand proof; He showed them the scars in his hands and side. If you read the book of Acts, you will see that their faith in the resurrection of Christ was unshakeable. They would not recant their faith in Jesus even when threatened by death. But notice in verse 24 that Thomas was absent on this occasion.

24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Basically, Thomas reacted the way everybody else did. He wanted firsthand evidence. Thomas said, "Unless I see and touch the scars in Jesus' hands and side, I will not believe." Because of this statement, he has been dubbed "Doubting Thomas" (which isn't completely fair).

But the significant thing about Thomas is that he was ***willing to believe***. He did want irrefutable evidence. But he was willing to be convinced. In other words, he didn't say, "You can show me all the evidence in the world, and I'll never believe. . ." Some people in that day and in ours have that attitude, but not Thomas. He was willing to be convinced if he had evidence.

Mark Buchanan writes about his own encounter with a person who claimed to be a "skeptic":

I met a man who told me he didn't believe the Bible because he was a skeptic. I asked him if he had read the Bible. "No, not really," he said. "I told you. I'm a skeptic. I don't believe it." This is not skepticism. This is its opposite: a refusal to investigate, to scrutinize, to ponder deeply.

Skepticism is not an excuse for evasion, an alibi for laziness. Any skeptic worthy of the name is both a hunter and detective, stalking the evidence, laying ambush, rummaging for clues, dredging the river bottom, wiretapping phone lines, setting traps. Skeptics are passionate about finding truth out. True skeptics want to believe, but safeguard against the hypnotic power of that wanting. So they test.

Thomas was a true skeptic. He doubted, not to excuse his unbelief, but to establish robust belief. He doubted so that his belief might be based on something more than rumor and wishful thinking. (*Christianity Today*, April 3, 2000, p. 64)

Thomas said, "I'm willing to believe, but show me the evidence!" Thomas got the evidence he wanted.

26 And after eight days again His disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you."

The fact that the doors were still shut would indicate that the disciples were still fearful of the Jews. As before Jesus "stood in their midst" - apparently He miraculously appeared before them - and gave them the customary greeting of "Peace be with you." Then Jesus addressed Thomas. It is clear from what He says that Jesus knew the type of evidence that Thomas had demanded.

27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing."

Jesus commands Thomas to believe based upon the evidence. "Touch My wounds and see the scars in My hands. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Apparently Thomas needed only to **see**; we aren't told that He touched Jesus:

28 Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

That confession indicates that Thomas believed. The resurrection was irrefutable evidence that validated everything Jesus had said and done. Jesus' response to Thomas is striking:

29 Jesus *said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

Jesus anticipates the day when people would believe without seeing Him. Even though Jesus was willing to appear to the original disciples, the day would come when Jesus would return to the Father. In the mean time, people would believe without "seeing" the way Thomas did. Jesus says that such people are blessed - that the favor of God rests upon them.

It is important for us to acknowledge that we who live almost 2,000 years after the resurrection don't get the same irrefutable evidence that Thomas did. We aren't in a position to demand, "Unless I see His hands and touch His wounds, I'll never believe." That's simply not how we evaluate historical events.

And so, what type of evidence is legitimate to "demand" or expect? Surely a person shouldn't believe that Jesus is risen from the dead simply because others believe that, right? If you ask around, you will find all sorts of contradictory things people believe about Jesus. What type of evidence do we have today?

Interestingly enough, immediately after Jesus spoke of those who would believe without seeing, John (the author of this gospel) addresses this very issue. And then he links that belief to life - full, satisfying, eternal life. In verses 30 and 31 he talks about:

Faith in Jesus based upon eyewitness testimony (vv. 30-31)

John writes this:

30 Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Jesus did many other miracles that are not recorded due to space constraints (see John 21:25). "But," John says, "these [signs] have been written ***that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*** . . ." In other words, the stimulus for faith is now the written accounts of eyewitness testimony. John wrote what he did so that his readers (including us) might believe that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah - that this Jesus is the One sent by God to deliver us from our sins. The premise throughout Scripture is that we have all sinned and that we therefore need a Savior. Sin is a broad category in Scripture that basically means straying from God and His will. You don't have to teach a person to sin; we do this both by nature and by choice.

Biblically speaking, sin has a couple of catastrophic consequences. First, sin shows up in human relationships and becomes a destructive force in this world. God's design is that we are full of compassion and humility and generosity toward others. Instead we tend to be self-centered and self-absorbed; we will help others out if convenient, but we mainly care about "me and mine." When given free reign, sin manifests itself as hatred, violence, and oppression. The history of humanity is dominated by the sinfulness that is embedded in individuals and societies. Sin causes death, not life.

Second, sin shows up in the way we tend to relate to God. Instead of being enamored with God and His ways, sin makes us suspicious of God; instead of moving toward God, we move away from God. Instead of viewing God as the most intelligent, most compassionate, and most beautiful being in the universe, sin makes us view ourselves as more intelligent, more compassionate, and more beautiful than God. Instead of looking up to God in wonder, we look down at God with contempt. Nowhere is this more obvious than the crucifixion of Jesus. When God showed up in the flesh we crucified Him.

The great message of the book of John (and the rest of the NT) is that Jesus' death on the cross is the remedy for our sin. When He hung on the cross, our sin was laid upon Him. He paid the penalty that we deserved for our sin. Look at verse 31 again:

31 but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

John wrote what this book we call the gospel of John so that we might become convinced that Jesus is the Son of God who paid for our sin and then rose from the dead the third day. Notice that he said that when we believe, we will have **life** in His name. This life we have is elsewhere called **eternal** life. Eternal life doesn't only mean we live for all eternity. It does mean that; those who believe will live with God for eternity. Since we are created in God's image, we are eternal beings; we will each live for eternity somewhere.

But more than living forever with God after we die, eternal life denotes a **quality** of life we experience here and now. Eternal life addresses the catastrophic consequences of sin. First, we now relate to God properly. We experience Him as the most intelligent, compassionate, and beautiful Being imaginable. We experience Him as described in Scripture: He is a Good Shepherd (nourishing, protecting, and providing), as a good Father (who wants us and who trains us up), as a Refuge (when the storms come, we flee to Him for safety instead of running away from Him). When we have eternal life, we relate to God properly.

Second, we progressively relate to other people properly. We progressively become the type of people who are full of compassion, humility, and generosity toward others. We become life-giving in relationships. We learn how to treat others the way God in Christ has treated us: we lay down our lives for others; we forgive others; we aren't merely concerned about ourselves, but also the needs of others. Even though it's hard, we do this joyfully because we are God's children; we bear the family resemblance.

This is the quality of life that we all long for. This is the quality of life Jesus offers. We asked Shashika Perera to share her story of how she came to experience eternal life in Christ. I think you'll find it fascinating.

Video: Shashika Perera

I love Shashika's story for many reasons. For one thing, her story is different from almost anybody I know. I also love that she was "a true skeptic" as we discussed earlier. She was willing to consider the evidence to find out whether or not Jesus was the Son of God who died on the cross as her substitute and then rose again on the third day. She read Scripture, thought deeply about it, and talked with others.

Many of you already believe that Jesus is the Son of God. For others of you, the things I just shared might sound strange or ludicrous or "too good to be true." My encouragement to you is to be a good skeptic and "stalk the evidence." As we read earlier, the primary evidence we have is the eyewitness accounts found in Scripture. I'd encourage you to take a risk and read the gospel of John. If you read a chapter a day, you'll be done 21 days from now. Read slowly and carefully and even prayerfully ("God, show me if Jesus really is Your Son who died for my sins and rose on the third day."). Like Shashika, you'll also find it helpful to discuss what you're reading. If you would like us to connect you with another person or two, click the link on our web site or there on Facebook live, and someone will be in touch with you about options (Zoom, phone, email, etc.).

I realize that this is a huge risk for some of you. But it's a risk well worth taking because there is so much at stake. If Jesus really rose from the dead, the life He offers is the life we should want for ourselves.

Prayer.