

John 20:1-31
The most important thing for you to believe!
Christ Church Liverpool

Felix Adler, 19th century Jewish ethicist and social reformer, once said that: *Religion is a wizard, a sibyl . . . She faces the wreck of worlds, and prophesies restoration. She faces a sky blood-red with sunset colours that deepen into darkness, and prophesies dawn. She faces death, and prophesies life.*

For Adler, the son of a Rabbi, all he had seen in religion was a deceit. A sleight-of-hand. A denial of reality in the face of the most obvious evidence available. Look round the world, he said, and what do you see? Destruction, suffering and death. And what does religion claim to offer? Restoration, dawn and life.

And if you've read up to this point in John's gospel you might be excused for thinking that Christianity performs the very same dishonest trick. Cast your eye back to the very end of our reading from last week and look at the last two verses:

"At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden. And in the garden a new tomb, in which no-one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

What is this charade? It's all very well, perhaps, for John to give us signs and symbols in the story of the crucifixion that Jesus is really a king – the sign above his head saying he's a king, the crown of thorns and the fulfilling of Old Testament prophecies. It's all well and good for Jesus to make massive claims about himself – *I am the way and the truth and the life* – or for John to make them about Jesus – *whoever believes in the Son has eternal life*.

But with Jesus sealed in a tomb surely all there is eternally is darkness? With his very heartbeat extinguished surely all Jesus can offer is death?

Well that's why these last chapters of John's gospel are absolutely vital for us to understand. The teaching, miracles and death of Jesus are of immense, in fact of universal significance. They are the most important things that have ever happened in history. But without the resurrection all those other things are simply meaningless.

I What we have without Christ: darkness, fear and weeping.

Mary Magdalene had stood as Jesus had been crucified just a few yards away from her. She had witnessed the horror of that event. It probably wasn't the first time – most people who lived in and around a big city in the Roman world would have witnessed many crucifixions. It may not even have been the first time she had seen someone she knew crucified – life was brutal and justice pitiless in those times.

But it was certainly the first time she had ever seen, the first time the world had ever seen, the execution of a complete innocent. Someone who was not only, as John emphasises again and again in his gospel, innocent of the crimes he was accused of. But someone who was innocent of all crime. The only man who ever lived who had not only

done no harm but had continually loved his neighbour as himself, spoken the truth and honoured God in perfection.

Imagine how Mary felt – losing a perfect friend. Not only that but more than that losing the man on whom she had pinned her hopes. Not, as Dan Brown's "Da Vinci Code" would have us believe, her hopes for marriage, but all of her hope. Political, social, spiritual. Mary, and the other followers of Jesus, really had no idea **how** Jesus was going to transform the world. But they were absolutely certain that he **was** going to change the world. But as those Roman soldiers stuck a spear in Jesus' side to prove he really was dead those hopes were destroyed.

It's no wonder then that John opens this chapter by saying that Mary went to the tomb, "*while it was still dark.*" That's an historical observation of course – it was dark. But the words darkness and night in John's gospel always tell you something more than that there aren't that many photons flying about. Mary was in darkness. Ignorance, certainly, of the wonderful resurrection that had already happened but which she was unaware of. But more than that, I think, the darkness John wants to draw our attention to here is a darkness of Mary's despair. By the time she discovers that the body itself has gone, in v13, she has dissolved into tears.

And why not? Her profound grief and bitterness and misery is completely justified isn't it?

Just as it seemed to Felix Adler that religion makes promises it does not keep, so it must have seemed to Mary that Jesus had in some way betrayed her. He promised eternal life; and he can't even protect his own grave.

He promised his disciples joy; and yet they have deserted him, denied him and meet in locked rooms, cowering in fear from those who put Jesus to death. Those who, if they can overcome Jesus, who seemed to have such power, would certainly have no trouble executing a rag-tag collection of fishermen and junior tax collectors.

I sense that Mary is reflecting very much on death as these events unfold. And there's no doubt that the disciples are terrified of impending death as they meet in secrecy away from the watchful eyes of the authorities.

Of course, it's a more or less universal feature of human existence that we fear to die. That's not to say that the first followers of Jesus experienced quite the same abject terror that most modern people in our culture know when considering death. They were Jewish. They trusted the God who lived eternally and had would have had some idea of an afterlife, even if it was a bit vague.

We, of course, for the most part, don't even subscribe to vague and fluffy ideas of heaven do we? I know most of us say we do at funerals with our pat words about how we're sure he's looking down on us know. But that's only to make the relatives, and perhaps ourselves, feel better isn't it?

Death is the elephant in the room in our culture isn't he? The one we never talk about. We walk round him – picking our way gingerly between his huge gray bulk and the wall, trying not to get squashed by his unavoidable presence.

But just as none of us can avoid the reality of death, so none of us can avoid thinking about him from time to time.

In fact our whole pattern of trying to get things done by that time and this finished by that date and then move on to the next job in this year is an admission of death's power. It's a marker that we know that for each of us time is running out, and that one day we, too, will be laid in a tomb.

Without Christ, who said he was the resurrection and the life. Who said he was the light of the world. Who said he was the bread that a man might eat and not die. Who said he was the living water who could become a spring welling up in a woman to eternal life. Without Christ, Mary and the disciples were left with darkness, fear and weeping. And with Christ in a tomb that what's we would be left with too.

Ernest Becker, 20th century American anthropologist, put it like this: *"The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity - designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man."*

That, without Christ, is all we have.

2 How Christ comes to us: in person and by faith.

Back in the 1980s there was a huge outcry when David Jenkins, the then Bishop of Durham, questioned whether the resurrection could be described as a "conjuring trick with bones." Bishop Jenkins was questioning whether the resurrection of Christ was a physical one or whether it was "spiritual" – that Jesus lived on in the hearts and minds of the disciples.

He was surprised by the negative reaction to even suggesting the possibility that Jesus did not physically rise from the dead – surprised because that was precisely what lots of university theology departments and theological colleges training vicars and pastors have been teaching for about 100 years!

The apostle John, eyewitness of all the events of Jesus ministry, would have said that Bishop Jenkins, and many others are profoundly wrong when they talk about a "spiritual resurrection". Not wrong to ask what actually happened – that's exactly the question John himself is trying to answer.

But wrong to think you can separate the Christian faith from real history. And wrong to think that the history the New Testament writers record can be understood to be describing anything other than a bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The account John gives here isn't some airy-fairy, fluffy-cloudy, spiritual hope and wish list. It's a record of the actual events that took place that morning; as real as the

breakfast you ate or the shower you took before you left for church today.

Seeing the moved stone, v2, Mary hares back to her friends and they come running to the scene. John, the writer of this gospel who never refers to himself by name but always as "the disciple Jesus loved" can't resist telling us that he was fitter than Peter and made it to the tomb first!

But Peter, impetuous as always, is first through the door. And what does he see? Well firstly he sees that grave robbers haven't been in. They, v5, would never have left behind the linen and the thirty four kgs of spices it contained. They were extremely valuable – a body itself was worthless. Secondly Peter sees that this is no resuscitation. A man who had been crucified and came too would not have been able to remove the tightly bound linen strips – or of course move the stone.

Nor, it seems to me, would he have gone to the trouble of folding up the cloth that had been put over his face – I love the little detail that the resurrected Jesus stopped a minute to make sure he left his tomb tidy before he left!

John, emboldened by Peter's going in, enters the tomb too. He surveys the scene and sees the fingerprints of God all over it. John doesn't see the resurrected Jesus. He doesn't understand all sorts of wonderful things that he will later understand from re-reading his Old Testament. But he does understand that Christ has been resurrected – he believed, v8.

Mary, it seems, returns to the tomb some time later, after Peter and John have gone again. And she is overwhelmed by the final insult that not only have they cruelly crucified her Lord – but they have hidden or moved his body so that not even her grief can be complete.

Jesus himself appears to her but is unrecognised – whether because through her tears she really cannot see him or because of his changed appearance we can't be sure.

But, just as Jesus himself predicted, when he calls her name suddenly everything is made clear to Mary. He is, as he said, the good shepherd – who calls his sheep by name and they recognise his voice and come to him.

Mary runs off and announces the good news to the other disciples. John doesn't tell us how they react but, from the total surprise they evidence when Jesus appears to them all that evening, it's pretty clear they didn't take much notice of her.

Imagine the scene that evening. You have everything locked up to keep people out. And what happens? Someone you thought was dead appears in the room and says "peace be with you."

But their reaction is not terror or fear. And they don't think they've seen a ghost. They are witnesses of the physically risen Jesus – their friend and their king.

We don't know where Thomas was that first Easter Sunday night – visiting friends and family in Jerusalem perhaps? Maybe he was just taking a quiet wander around the city streets trying to absorb something of the breathtaking and shocking events of the last few days.

When Thomas returned they must have been in a state of absolute frenzy. It may well have taken him some time to get out of his friends the staggering truth that they had seen Jesus. Not a ghost. Not an apparition. They had seen Jesus – risen from the dead.

But Thomas is unconvinced. He is a sceptic. Despite the fact that Jesus had specifically predicted his own resurrection. Despite the fact that Thomas had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead just a few days earlier. Despite the fact that he was being told of the resurrection by the people he had shared his life with for three years and trusted. Despite all of that Thomas **WOULD** not believe. He just wouldn't: V25. *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."*

Thomas doesn't just want a physical sign: he wants the most personal and concrete evidence possible that the man he knew had been killed was indeed raised from the dead. Thomas says he must see to believe.

A week passes. The following Sunday would have been the end of the feast of unleavened bread. Everybody would be getting ready to return to their homes across Israel. This would probably have been the last time that the disciples would meet in Jerusalem.

They were still terrified. V26, the doors were still locked. But though locked doors might have kept the Jewish authorities and the Romans away they weren't going to have any impact on Jesus. Through the locked doors he comes again and stands in the middle of them. Then, v27, he turns to Thomas, the only one who was not there before and speaks directly to him: *"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

Jesus was not there when Thomas spoke his sceptical words the previous last week. But he knew exactly what it was that Thomas had said. And he removes all possible grounds for not believing.

V27, of course, is where Thomas gets his famous name – doubting Thomas. Actually that's not really quite fair. Because, no doubt, if Thomas had been present with the other disciples the previous week he too would have believed. There is no evidence that Thomas was any slower than Peter, James, John and all the rest of them.

But it's also not quite what Jesus said. The best translation of what Jesus said here is more like: *"Stop being unbelieving and believe."* As far as Jesus is concerned it's not that Thomas believes but has some doubts. It's actually much more serious than that. Thomas, up to this point, does not believe at all. But of course Jesus is not telling Thomas just to believe in anything! When Jesus says "believe" he means, "believe in me."

Jesus doesn't want us to believe in a system of thought, or in a philosophy, or a moral code. He invites Thomas people to believe in him. In his physical resurrection.

Faith, in itself, is useless. You might have had all the faith in the world that I was only going to speak for 10 minutes this morning. You might have really, really believed that. You

might have been 100% sincere and genuine. But you will be wrong. Very, very wrong!

Christian faith is related to history. To have Christian faith, is not to have a vague mystical experience unrelated to the facts of the "real" world. It is to believe in the person of Jesus Christ and the real history of his life, death and resurrection. That's what Jesus invites Thomas to do. He invites Thomas to believe in him.

Thomas realised that. He didn't think he was being presented with a new philosophy. He didn't think Christianity was going to be mystical waffle or therapeutic self-help. He knew that he was being invited to believe in real, historical events. And more than that he knew he was being commanded to believe in a person who ruled over those events.

That's why he responds as he does, v28: "My Lord and my God." Thomas exclaims that Jesus is God when he sees that the crucified one is alive. If the resurrection is not real then Jesus is not who he said he was. And he cannot do what he said he would do. Jesus said he was the good shepherd. How do we know? Because the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep only to take it up again. Jesus said he was the resurrection and the life. He do we know? Because he was raised from the dead. It is only when Thomas sees the crucified and risen Christ that he knows that all these claims are true.

The cross and resurrection are the greatest sign that Jesus is who he said he was. Faith itself is useless. But Jesus comes to us in person, in history and in fact. And faith in that reality – in the person of the crucified and risen Jesus – is everything.

What an amazing blessing Thomas had. He saw with his own eyes that Jesus was alive. And straight after Thomas' exclamation of worship and adoration Jesus pronounces a blessing. But like most of Jesus' blessings this one contains a shocking reversal of our normal expectations. Who is blessed? *"Blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet have believed."*

Christian faith is belief in the crucified and risen Jesus. And exactly because the Christian faith is rooted in real events in history the evidence that Thomas and his friends had is not repeatable for every future generation.

Maybe you're not a Christian here this morning. Maybe you feel that you really would believe in Jesus if he himself appeared to you and told you it was all true. If he stood in front of you and explained it then you could believe. Well Jesus says you don't need that. Jesus says it is possible to believe without seeing. More than that he says that there is blessing in believing without seeing.

We are to be like Thomas, in that we need to believe what he did. We too need to believe that the crucified and risen Christ is "my Lord and my God." But we're not to be like Thomas in every respect. Jesus is not going to give us the same evidence that he gave to Thomas. Because that evidence is tied up with events from a particular time in history.

But doesn't this just leave us with faith as a leap in the dark? If we cannot see Jesus how can we possibly believe?

Well, we can believe without seeing. And that doesn't just make faith a blind leap in the dark. John tells us why in v30-31. John wrote his gospel precisely because we will not all see Jesus.

All the things that John has written, v31 there, have been written so that we will have enough evidence to know that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God.

John's purpose was not to write a comprehensive biography of the life of Jesus. He admits it: Jesus did lots of other miracles, v30, that he hasn't included. John wasn't trying to include everything. He was writing enough so that we can know with confidence who Jesus is and what he did.

It was absolutely vital that Jesus physically showed himself to the disciples. They had to see that the crucifixion and resurrection were real. They had to see that Jesus really was who he said he was.

Without the eye-witness accounts of Thomas, Mary, Peter and the others, written down for us in the gospels, there would have been no Christian faith at all.

Those people were blessed. But their blessing is the means of a greater blessing to people like us who cannot see Jesus because we live in a different period of history.

And, of course, we have a wonderful example of believing without seeing – because John, the author of this book, saw enough to believe even before he encountered the resurrected Jesus himself.

Sadly Christians all too often give the impression that what they are Christians by virtue of some mystical and completely indefinable thing called "faith." That was the experience of the climber Joe Simpson who recounts his loss of Christian faith in his book "This Game of Ghosts":

"I resented priests... most of all I despised them for giving me something to believe in, something that was precious to me as a child yet were unable to prove it to be true when I was a questioning adolescent. They could only fall back on faith. And blind faith, like burying your head in the sand, gets you nowhere. I resented the sense of betrayal, of failure, that has infected me since I realised that I had no faith; that the fairy tale had evaporated. It was the ultimate deceit, and I couldn't stomach deceit."

It's a sad story. And I'd love to be able to meet Joe Simpson and talk about it with him. And most of all I'd want to tell him that what he was taught was not Christian faith.

Because it's not blind faith. Sure there is an experiential element to being a Christian. I know that the God of the Bible is true because I know him.

But the reason I can know that my feelings are not tricking me is because there are reliable, trustworthy, eyewitness accounts from history that make it clear that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead in history.

If you're here this morning and you do not yet believe that can I say to you that John, who wrote this gospel, wrote it for you. He wrote his book so that people might read about Jesus and come to have life by believing in him. So read and believe.

3 What we have with Christ: joy and life.

The story started in the dark. It started with death – the word tomb is mentioned 11 times between end of ch19 and 20:11. The tomb, the tomb, the tomb, the tomb... It started with weeping.

Even after the events of the cross, which Christians know lies at the very centre of the rescue from God's judgment that Jesus achieved for us... Even after that Jesus' friends are grief stricken and perplexed.

And it is only because they come to know that Jesus is risen that anything changes. What Jesus brings to his friends as he encounters them in these verses is exactly what he said he would bring them.

He had promised them peace – and his first greeting to them on that first Easter Day is peace. Peace with God. The knowledge that the forces of death and destruction are defeated.

He promised them that their grief would turn to joy – and their first response to recognising him is, v20, that they are overjoyed.

Most of all this whole gospel has promised them life. In him, John wrote in his introduction, was life, and that life was the light of men.

In his resurrection Jesus has shown that he has life in himself. The divine life that created all life runs so strong and deep in him that it cannot be extinguished by the hatred of men, the power of the devil or even by bearing God's own judgment on sin.

And, triumphant from the grave, Jesus now offers, persuasively, that same life to us. A life that begins today and lasts forever. A life that passes through death to a new life with Christ. A life just as physical as this one – where Jesus retains not just his humanity but retains the scars that show what he has won for us. A life that will never be extinguished by death. A light that will never be put out into darkness. A joy that will never be overwhelmed by grief.

If that's a life that we want, we can have it. It is freely available as a gift to all who look at the evidence that Jesus is alive, conclude from it that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and live in the light of that wonderful reality.

Religion might be a wizard. But Jesus Christ isn't. He faces the wreck of worlds, and *guarantees* restoration. He faces a sky blood-red with sunset colours that deepen into darkness, and *brings about* the dawn. He faces down death, and *overcomes it* to bring life for all eternity.

The question is – will you take what he offers?

Andrew Evans, June 2008