

**Luke 24:36-49**  
**How we can be sure**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at**  
**Christ Church Liverpool**

Last night Pat Gibson became only the 4<sup>th</sup> person in the UK to have correctly answered the 15<sup>th</sup> question on "Who wants to be a millionaire?" I wonder if you've ever reflected why it is that so few people manage to make it all the way to that top prize. I know the questions get harder as you get nearer to the top prize. But I'm sure that there's more to it than simply that British people are so thick that we can't answer 15 multiple choice questions in a row.

Much of it, I think, is to do with confidence. With certainty. If I asked you what the capital of Canada is this morning I guess you might feel pretty confident that it's Ottawa. But if there was a lot riding on it, like £1 million, how certain are you that it isn't Vancouver? And with the lights dimmed, the music still ringing in your ears and Chris Tarrant in his smoothest DJ voice asking "Are you sure? Is that your final answer? You're confident it's not Toronto?..."

Well in those circumstances you might be beginning to feel just a little bit hesitant.

We live, don't we, in a world which is full of doubts. A world packed with uncertainty. I think that's one of the reasons we find it so difficult to trust politicians. They seem to predict confidently that if we do this, this and this then that problem will be resolved. But we know, from hard experience, that solving even simple problems can be pretty complicated. So we tend to doubt the possibility of anybody ever solving really complex problems – the health service, crime, the economy or whatever.

We are full of doubts.

We are best by doubts too in our personal relationships. After all we know that all the signs are that our wife or husband loves us. But we all know, or at least know of, the people who thought the same until they were dumped for someone else. Or we think we know that. Was that a true story or did I just see it on the TV?

We are full of doubts.

And that experience of doubting is, perhaps, more common in thinking about the things of God than any other sphere.

From the outsiders point of view doubting is now almost to be considered a religious view in itself.

We've even given the religion a name – agnosticism. Professional doubting.

Agnosticism, doubt, is probably the trendiest view in most parts of the academic world these days. It's the champagne and caviar. The Rolls Royce of world views. Doubt is cool.

From the insiders point of view I imagine there is not a single Christian present in this room who has never experienced doubts. Phew, you're thinking, at least I'm normal!

- Doubts about whether God actually exists.
- Doubts about whether, in the face of some suffering or issue in your life, God really loves you.
- Doubts about whether that thing you've done isn't so bad that you can't possibly be forgiven.
- Doubts about what happens when you die.
- Doubts about whether or not the thing I'm worrying about really is the most important thing I should be worrying about – doubts about doubts!

Maybe already you're feeling like the person sitting in the Millionaire hot seat wondering about the capital of Canada – you didn't have any doubts when you came in this morning but you certainly do now!

Well the good news is that this morning's passage, while it certainly doesn't answer every question we've ever had doubts about, points us to the right place to go to deal with our doubts.

And more than that it tells us how we can be involved in bringing that precious commodity of certainty to other people.

**1 Jesus' physical resurrection dispels the disciples doubts (v36-43)**

It's Sunday night. At least 8pm, perhaps later. And Jesus' followers, emotionally drained by the events of the last few days, are gathered.

Probably they are in the house that became the base for many of the activities of the church in those early days – the home of John-Mark (the man who gave us Mark's gospel)'s mum. Quite possibly the same room where, only 72 hours before, Jesus had shared the Passover meal with his disciples.

And the disciples are gathered round telling stories.

Mary, Mary, Joanna and their friends are recounting their trip to the tomb on embalming duty and their encounter with an angel who told them how stupid it was to look for the Jesus, the living one, among the dead.

Cleopas and his friend are describing the mysterious stranger who told them they were foolish not to believe that the Old Testament said that Jesus the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead and who then revealed himself to be Jesus when he broke bread in front of them.

Simon Peter, breathless with excitement, is bursting with news that Jesus has indeed appeared to him. That Jesus is alive.

You can imagine the scene – they all sat round listening to the ever more amazing experiences being recalled, asking for repetition and expansion of key details.

When Jesus came among them.

How did he do it?

Did he just appear in the middle of the room like the shopkeeper in Mr Ben with a “ping”?

Or did he, and I like to think that this is much more Jesus’ style, simply quietly come in to a corner of the room and sit quietly as one after one they noticed his presence?

Well we don’t know. But we do know what their response was.

They were, Luke tells us, with lovely understatement, startled and frightened. They were terrified. And quite understandably so.

It’s one thing for Peter to tell you someone you thought was dead is alive. It’s quite another, I imagine, for a person you saw dead 2 days ago to come and sit next to you at the dinner table.

You can well comprehend why Jesus felt that his first word to them should be **peace!**

In fact, v38, Jesus almost seems to suggest that they were beginning to believe that he really was alive **until** they saw him.

Perhaps the resurrection was a nice idea in the abstract but it absolutely scares them witless in reality!

Far from being overjoyed at what seems to be the final confirmation of all the wonderful news that they have been hearing throughout the day the disciples experience a mixture of blind terror and unbelief.

Even after they’ve calmed down a bit in v41 it all still seems too good to be true.

But Jesus comes to them to make absolutely sure that they are completely convinced, by good evidence, that he has indeed been physically resurrected.

He invites them, v39, to look at him. To recognise that whatever differences there might be between when they saw him last and now it really was the same Jesus. He was recognisably and distinctively the same person as he was before.

*It is I myself!*

The he invites them to touch him.  
To handle him.  
To physically make contact.  
Flesh to flesh.  
You can’t do that with a ghost!

Then he asks for some food. And the disciples gave him a piece of fish. Just pause a minute and imagine the impact of that. A man who they saw killed. Buried. As dead as a dodo. Eating a piece of fish. Actually there. Mouth, tongue, jaw muscles, stomach. Eating.

It’s become quite fashionable in the last 100 years, once you get promoted to a certain point in the hierarchy of the major denominations, to make a controversial comment about the resurrection.

The most famous is probably David Jenkins, former bishop of Durham, who described it as merely “a conjuring trick with bones.”

Unlike most of his theological friends Jenkins at least has the benefit of using language most of us can comprehend!

Most use considerably more obscure language – largely designed, one suspect, to hide the fact that what they are saying is the opposite of what the Bible teaches which might, you’d think, disqualify them from working for a church – though why anybody who doesn’t believe what the Bible teaches would want to work for a church remains a total mystery to me!

One commentator said this to a BBC interviewer about the resurrection:

*“The very life, purpose and personality that was in Jesus was continuing in history so that he was a living presence and possibility.”*

Now I don’t know about you but that doesn’t sound to me like the kind of thing Luke, who was, we know, a Doctor, is talking about here.

Now I know we've got a lot of medics in the congregation and maybe I'm out of touch with medical practice. But I don't think that doctors now, or at any point in history, have generally talked about the eating habits of "living possibilities".

And we can't get out of this by saying that Luke was writing a different kind of literature to what we'd consider history today.

*Luke 1:1-4.*

Luke makes it quite clear doesn't he what kind of account he's writing?

As preacher Richard Coombs puts it if the resurrection of Jesus isn't physical and bodily Luke is a double liar. He is lying about the events themselves and he is lying when he says he has prepared an orderly account that can give certainty to Theophilus.

If all Jesus did was make sure that his purpose continued in history that's not much of a claim is it? After all you could say that about Ghandi, Winston Churchill, The Beatles or S Club 7. Their influence continues in history through their followers.

Jesus, and Luke, go out of their way, to make it crystal clear that what we are talking about here is physical, flesh and bone. Muscle, ligament, eyes, hands, feet resurrection.

And the impact of it is seen in v53. These people are transformed from despondent to joyful.

This event dispels their doubts. And as he puts it as the climax and crescendo of his gospel there's no doubt that Luke intends this as the crowning certainty that Theophilus is look for.

Here is the event that brings certainty. The physical resurrection of Jesus dispels doubt, not just for those first disciples, not just for Theophilus but for all who read and believe these words because they are trustworthy and reliable.

In fact the resurrection is a bit like a WWF wrestling star. It will take on all comers.

If you are persuaded that Luke is not making this up but the resurrection really, physically, actually happened then most of your other doubts will be answered.

Uncertain of God's love? Jesus, v46, suffered and rose, such was his love for people like us.

Fearful of judgment? Afraid that something you have done might not be forgivable? Jesus says, v47, that as a result of his death and resurrection forgiveness will be preached to all nations. Jesus' resurrection proves he has paid all that ever needs to be paid for everyone who puts their trust in him to be forgiven.

Jesus' physical resurrection really happened in real history. And believing and understanding that can dispels doubts as quickly as the rising desert sun can burn away the mists and vapours of the night.

We can be sure.

Of course that doesn't suit some of us!

Postmodern idea that certainty always leads to tyranny. Said that it is a short step from "I am right" to "therefore you must do what I say."

We can use our doubts to hide from the evidence so that we don't have to look too carefully!

What a friend of mine calls the RH factor – real hangup or red herring.

Can apply to those of us looking into Christian faith and claims of Jesus. Doubts can become excuses.

Can apply to those of us who are Christian. Well I won't commit all of my life to following Jesus because I'm not really that sure. Saying we are certain that what Jesus says is really true might entail too many consequences – change way we deal with money, time, church, friends and family.

We can be sure!

## **2 Jesus' predicted resurrection will be globally proclaimed (v44-53)**

Of course we don't have the same experience as those first disciples.

Jesus has not physically appeared to anyone in this room. And he will not do so to anyone again until he returns at the end of time to judge the world.

But the great news of this passage, as of the passages we've looked at over the last two weeks, is that despite that we have everything the disciples had and more.

Like the disciples we too have the law of Moses, those first books of the Old Testament, the prophets, everything from Joshua to 2

Chronicles and the Psalms – Psalms, Proverbs and the wisdom books.

Those books that testify about Jesus and will, he says, v44, without fail come to pass.

And the message those books predict, Jesus says, the core message of the global multinational we call the church, is that the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead bringing the need for repentance and the possibility of forgiveness of sins to the nations of the world.

Jesus resurrection wasn't only physically demonstrated to the disciples. It was positively predicted by the Old Testament.

And the disciples are witnesses of these truths.

But they were not witnesses merely in order to dispel their own doubts so that they can live comfortable lives in the certainty that their good friend Jesus was not dead.

They were witnesses so that Jesus, after he had sent his Spirit – the promise of his Father, v49, power from on high, could use these disciples to proclaim the glorious resurrection of Jesus to all nations.

For as far as Luke is concerned, as far as Jesus is concerned, the resurrection is not the end of the story.

It is merely the end of volume I. Luke here is really teasing us up for volume II – the book of Acts, which we'll have to study some other time.

The book of Acts describes the spread of the gospel message, the good news of Jesus death in our place and his resurrection to glory ahead of us.

It describes the movement of that message from Jerusalem all the way West to Rome and East to Damascus within 70 years.

Jesus makes the disciples witnesses not just to dispel their own doubts but so that they might be active in dispelling the doubts of others.

The disciples were to be witnesses – proclaiming the physical reality of the resurrection and the atoning power of Jesus' death to make repentant people right with God.

Indeed part of the disciples' confident certainty would come as they saw Jesus glorified by their witness to the nations.

As he receives and read's Luke's gospel Theophilus can be confident of the truth of the

Christian message not just because the disciples have seen the risen Christ.

He can be confident too because the same message that he has received is being taken by those disciples to all nations.

Later on the apostle Paul says much the same thing by way of encouragement to the Christians in Colossae:

*"All over the world," he writes, "this gospel is bearing fruit and growing."*

Luke's gospel finishes with the Christians in the temple at Jerusalem praising God.

But Luke want us to see that as a pause not as the end of the story.

Luke's sequel tells us that the disciple's ultimate expression of praise and joy having seen the risen Christ won't be singing Psalms in the temple. It will be taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

And as you read on through Luke's volume II it becomes clear that it is not only those first eye witnesses whom Christ commissions to dispel the doubts of others about Jesus.

All those who come to believe through the message brought by Peter, John, James, Paul and their friends were to multiply and continue their work by taking the message of Jesus to other doubters and sceptics and showing them that Jesus is risen.

The purpose of having your doubts about Jesus dispelled by the gospel accounts of the resurrection is not merely so we can have PhDs in Biblical studies or great Bible studies in our home groups.

No the risen Christ is glorified, his purpose is achieved, when repentance and forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations.

That, following in the footsteps of those first eyewitnesses, and using their authentic testimony, is our task too.

This morning, if you have doubts, bring them to the resurrection. Look carefully at Luke's thoroughly researched, trustworthy and reliable account of Jesus' physical return from the dead, never to die again.

Trust Jesus' explanation of the Old Testament that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead.

Have your doubts blown away.

And recognise that it is never enough for the Christian simply to sit in a corner, full of confidence in the resurrection.

See that our calling, our mission, our task is to be active in bringing others to the words of Jesus and his apostles.

Our job is to be active in dispelling the doubts of others as we explain to them God's words about the risen Jesus.

*No more we doubt Thee,  
Glorious Prince of life;  
Life is naught without Thee:  
Aid us in our strife;*

*Make us more than conquerors,  
Through Thy deathless love;  
Lead us in Thy triumph  
To Thy home above.*

*Thine be the glory,  
Risen, conquering Son;  
Endless is the victory  
Thou o'er death hast won!*

*Andrew Evans  
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