

Scripture Reading:

Matt. 26:31-35

³¹ Then Jesus *said to them, “You will all [a]fall away because of Me this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” ³² But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” ³³ But Peter replied to Him, “*Even* if they all [b]fall away because of You, I will never fall away!” ³⁴ Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this *very* night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” ³⁵ Peter *said to Him, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” All the disciples said the same thing as well.

John 21:15-17

¹⁵ Now when they had finished breakfast, Jesus *said to Simon Peter, “Simon, *son* of John, do you [a]love Me more than these?” He *said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I [b]love You.” He *said to him, “Tend My lambs.” ¹⁶ He *said to him again, a second time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you [c]love Me?” He *said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I [d]love You.” He *said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.” ¹⁷ He *said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you [e]love Me?” Peter was [f]hurt because He said to him the third time, “Do you [g]love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I [h]love You.” Jesus *said to him, “Tend My sheep.

Sermon Text:

John 20:19-29

¹⁹ So when 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 then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them and *said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” ²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I 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.”

²⁶ After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus *came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then He *said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands, and reach here your hand and put it into My side, and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” ²⁸ Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus *said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”

A Rooted Faith - Part 2 by John Costa

Second Congregational Church—Winsted 7/7/24

All the Disciples Experienced Doubt, Fear, and Questioned

I thought a lot about Thomas recently. The one we often refer to as “doubting Thomas.” There’s probably not a Christian who hasn’t heard that nickname, and there are more jokes about Thomas’s doubting or alluding to Thomas than any other disciple. Let me share just a couple of these as an example. Now, a little warning, these are pretty bad. For instance, why didn’t Thomas ever like sharing a boat with all the disciples?... He always wanted a Sea for himself. The disciples asked Thomas, why don’t you believe Jesus rose from the dead? Do you remember the time he turned water into wine? You remember the time he walked on water. You do remember the time he even raised someone from the dead! Thomas said, “Well yes, I think I can remember but the problem is that I-can’t-quite-put-my finger on it.” And finally, When Jesus and the other disciples drank wine. What did Thomas drink?... Nothing but 100 proof! I know, pretty bad right? But that should contribute to the point that I’m about to make, which is that Christians have gone to great lengths to dog on Thomas.

I think we’ve been a little hard on Thomas, however. He’s gotten a pretty bad rap, which I’m not sure is completely justified. Thomas’ moment of doubt is highlighted so much that we often overlook the details around it. As we look back in the text, verse 19, we see that Jesus literally appears in the room where the doors were shut, they were probably locked, as they were hiding in fear. And Jesus just appears in the room out of thin air. All the disciples were standing around *except* for Thomas, and Jesus showed them both his hands and his side. It was after this that the text tells us “The disciples *then* rejoiced when they saw the Lord” (v 20). So, it was then that they all realized that, “Wow, this is really Jesus.” Thomas shows up later and they’re telling him, “We saw Jesus, He rose from the dead!” And Thomas is like, “Yeah right, come on. I know what happened to him. You know what happened.” Unless I see his hands and his pierced side and can actually touch it, I’m not believing it's really him.” He essentially wasn’t going to believe unless he saw exactly what they saw. He needed to see for himself. There is no telling that if any of the other disciples weren’t there, they wouldn’t have needed to see for themselves. And when Jesus returned, He didn’t ask Thomas why he doubted him. He didn’t scold him for not believing but simply said, “Thomas, put your hand here. Look, feel this.” And then he says, “Don’t be unbelieving but believing.”

We’re pretty hard on Peter too, who’s gotten a pretty bad rap. The disciple who denied the Lord three times! And yet, outside of Peter and John, who kind of subtly followed behind, the rest of the disciples fled. My generation would say, they were ghost! Or the even younger generation would say, “They ghosted him.” They straight-up ghosted Jesus. And from what we can see after the fact, the disciples were hiding away in fear. All the disciples had denied Jesus in their own way. They all had their doubts, they all were fearful. And their faith was definitely shaken for sure.

As believers, especially new believers, we all have had doubts at times. We have to ask ourselves, is it wrong to ever have doubts? Is it wrong to ever question our faith? Does doubt equal disbelief? When I was young in the church I was certainly led to believe that I shouldn't doubt at all. And we were taught not to question the claims of Christianity. So rather than getting an answer to tough questions, I was expected to simply "have faith and believe." As we see from the way that Jesus confirmed himself to Thomas when he doubted, and the way he re-affirmed Peter later on, it's not unexpected that a believer ever doubts or questions the faith. However, we do see that Jesus dispelled all their doubt with His own resurrection.

The Resurrection Changed Everything

We see that the resurrection changed everything for the disciples. It turned a group of men, who were doubtful, fearful, and shrunk back into bold witnesses who were willing to be persecuted, imprisoned, and even willing to die for what they believed in. Their faith was partly rooted in how Jesus revealed himself to them and provided evidence and substance of his power over and over again, yet their faith became firmly rooted (and unshakable) due to what the resurrection encompassed for them.

What the Resurrection Did for the Disciples:

What was it about the resurrection that literally transformed these doubting and fearful disciples into bold and faithful apostles? What turned a wavering faith into a firm and grounded faith?

- It provided a final confirmation of Christ's undeniable divinity. There was literally no mistaking that Jesus was exactly who He claimed to be.
- It affirmed His promise and his own prediction. Although they had a hard time truly hearing what Jesus had been telling them, He told them that he was going to be raised up again on the third day multiple times (e.g., Matt. 16:21; Mark 9:30-32; Luke 18:31-34).
- It affirmed His promise that *they* would one day be resurrected. Jesus had promised them eternal life. He promised that in his Father's house are many mansions and that He would go to prepare a place for them. Christ's resurrection after death affirmed all believers' resurrection, as He promised that they would one day be with him.
- The resurrection affirmed that Jesus would be the prophesied king of a new kingdom (not an earthly one but a heavenly one). We know it was a common Jewish expectation that the Messiah would set up and rule an earthly kingdom. And when He rose from the dead and further instructed them on their commission, I think it finally clicked that the great kingdom that they were to take part in building would be an everlasting kingdom—not of this world.

Encountering the risen Christ literally restored their peace of mind, their hope, and their vision of Christ's kingdom. All that they had been taught and promised was affirmed and came together. Strangely enough, they didn't completely grasp the implications of his death and resurrection until it actually happened—until they knew for certain that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead.

Jesus explained to them what would happen over and over again. But it wasn't until they bore witness of the resurrection, and had an encounter with the risen Christ, that their faith was finally grounded.

Many of us recall, that it was an encounter with the risen Christ that converted an unbelieving Saul to Paul, one of the greatest apostles. One of the biggest persecutors of Christians at the time. The one who literally gave the green light, his stamp of approval, for the stoning of Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr. And yet, Paul was now willing to boldly proclaim Christ. One who persecuted the church but then was willing to be persecuted himself for Christ. And I think there's a reason why Acts records three times that Paul shares his testimony on the Damascus Road. It was this initial encounter with the risen Christ that not only converted Paul but completely transformed him. It was the resurrection that persuaded James (the skeptic), the brother of Jesus who didn't believe Jesus was anything more than his overzealous brother. But all of a sudden, after the resurrection, James not only becomes a believer but the head of the first believing church in Jerusalem.

We learn from the scriptures that the whole of the Christian faith rests on the truth of the Resurrection. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain, our faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:14). Based on what Paul wrote in 1 Cor. Chapter 15, One commentator wrote, "The Resurrection was God's validation that the redemption paid by Christ on the cross was accepted (Rom. 4:25). Without the Resurrection there could be no certainty of the atonement and the Corinthians would remain in a state of alienation and sin." If there was no resurrection, those who have died in Christ, also died in vain. Without the resurrection, we literally have no assurance of salvation and we have no certainty of eternal life. The resurrection is the most important event at the center of the Christian faith. So, the resurrection as a historical event should be confirmed and solidified by every believer. And that's why the enemy will do anything to deny the Resurrection or to cast doubt on its historical validity.

It's interesting that whether one is Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, most believe that Jesus was a wise teacher. Others believe him to be a great prophet. Some even believe that he *did* perform miracles. But they all deny that he actually rose from the dead. Why? Because that's what separates Jesus from Budha, Ghandi, Mohammad, and every other religious figure. The resurrection is at the top, among other things, that confirmed Jesus' divinity. It affirmed His claim to be the One Son of God, His claim of equality *with* God. And so, there have been many attempts to historically disprove Christ's resurrection. Skeptics have offered a number of different theories for the empty tomb. There's been the "Stolen Body Theory," the "Hallucination Theory" which suggests that the disciples were so overwhelmed with grief that they imagined seeing and hearing Jesus, and the "Swoon Theory," which proposes that Jesus didn't really die on the cross. Instead, he "swooned" or fainted and later woke up and walked out from the tomb. Now, I'm not going to get into the counterarguments for these and turn this into an apologetic lecture but none of these have held any agreement in scholarship. What's interesting though, is that it's like God anticipated some of these refutes and provided enough evidence so that none of these could hold any water.

In addition to being whipped and scourged and brutally nailed to a cross, when the soldiers went to break the legs of the three crucified to make sure they were dead, they didn't do it to Jesus because he was already dead. But more so, one pierced his side, and blood and water poured out. It's undeniable by any serious scholar that Jesus was definitely dead when he left the cross. And Jesus didn't just briefly appear but He ate and drank with the disciples—allowed them to touch his physical body.

Despite some of the alternatives that have been offered over the years, even Bart Ehrman, the famous atheist New Testament scholar, won't advocate for any of these alternatives. In fact, he won't stand behind any alternative for the empty tomb because he realizes that according to the historical evidence, nothing else makes sense. In his book *Jesus Interrupted*, he names several other alternatives for the empty tomb other than the resurrection. He admits that, according to the evidence, all of these are highly implausible. And yet, because a miracle like the resurrection is the most scientifically implausible thing to happen, he says it would make more sense to be open to another alternative—as implausible as it may be. He essentially admits that the reason he doesn't believe in the resurrection isn't due to the evidence, or lack thereof, but the implausibility of a miracle. So the only reason he doesn't believe the resurrection happened is because he can't accept that an actual miracle could have taken place. In fact, he says, because it is history, and we can't empirically prove any history, there is no historical evidence that could ever prove a miracle.

What Does the Resurrection Accomplish For Us Now?

As we understand the weight of the resurrection, it's easy to see why the enemy would want many to deny that it ever took place. The enemy would love it if even Christians doubted the resurrection. And that's why it's obviously so important that believers completely grasp the weight of the resurrection on a doctrinal level but also on a historical level. The resurrection is what dispelled the doubt of the apostles. Of course, it's not wrong that believer ever has doubts in their walk. But when it came to the resurrection of Jesus, that became a doctrinal and historical truth that was firmly held with certainty. It's literally the center of the Apostle's Creed. The resurrection is what converted thousands in the early church, and what literally sparked the movement of early Christianity, not because it was a compelling story passed around but because it was an event that could be verified by eyewitnesses. Paul said, that in addition to all the apostles, Jesus appeared not only to him and James but more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, *most of whom are still alive* (1 Cor. 15:3-9). Paul is proving that this isn't fake news, by what was literally first-century fact-checking.

So, when Christians today can understand all that the resurrection means for believers, as well as the historical validation of the resurrection, it should be an additional builder of their faith—even the center or foundation of their faith. When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is, He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all *your mind* and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). There is a reason why we're called to worship God with all of our being, including all of our minds. We worship God and submit ourselves to His will and His truth spiritually, emotionally, practically, *and* intellectually. Jesus said, we are to who worship God in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

Obviously, the spiritual component and the faith in our hearts are vital, but as God has given us the ability to reason, it's expected that we use our intellect in learning and discerning what is truth.

God said in Isaiah, "Come now, let us *reason* together," or in our NASB "Let us *debate* your case," "Though your sins are as scarlet, They shall become as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be like wool" (Is. 1:18). He's saying, they should be convinced by their argumentation with God that He was right and they were wrong about their sinful condition. But by intellectually acknowledging the depth of their sins then God would cleanse them, making them spiritually white as snow. And when a person can obviously grasp their own sinful condition, and that Christ's work on the cross is what cleanses them of that sin, it should prompt repentance. Christ's resurrection solidifies the promise of atonement and the reward of eternal life. And the more a person can perceive the resurrection as an undeniable event in history, the more solid their faith will obviously be regarding the assurance of that hope. If we look back a bit on the first part of the message a couple of weeks ago, we see that this is a good example of where faith and reason work together in building our faith in Christ. Many of us know that we're not called to operate merely on feeling, emotion, or intuition. But instead, called to think and to walk after Christ in the knowledge of truth.

Application

The bad thing about believers being led only by feeling or emotion is, that they'll gauge the success of their walk or their closeness with God on how they feel in that given moment. Even worse, we tend to measure the goodness and power of God based on what we sense as His presence or the moving of the Holy Spirit. Many years ago, I was part of an extra charismatic church where I was led to believe that every time I came into the presence of God, I should feel an overwhelming sense of...something. I would go into my prayer time expecting to be spiritually moved. I would enter into worship awaiting the feeling of the Spirit's presence. The problem was, that when I didn't feel what I thought I was supposed to feel, I thought maybe I wasn't praying long enough. I wasn't worshipping deep enough. And I began to attempt to draw closer to God in intimacy, chasing a feeling. It became about what I could get out of it and not what I was giving to God. And then when we don't necessarily feel the presence of God, we begin to doubt Him. Our faith is based on what we feel rather than being based on the truth which we've grounded on our faith on. And when all the good feelings are gone, we feel distant from the Lord. When the mountaintop experience from the revival retreat wears off, we feel like we lost something special we once had with the Lord.

The extent of this type of faith is comparable to the seeds that fall upon rocky ground. They receive the word with joy, passion, and zeal. But when trials come, or when it comes time for a testing of faith, there is nothing to hold on to, Because it was based merely on a feeling, an emotion, a blind optimism. And there's nothing to truly hold on to. There's nothing to anchor one's faith because it wasn't rooted in the undeniable and inerrant word of truth, but hanging on the thread of a shallow subjective idea of who we think God is. We can see how the problem of gauging reality based on what we feel rather than on what's objectively true has played out in our

culture so much. And it matters less what is actually true and more what a person feels that makes a new reality.

There are more and more progressive denominations of Christianity that have decided to choose which parts of Scripture are true to them. I've seen some that have completely disregarded the Old Testament as valid and decided that all of Paul's writing is not a part of inspired Scripture—simply because it doesn't fit with what they feel is right. Obviously, the danger in interpreting Scripture, and interpreting our entire life in Christ, based on what we feel is right, is that we drift further and further away from what is absolutely true. The upside for us is that we know there is a way to be grounded on a firm foundation—to have a faith that is deeply rooted so that when the rain pours and the winds blow, our house will remain standing. And as we know that our faith is mostly relational, we grow our roots in being connected to the vine—In prayer, in the Word, in fellowship. Jesus said those who hear my words and are obedient to them will be like the man who built his own on a rock. Interestingly enough, we see that the disciples, though they walked with Jesus for three years had pretty shallow faith until the resurrection. They may have listened to Jesus' words but they didn't quite hear them or completely understand them until after their encounter with the risen Christ.

So, this is interesting to think about when we compare this not only to our own walk but to those who we help come to know Christ, or those we disciple. If we're looking at the example of the disciples, it would seem that there could very well be a time when believers learn the teachings of Christ, and perhaps even see signs and miracles, but until they have a personal encounter with the living Christ, their faith won't be firmly and deeply rooted. So, making sure our brothers and sisters in Christ, our children, and especially newer disciples, have a personal encounter with Christ should be a high priority. In addition, understanding the significance of Christ's work on the cross and his resurrection—both doctrinally *and* historically, enables one to truly hear His words and be able to apply them.

We learn that it's a great thing to have faith without needing to see to believe. But we also see that to remain in a faith that has never been given answers to difficult questions or evidence to dispel doubt, or a faith that has never had an authentic encounter with the risen Christ, is a faith that likely won't weather the storm. Opposed to the seed that falls upon rocky ground, not being firmly rooted and withers away in times of adversity, Jesus says, "The seed that was sown on good soil is the one who hears the word and understands it" (Matt. 13:23). "And the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. (Matt. 7:25).