

Are You Still Doubting The: Resurrection Of Jesus?

By Ron R. Ritchie

In 1955, I was a corporal in the United States Air Force, stationed in Morocco, North Africa. Around that time I found myself becoming more and more involved in religious activities. The chaplain recognized that and included me in a retreat in which he planned to take a number of men to Jerusalem. I was overjoyed to be going to a city I had never visited but which I had heard so much about. We spent a wonderful week in the ancient city, staying in the finest hotels, being driven to the various historical locations in big cars. It seemed I saw more rocks during that week than I had ever seen in my life!

One day when we had free time I took off by myself and spent the day walking the streets of Jerusalem. I went out the Damascus Gate and walked down an alley which I thought looked interesting. A sign on an alley door said, "Garden Tomb." I rang the bell and was admitted. An Arab guide, responding to my question, "What does this place have to do with the history of Jerusalem?" told me that I was standing in a garden which had been unearthed about 100 years earlier by a British archaeological team. They felt they had discovered the location of the tomb in which Jesus was placed following his crucifixion, he said. The guide pointed out a small cave carved out of a hill which may have been the tomb of Jesus. He told me to feel free to investigate the area on my own, and left me.

The garden area was very beautiful, with multi-colored flowers and shrubs in full bloom. When I reached the tomb which the man had pointed to, I saw a sign outside it that said, "He is risen. He is not here." I went into the first chamber and sat on a seat, obviously meant for mourners, which had been carved out of the rock. I looked through a grill into a second chamber which was the burial site. I have had a lifelong interest in graveyards. Everywhere I travel I make a point of visiting them. Mummies, bodies and bones hold a fascination for me, it seems. As I sat on the mourners' bench that day in Jerusalem, however, I was struck by the fact that there was no body lying in the tomb. I had arrived in Jerusalem carrying my usual complement of doubts and uncertainties about Christianity. The religion I inherited from my family seemed to be concerned only with holy days and various compulsory activities. It certainly had nothing to do with what I began to feel as I sat in the tomb. There, in the cool, quiet surroundings of that garden tomb, I found myself saying, "Jesus, if all that people say about you is real--that you were placed in this tomb following your death for the sins of mankind--will you please make that real to me? I am a very religious man but I lack joy, I lack power. In fact, I'm absolutely miserable right now."

A quiet peace seemed to come over me. I felt a hunger to investigate all of my doubts concerning Jesus, especially my doubts regarding his resurrection. Recently I checked my diaries to refresh my memory and I found that at that moment, while sitting in the tomb, I had prayed, "Jesus, if you are the Son of God, please take over my life, for I am without life now." Since that day 32 years ago I have never been the same. As I sat there I changed from being a skeptic and a doubter, although a religious one, to becoming a vessel of the resurrected Jesus Christ. That day Christ came to live within me because I finally took the step of faith needed and asked him to. That was my Easter experience, the day when Christ came alive to me.

And that is what the body of Christ is celebrating today: the fact that Jesus has been resurrected from the dead. For non-Christians, Easter is just a Spring festival, a time for bunnies and eggs. But for the Christian, this is a season best summarized by the apostle Paul in these words from his first letter to the Corinthians:

I passed on to you right from the first what had been told to me, that Christ died for our sins just as the Scriptures said He would, and that He was buried and that three days afterwards He arose from the grave just as the prophets foretold. He was seen by Peter and later the rest of the twelve. After that He was seen by more than five hundred Christian brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive . . . (1 Cor. 15:3-6)

For Christians, Easter is the most important date in history, for that is the day when the Lord Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead. If Christ be not risen, then we have no savior, and no hope of life beyond the grave;

we must remain now and forevermore dead in our sins. For the Christian, then, Easter is a time to review the events of that first Easter morning, a time to challenge and verify once more the realities of our faith. Non-Christians, those who still doubt the resurrection, of course, find themselves part of a long line of doubters going all the way back to the first century. But it's important to point out here that doubting is not wrong. What is wrong is remaining in a condition of doubt and refusing to investigate the evidence for the resurrection. To remain a doubter is to invite eternal separation from God, to experience death now and forever. Rejection of the evidence for the resurrection leaves doubters in a state of helplessness and hopelessness. Let us look into the Scriptures again, therefore, with two aims in view: First, to renew for Christians their living hope; and secondly, to challenge doubters to investigate the facts concerning the resurrection of Jesus. Our text will be the twentieth chapter of the gospel of John.

The chapter opens with a description of Mary Magdalene visiting the garden tomb early in the morning and discovering that the stone which had been placed at the entrance had been taken away. She immediately ran to Peter and John, telling them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." The two men ran to investigate. John, who arrived at the tomb first, did not enter but looked in and saw the linen wrappings in which Jesus had been buried lying there. Peter actually went into the tomb and also saw the linen wrappings. John then entered " . . . and he saw, and believed," the text says. It continues, "For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead." They did not understand Scriptures such as Isaiah 53:11, which says,

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied [because of His resurrection]; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant [Jesus] will justify the many.

The disciples did not understand the meaning of Psalm 16:10, either:

For Thou will not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to see the pit.

Nor did they know—and they were afraid to ask— what Jesus meant when he said to them'

"The Son of Man is to be delivered up into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise again three days later" (Mark 9:31).

After they had looked into and entered the tomb, Peter and John went home. Mary, however, who had been standing outside weeping, looked into the tomb again and saw two angels sitting there. Replying to their question as to why she was crying, she said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Then she turned around and saw a man whom she took to be the gardener but who actually was Jesus. She asked him if he knew where they had taken the body, and Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She immediately knew it was Jesus and said to him, "Teacher." Jesus then said to her, " . . . go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father, and My God and your God.'" Mary ran to where the disciples were and announced to them that she had seen the Lord—not a corpse, but the Lord himself, and he was alive. Later on that first Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and then to Peter (Luke 24:33-35). They reported news of these appearances to the other disciples.

But it would take more than these four witnesses to convince the rest of the apostles and disciples that Jesus had indeed risen from the grave, "the first fruits of many." Let us read of their whereabouts and what happened when Jesus himself appeared to them later that Easter day.

1. The Doubting Disciples John 20:19-23

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." 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 therefore said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent me,

I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

The setting was a hiding place in the city of Jerusalem; the time was the evening of the first Easter Sunday. There were ten of the original apostles present (Judas was dead; Thomas was not present), together with some other disciples. The atmosphere was one of fear. Jesus had been crucified; surely the Jews were out looking for his followers, they felt. Those present in the room were doubtful about the incredible accounts of the resurrection which they had heard earlier that day. They had just come through a very trying week: the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the Passover feast in the Upper Room, the betrayal by Judas, the arrest of Jesus, Peter's denial, the beating and mocking of their Lord, and finally, the cross and the burial. Now the disciples had to contend with the fact that Christ's body had disappeared, and with a chorus of witnesses, both men and women, saying they had seen him alive. It was all too much for them.

Then Jesus appeared among them and "stood in their midst." There was no knock on the closed doors, no announcement of his coming. Jesus appeared to them, his resurrected spiritual body no longer subject to restrictions of time and space. "Peace be with you," were the first words he spoke to his disciples. Peace was for them at last a possibility because of the price the Lord had paid for their reconciliation with the Father; peace amidst their fear, doubt and unbelief. Peace was theirs to experience right at that moment, the peace he had spoken of just a few days earlier in the Upper Room, when he said to them,

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give it to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27). "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The companion passage in Luke 24 takes up the account here, saying that the disciples ". . . were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit" (Luke 24:37). Mark 16:14 says that Jesus ". . . reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen."

At his appearance, then, Jesus first offered a word of peace to his disciples; then he gently rebuked them for their failure to believe the eyewitness accounts; and then he went on to prove who he was. Again, we look to Luke 24 for an account of what he did: "See My hands and My feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me have." Then he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" The disciples handed him a piece of broiled fish, which he ate.

As he had already conveyed to them, Jesus had a body of flesh and bone. They were not looking at a phantom, but a bodily resurrection of their Lord and Savior. They recognized his face and his voice. His body was now in a glorified condition, and he had the ability to appear and disappear, unhindered by time and space. Although he appeared in a spiritual body, however, he was not a spirit, not immaterial. He was controlled by the Spirit of God, possessing a body designed to do all that the Spirit of God wanted it to do. His was an imperishable, glorious, incorruptible, immortal, victorious body. At last the disciples rejoiced at his appearing. All their doubting and skepticism disappeared in the wondrous reality that the Man standing before them, whom they could see, hear and touch, was indeed their risen Lord.

Next, Jesus reviewed for them their commission: "As the Father has sent Me, so I also send you." God sent Jesus into the world with a message, and now Jesus in turn is sending out his disciples with the message ". . . that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18, 19). Such was their commission and such was their message.

But where would they find the power to deliver to the world this revolutionary message? Jesus goes on to demonstrate that they would not be forced to rely on their own abilities or their own efforts. That would be the ministry of the Holy Spirit: "And when he had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit . . ." The Spirit would provide the power necessary to carry out their commission. The abiding

presence of the Holy Spirit through the apostles and disciples, and, in turn, through Christians in every generation, would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.

Our Lord goes on to elaborate on the content of this message of salvation, saying to the disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." Our Lord is telling the disciples, and telling all Christians for all time, that they have been enabled to announce, based on people's acceptance or rejection of the gospel, that their sins have either been forgiven or retained. Thus, if someone by faith comes to Jesus Christ, a Christian can declare that, based on the word of God, that person's sins have been forgiven. Conversely, if someone rejects the gospel, a Christian can declare that that person's sins have been retained. This is not to say that there is any power inherent in the believer; he is merely declaring truth that has already been made known in Scripture.

I recently talked with a woman who had been for years a member of a certain religious group. She told me that she had recently left this group and had become involved in a relationship with a man. This was causing her a lot of stress and emotional pain; because of her background she was suffering under a great burden of guilt. I shared with her the gospel, and explained that in a relationship with God through Christ she could be set free from her past. Furthermore, I told her that if she did become a Christian she in turn could share the gospel with the man with whom she had a relationship. I even suggested that in time, if God should bless their relationship, I could play a part in bringing them together in marriage, and they would thus please the Lord by their obedience. She thought about what I had said for quite a long time. Then she said to me, "Is there any other option open to me?" I told her, yes, she could walk out of the room and remain in her sin. She said that was what she intended doing. I could not believe my ears. "Do you really want to continue living this way?" I asked her. "Do you want to give up eternal life for someone who will not even make a commitment to you?" At that she stood up and walked out. I have not seen her since. By her own free choice her sins had been retained. She had rejected forgiveness and new life in Christ, choosing instead to go her own way.

Following Jesus' appearance, therefore, the disciples no longer had to struggle with their doubts about the resurrection reports. Here was their Lord standing before them, reviewing their commission, providing power through the Holy Spirit so that they could fulfill that commission, and assuring them that as they shared the gospel they would be able to discern, based on whether their message was received or rejected, whether one's sins were forgiven or not. All of the disciples had by now seen, heard, and even touched Jesus . . . except Thomas.

2. The Doubting Thomas John 20:24, 25

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 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."

Here we meet doubting Thomas. He is the disciple who once impulsively declared his willingness to go to the cross with Jesus, but now he is laying down certain conditions which must be met before he will believe that his Lord is alive. He had not been with the others when Jesus appeared in their hiding place. When at last he joins his fellow-disciples, he is greeted with a chorus of voices declaring, "We have seen the Lord!" This is too much for Thomas. After all, he had seen the Lord nailed to a cruel Roman cross. He had watched him breathe his last. He had seen the spear enter his side. As Jesus was placed in the tomb, with him was buried, in Thomas' eyes, all his own dreams of the Kingdom of God on earth. His personal hope that Jesus was the Messiah, the Lamb of God, had been crushed. Picture Thomas now, in the presence of the other disciples, hearing the chorus, "He is alive!" In frustration he cries, "No, I will not believe that until I see the marks of the nails, until I can put my finger in the very holes, until I place my hand in his side." How many still make the same demands of God! People on every side spend their days calling the Almighty God to account. What arrogance!

Doubting Thomas spent the following eight days in doubt and unbelief, confusion and hardness of heart. Then, at last, the time came for him to enter into the joy of seeing his risen Messiah as had Mary, Peter, John,

and all the other apostles and disciples before him.

3. The Dispeller of Doubts John 20:26-29

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." 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." Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and My God!" Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

It is eight days after Jesus' first appearance to the group of disciples. Again, they are hiding in a locked room; and this time Thomas is with them. "Peace be with you," is once more our Lord's greeting at his appearing among them. Even Thomas will now experience this peace as Jesus deals with him in a gentle admonishment. Notice that the risen Lord was ready to accede to Thomas' every demand. He is saying, in effect, "Thomas, I was present when you spoke out in unbelief eight days ago. I am alive, forever present, and all-knowing. I not only heard what you said, but I know what is going on in your heart of hearts as well. Although you are doubting my resurrection, I love you. You see, I died for you as well as for the sins of the world. But that would not have amounted to anything if I had not risen from the dead, as the Scriptures said I would, and as I myself told you I would. My resurrection has bestowed upon me the power to free you from your unbelief. Come now, touch my hands and my side, and see that it is I who stands before you. Let our relationship be restored. Together let us go forth with the message of salvation to all the world. Be not unbelieving, but believing."

Thomas did not need any more proof. In response to what Jesus said to him, he made two profound statements about him: "My Lord and my God!" he exclaimed. The first statement, "my Lord," denotes ownership and absolute control. Thomas, who had tried to lord it over Jesus, now fell at his feet in joyful submission. ". . . and my God . . ." The resurrection of Jesus had convinced him that not only was he Lord but that he was God, the one living and true God. Thomas needed no further word from Jesus. He should, of course, have believed in the resurrection sight unseen, on the word of the other witnesses. But now he could see that Jesus' resurrection was not the coming back to life of a mere man; the Lord's resurrection was one to eternal life and glory. Thomas was looking at God's Son in the flesh. His resurrection made possible the forgiveness of sins and justification for all who would place their faith in him. And this forgiveness and justification, of course, is possible only because Jesus is alive. He is no longer dead, but has been raised again to life eternal!

Jesus' last words to Thomas, and to all of us also, is, "Because you have seen me have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believe." Faith that arises because of seeing is good, but faith that comes by hearing is even better.

There are several ways we could apply this passage to our own lives. As Christians, we learn from this account that doubting revealed truth can result in a state of spiritual, emotional and physical crippling. The prophets of the Old Testament had foretold that the Messiah would be killed and that he would rise again. Jesus himself had warned his disciples many times of his forthcoming death and resurrection. They reacted to this announcement by refusing to believe it-by, in effect, denying it in their hearts. Mary Magdalene, as a result, was crippled by her tears of grief; the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were crippled by their failure to believe Moses and the prophets in what they wrote concerning the Messiah; the apostles and disciples, hiding in fear in Jerusalem, were crippled by fear, unbelief and hardness of heart; Thomas was crippled by his arrogant unbelief, and suffered in misery for a whole week as a result.

Their only hope for healing of their spiritual and emotional lameness, as it is our only hope, is to believe the truth as it is revealed by the prophets and by the life and the words of Christ himself both before and after his resurrection. Furthermore, we have the additional proof of nineteen centuries of witnesses who turned by faith to a Christ they had never seen or met, and whose lives, and the history of the world itself, were radically changed as a result. We in our own day can also be set free from spiritual death by looking at the host of

witnesses all around us, people who have come to Christ by faith and have changed utterly because of that. They will tell you in their own words, and, better still, their very lives reflect the fact that Jesus, the One in whom they placed their faith, is alive. He is King of kings. He is their Savior, the only One who is capable of forgiving their sins and justifying them before his Father because of their faith in him. This Jesus is willing to meet you at your point of doubt. If you then truly desire to be set free from the guilt and shame of your past, he will meet your need as you come to him by faith. Then you will be truly free.

Let me close by saying that the worst service we as Christians can render to those who do not yet believe in Jesus Christ is to live as though he never rose from the dead. Let us not allow the world to cripple us by dragging us down into doubt, fear and unbelief. Jesus Christ is alive, and our lives should reflect that fact! We should live lives that reflect his peace, his righteousness, his truth, for we are men and women, boys and girls who have been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Are you still doubting the resurrection of Jesus Christ? I beg those of you who are Christians to live a lifestyle worthy of your great calling, fully confident that "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." I beg those of you who are considering the claims of Christ to not wait another day, for, as the Scriptures say, ". . . now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'" Jesus will meet you where you are, just as he met Mary, the disciples, and doubting Thomas even as they struggled with doubt concerning the fact of his resurrection. Bring to the Lord your unbelief, your doubts, your fears, your hardened hearts, and ask him to show you who he really is—the resurrected and living Lord Jesus Christ. He will meet you at your point of need.

Catalog No. 3948
John 20:19-29
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April 19, 1987

[Back to Index Page](#)

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