

# HAVE YOU EVER DOUBTED THAT JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD?

*SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST*

by Ron Ritchie

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As a Roman citizen Paul once had the opportunity to stand before the Jewish King Agrippa to defend himself against charges that had been brought against him. He said, "...having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ [Messiah] was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim [the] light [of truth] both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles...King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." Agrippa replied, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." And Paul said, "I would to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains." (Acts 26:22-29.)

It was the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ that changed the hearts and lives of the apostles including Paul, so much so that Paul was willing to speak out boldly before King Agrippa, hoping to convince him based on the writings of the prophets that the Messiah was Jesus, now resurrected and seeking to bring all men into that truth so that they could receive the joy of their salvation. But King Agrippa struggled with doubt and in time dismissed Paul and the prophets. He remained in his sin until he died, an old man of 73, in Rome in 100 AD.

King Agrippa is just one of many men and women down through the ages who have struggled with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. I'm sure that most of you have had your doubts concerning this subject, and some of you among us may still doubt whether you believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Well, you are not alone, for today we will take a look at a time when all the disciples struggled with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, especially one named Thomas.

## **The disciples doubted**

Luke 24:36-43

And while they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst. But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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 that I have." [And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet.] And while they still could not believe it for joy and were marveling, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" And they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; and He took it and ate it before them.

Remember, the gospel writers record several previous appearances of the resurrected Lord Jesus. The appearances began early Sunday morning when several women arrived at the garden tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. They were met by two angels in dazzling apparel who said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." (Luke 24:1-8.) The women reported this experience to the disciples in Jerusalem, but the disciples thought it was nonsense and would not believe them. According to John 20:14 and Matthew 28:9-10, Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene when she came back to the garden, then to the other women who returned. He then appeared to Simon Peter privately sometime that Sunday (Luke 24:34), and then on Sunday afternoon he appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, followed by this evening appearance to the disciples who had gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem (Thomas was not in the room at

that time).

Why did Jesus appear in Jerusalem, rather than, say, in Galilee or in the desert? Looking back, according to Luke, "...it came about, when the days were approaching for His Ascension, that He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). In Psalm 110:4 we are told that the Messiah should be "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Melchizedek was the King of Jerusalem (called Salem in the time of Moses) and a priest of the Most High God. He provide bread and wine as well as a blessing to Abraham, who had just defeated the enemy who had taken his nephew Lot captive (see Genesis 14:19-20; Hebrews 7:1-2). Jerusalem was the city where God promised David that after he died, "...I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom...forever" (2 Samuel 7:12-13). It was in Jerusalem the city of peace that our Lord in his humanity presented himself to his people as the Son of David, the Prince of Peace, and the Passover Lamb. Jerusalem was the city in which he was crucified as "King of the Jews" and buried, and then was raised from the dead as the victorious King of kings. It was in Jerusalem, therefore, that he appeared to his disciples as their risen Lord and God, and it was in this city where he would commission his disciples to become witnesses once he sent the Holy Spirit. It was in Jerusalem that he would ascend to his heavenly Father. It was in Jerusalem that the church would be born and from which it would spread out into the world. And it is to Jerusalem that our Lord will come for the second time to set up his earthly kingdom.

Jerusalem is the city of peace where the Prince of Peace will rule. And the Prince of Peace gives his peace to all of us who have made peace with him, and then we are able to share that peace with all those around us. Don't you hunger for the day when every man, woman, and child will be at peace with God? Then to every individual we meet we can say out of a peaceful heart, "Shalom-peace be with you." The Prince of Peace is going to make sure that it happens, and it began in Jerusalem through his death and then his resurrection.

According to John 20:19-24 it was Sunday evening when ten of our Lord's apostles met in a room behind locked doors. They were fearful that the Jewish leaders would arrest them because of their association with Jesus. And appearing before them was Jesus, the "Prince of Peace" of Isaiah 9:6. John records that he said, "Peace be with you." Our Lord's presence equals peace. His blessing of peace means the absence of spiritual unrest, fear, and anxiety; and the assurance of God's loving presence under all circumstances, which we experience by exercising faith in God and his Son. This same Jesus had told his disciples on Thursday evening, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." (John 14:27.) This was the peace that Jesus obtained for all his followers by his death on the cross.

Here stood the man they had all considered their dead Messiah. You can imagine their shock and fear, for the last time they had seen Jesus he had been beaten almost beyond physical recognition. His head and face had been bruised and covered with dried blood and fresh blood from the thorns on his brow. His hands and feet had been pierced with Roman nails, and his side had been pierced with a Roman sword. They all had seen him die, and then they had witnessed Joseph and Nicodemus take him down from the cross and carry him to Joseph's own tomb. Now three days later he suddenly appeared before them as if out of thin air. They must have thought, "This is too much, it's impossible. It must be the pressure of these last three days. We are all seeing the same 'spirit.' But the 'spirit' is greeting us! What is going on?" Then they heard him say, "Peace be with you." But regardless of those reassuring words, they were startled and frightened.

Jesus asked them two questions: (1) "Why are you troubled?" Their minds were filled with fear and perplexity. At this moment in their spiritual growth they were experiencing the same despair and unbelief that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus had experienced over the previous three days. Jesus was the Prophet to come, mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people. He was to be the Redeemer of Israel, according to all the prophets-yet the chief priests and their rulers had delivered him up to the sentence of death and crucified him (see Luke 24:19-20). And (2), "Why do doubts, or questions, arise in your hearts? You have the Scriptures, and I have told you many times, '...all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered up to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again.'" (Luke 18:31-33.)

Then Jesus said, "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 that I have." I was just reading about the New Age idea that the spirit of Christ came on Jesus at his birth, stayed on him until the cross, and then left Jesus, and now just the spirit of Christ remains. Proponents of this idea don't believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. But there are several observations we can make about this verse that show that these disciples were not dealing with a "spirit" but with the fulfillment of all prophecies concerning a bodily resurrection, which should also encourage us about our own life, death, and resurrection:

1. Our Lord's resurrected body could be touched.
2. Our Lord's resurrected body was made of flesh and bone rather than flesh and blood. In this world the life is in the blood; in eternity life is in the Son (see 1 Corinthians 15:45).
3. Our Lord's resurrected body had some of the same outward design it had before his death ("See My hands and My feet....").
4. Our Lord's resurrected body retained the scars from his earthly experience on the cross (and it will for eternity as a memorial of his great sacrifice).
5. Our Lord's resurrected body could consume food.

Sixty years later John would write: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld [the Greek word here is *theaomei*, a careful and deliberate vision that interprets its object] and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life-and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life...." (1 John 1:1-2.) John also wrote, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is." (1 John 3:2.) As Christ's Spirit housed in his resurrection body walked among them, so shall we be-our spirits will be housed in a body that is fit for eternity, never to die again. We will have personality, a voice, taste, smell, design, and function. An unknown author wrote:

On the day of the crucifixion the disciples were filled with sadness; on the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless; on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty and hope. When the message of the resurrection first came they were hard to convince, but once they became assured they never doubted again. What could account for the astonishing change in these men in so short a time? The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits and characters. Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up which would so affect them.

Did you ever doubt or are you still doubting that Jesus rose from the dead? The disciples struggled with doubt about the resurrection until Jesus appeared and they were able to see him, touch him, and even watch him eat a meal with them. That experience eliminated their doubts, but there was still Thomas who was absent at the time, so let's turn to John's gospel, where we will pick up the episode of the famous "doubting Thomas."

### **Thomas doubted that Jesus was raised from the dead**

John 20:24-29

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." 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."

Thomas was a disciple who had been chosen by Jesus early in his ministry (see Luke 6:15). He was a twin. When Jesus wanted to go to Bethany to visit the grave of Lazarus, Thomas realized the Jewish leadership was looking for Jesus and that if he went anywhere within the city of Jerusalem he was putting his life on the line. So showing a mixture of courage and pessimism, Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." (John 11:16.) George Matheson wrote:

...the skepticism of Thomas comes out in the belief that the death of Jesus would be the death of His kingdom. "Let us go, that we may die with Him." The man who uttered these words had, at the time when he uttered them, no hope of Christ's resurrection. No man would propose to die with another if he expected to see him again in a few hours. Thomas at that moment had given up all intellectual belief. He saw no chance for Jesus. He did not believe in His physical power. He had made up his mind that the forces of the outer world would be too strong for Him, would crush Him.

The risen Lord had left the upper room, and soon after a spiritually and emotionally despairing Thomas joined the other disciples. But now something had changed: The other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord! Thomas, it was wonderful! We were all here in this room and the door was locked, and suddenly in the midst of our despair he stood among us and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he showed us his hands and feet as proof of his death on the cross. And then he asked us for some fish and he ate it! Thomas, rejoice with us!" But Thomas the skeptic said, "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." (John 20:25.)

Thomas was saying, "Listen, you guys, I was at the cross when you were. I saw what you saw-his crucifixion, the Roman soldier piercing his side with a spear. He was dead within six hours. The women believed he was dead and made preparation to put spices on his body. The Jews believed he was dead, so they and the Romans allowed Joseph and Nicodemus to take him from the cross and bury him in Joseph's tomb. And then I heard that the Jewish leaders assigned a group of temple soldiers to guard his tomb in case we came and rolled away the stone from in front of the tomb, stole the dead body, hid it, and then said, 'Jesus has risen.' But you know we didn't do that because we all believed he was dead and it was all over for us. Now quite frankly, unless Jesus appears to me and I am allowed to touch his hands and side, I have to tell you I cannot believe he has been raised from the dead. In fact, I will not believe." He had missed the earlier appearance of the "Prince of Peace" and also his blessing, "Peace be with you," so he remained in a state of spiritual restlessness and doubt in spite of the witnesses all around him. He was like the man of whom Paul would later write, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:19)

Thomas was willing to believe that Jesus rose from the dead if Jesus would fulfill certain conditions based on the senses: (1) Hearing about his resurrection from his fellow apostles was not enough. (2) He had to see in his hands the mark of the nails. (3) But seeing would not be enough; he had to feel by putting his hand into Jesus' side. Now some eight days after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples were again meeting behind closed doors. They were still in Jerusalem and I assume they were still using the upper room as a meeting place. Jesus appeared for the sixth time to confront Thomas. He stood in their midst and again said, "Peace be with you."

Remember, Jesus had not been physically present eight days earlier when Thomas had expressed his doubt and unbelief. But he had been spiritually present, because he had heard each and every word of unbelief. So in a spirit of firm love our wonderful risen Lord and Savior was about to dispel Thomas' doubts about his physical resurrection! He said, "Thomas, I heard you say to the other disciples eight days ago, '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.'" At this point Thomas could have done as so many have done through the ages since the resurrection of Jesus: simply leave the room, regardless of the overwhelming evidence, because of pride or embarrassment. Or he could have said, "It's the wine and I am having delusions, or it's a smoke-and-mirror trick."

Jesus said, "Thomas, you need to see and feel. Well then, 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." The Scriptures do not indicate that Thomas walked over and did what the Lord commanded him to do as he had boasted he would have to do, but his conclusion seems to witness that he actually submitted to his Lord's commands. I can hardly believe that he didn't, because his senses simply had to be satisfied. You can see him in your mind's eye slowly walking over to the Lord Jesus and placing his finger into his wounds. Once he investigated our Lord's body you can see him falling to his knees before the resurrected Jesus Christ and confessing, "My Lord and My God! Jesus, I submitted to your lordship in the days of your humanity, but now I realize because of your bodily resurrection that you are also God, and my God. My Lord is my God." At that moment, for Thomas the son of a man became the Son of God. Because he is God, death has no power over him or anyone who believes in him as God.

Jesus continued with a rebuke: "Thomas, because you have seen me you believe. All the prophets, all the Scriptures, and all the miracles should have been enough for you to believe that I am the Son of God. Faith is the belief in invisible realities. It is not blind faith that I expected from you; I had plenty of evidence to demonstrate to you that I am the Son of God. If I had never shown up physically you still should have believed in me and in the word of God through the prophets."

Then our risen Lord gave a word of encouragement for all the future believers who would come into a personal relationship with him in the days, years, and centuries ahead, who would never have the personal privilege of walking with the Lord as his first disciples did: "Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." Peter would write to a second generation of Christians in western Turkey some thirty years later and say, "...though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:8-9.)

What exactly did Jesus mean, "Blessed are they who never have seen?" He did not want men and women to approach him as their Lord and Savior out of blind faith. Peter wrote to the church in Asia, "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow." (1 Peter 1:10-12.) Our Lord Jesus was saying, "Blessed are those who inquire, investigate, and come to the conclusion based on the evidence of the prophets, the miracles, the cross, the resurrection, the Ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit, as well as the changed lives of the disciples, that the risen Jesus is God." What he wants is for us to look at what the Scriptures say about Jesus and see how he measures up, how he exactly fits the prophecies of the Christ. He is not asking us to just say, "Well, I have this wonderful feeling about Jesus; we just sang a great song about him, and I am going to believe in him." He doesn't want that kind of faith because it's faith in a Jesus of our imagination. He wants us to believe in the Jesus who has been revealed in the Scriptures—the prophecies, the gospels, and the epistles. That is the Jesus who is going to come again as Lord of lords and King of kings, and then every knee will bow and every tongue confess, "My Lord and my God!" whether they want to or not. It is not a blind faith or an emotional faith by which we come to him, but one resulting from careful inquiry.

The temptation to doubt the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is not sin, but refusing to investigate your doubt is sin. Some people rejoice in their unbelief; they love the search but have no desire to find the treasure. Thomas expressed his doubts to the other disciples concerning the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but when the evidence was presented to him he was willing to bow his knee to his risen Lord and God.

Jesus wanted all of us who have not seen him physically risen to understand that we have no cause to envy those who had an opportunity to see and who believed only after they saw him. We are not at a disadvantage. It is a higher calling to be able to believe without seeing because we have had to dig harder for the truth, but once we discovered from the Scriptures and from the changed lives all around us that Jesus was truly risen from the dead, our hearts were filled with his gifts of everlasting joy, peace, and salvation.

Frank Morison was an English journalist who set out to prove that the story of Christ's resurrection was nothing but a myth. In reviewing his research of the life of Jesus he said:

I wanted to take this last phase of the life of Jesus...to investigate the origins of its literature, to sift some of the evidence at first hand, and to form my own judgment on the problem it presents. I will only say that it effected a revolution in my thought. Things emerged from that old-world story that previously I should have thought impossible. Slowly but very definitely the conviction grew that the drama of those unforgettable weeks of human history was stranger and deeper than it seemed. It was the *strangeness* of many notable things in the story that first arrested and held my interest. It was only later that the irresistible logic of their meaning came into view.

In time his investigation led him to place his faith in the risen Christ and then to write a classic book entitled *Who Moved the Stone?*.

Have you ever doubted that Jesus rose from the dead? The question is most serious. May I encourage those of you who are doubting his physical resurrection to turn to the word of God, but before you begin your investigation, ask the one and only living God to open the eyes of your heart so that you will be able to discover the truth concerning Jesus. And the greatest evidence after you study the Scriptures is the lives that have been changed. Something has happened to an awful lot of us! If you want proof, look at the life of the person sitting next to you. The men and women around you have committed their lives to Jesus Christ. That's evidence enough.

I believe, based on my own experience and that of millions of other followers of Jesus who took the time to investigate the evidence as presented in the word of God, that you will in time discover the truth that Jesus is the risen Son of God and the only one in the universe who can save us from the wrath of God. You will also discover that Jesus is the only one we can turn to in order to be forgiven of our sins. Once you discover that there is enough evidence to show that Jesus is the Son of God, you then need to bow your knee to him by faith and invite him to become your Lord and Savior. Based on that simple act of faith he will forgive your sins, and then he will give you the gift of eternal life, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower you to live a life that is pleasing to him now and into eternity.

If you still have doubts that Jesus rose from the dead, let me encourage you: Let the investigation begin!

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