

## **I believe in... The Resurrection**

Easter Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2011

On Good Friday, probably around 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 33AD, Jesus was crucified and died. The Bible doesn't go into much detail about His death, but clearly He died and the Roman soldiers overseeing the crucifixion were satisfied that He was dead.

The Roman governor – Pontius Pilate allowed His body to be released to some women close to Him, including Mary His mother and Mary Magdalene and His body was washed and part prepared and then laid in the unused tomb of a wealthy man called Joseph of Arimathea. Because it was close to the Sabbath, the preparation of the body had to be cut short, and the tomb was closed and then guarded by a squad of soldiers, as the authorities were nervous that if a story was spread about Jesus rising from the dead – as He had promised, a rebellion could break out.

On the third day, very early in the morning, before first light, Mary Magdalene, probably with some other women, went back to the tomb to finish anointing the body.

Shortly after she had been there, two of Jesus' disciples – John and Peter also went to the tomb.

These three were possibly the closest three people to Jesus while He was on Earth:

In Luke (8:2) it says that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary and she may be the same woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil and her tears and then wiped them with her hair in an extremely intimate display of her devotion to Him.

John is referred to as "the Disciple Jesus loved" – and also had a very close relationship with Jesus; at the Last Supper he had rested his head on Jesus as they reclined to eat; it was John who Jesus had entrusted His mother to.

And Peter also throughout the Gospels had been an outspoken, passionate follower of Jesus and, together with James and John, had been the three disciples closest to Jesus.

But after Jesus' Death, despite Him saying clearly that He would rise again, none of them are expecting Jesus' imminent resurrection.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Mary and the other women were, out of their love for and devotion to Jesus, going back to the tomb to finish the job of anointing His body with oils and expensive spices – as a last act of love.

None of them seem to have been expecting to find the tomb empty. And when it was empty, they didn't immediately jump to the conclusion that Jesus must have risen – just as He said.

Rather, they ran to tell the disciples and say '*They've* taken the body and we don't know where *they* have put Him" (the 'we' suggests that there were a group of women together.)

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb, first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) (John 20:1-9)

Again, out of devotion they run to the tomb – obviously still not understanding what is going on and not yet coming to the conclusion that Jesus is alive.

John got to the entrance to the tomb first, then hesitated, and then Peter arrived and, in his usual character, burst in – to find the tomb empty.

Then John went in and saw the scene – the linen and the folded burial cloth – and believed.

What he saw definitely didn't look like a crime scene with a stolen body - John Chrysostom said that – Stealing a body would have been an unthinkable

sacrilege – never mind stripping a body before stealing it; “thieves don’t neatly fold up clothes – no robber was ever concerned with tidying up!”

There is another idea that people have had about this scene – the oils and spices may have made the bandages hard – a bit like a mummy. Later on in this chapter, Jesus appears amongst His Disciples inside a locked room; so the reason the stone was rolled away from the tomb wasn’t to let Jesus out, but to let Mary, Peter and John in so they would believe in the Resurrection.

So maybe the bandages were still in the shape of Jesus’ Body – like a chrysalis.

But whatever he saw, it was enough for John; “he saw and believed;” he came out of the tomb into the early morning sunlight, not looking for a missing body; not as a devoted, but grieving follower; but as someone who believed in the Risen Christ – blinking in the sunlight and trying to take in the fact that Jesus is FULLY who He said He was, and now, even Death was defeated!

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. She was still completely devoted to Jesus, but still not understanding the Resurrection.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

Even at this point, Mary’s devotion to Jesus is beautiful; but even with the appearance of angels, she hasn’t yet *believed*.

“Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

Even with Jesus standing in front of her, she still hasn’t got it... and then:

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, (“stop clinging to me”) for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:10-18)

Mary too went to the tomb as a devoted follower of Jesus; possibly risking arrest; showing the most beautiful example of devotion and love for Him – grieving His death.

But she encountered the Risen Christ – and suddenly EVERYTHING was different!

She went as a devoted follower; she came back as a believer – “I have seen the Lord!”

For **Peter** it was seeing the Risen Christ, hearing His voice “Let down the fishing net on the other side of the boat!” and then eating a meal of grilled fish with Him.

For **the other disciples** it was seeing Him amongst them whilst they were locked away in the upper room.

For **Thomas**, that wasn’t enough, so he had to physically touch Jesus’ wounds before he believed.

For the **two disciples on the road to Emmaus**, it was having Jesus explain why He needed to die to fulfil the Prophecies of the Old Testament, having their hearts burning inside them as He spoke with them and then, finally recognising Him as He ate with them.

Each of these were devoted followers – but when they encountered; saw; ate with; touched the Risen Christ – everything changed – they went from being followers to Believers in the Resurrection.

And that so utterly changed them that most of them were sent to their deaths for that belief.

When Thomas met the Risen Jesus, seeing Him was enough, but Jesus also made Thomas, who had been doubtful about the Resurrection, touch His wounds for further proof:

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him (kept on telling him), "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

I don't think that Jesus was rebuking him because of his doubt; doubt is not a bad thing as long as it is seeking the Truth and is willing to look at the evidence; that is honesty. Blind doubt though is pointless and is just refusing to believe.

But clearly, given that Jesus was presenting him with the evidence, it was right for Thomas now to believe. And he did.

This is the first time Jesus has been worshipped as God; one writer (Paul Beasley-Murray) says "from the furnace of his doubt emerges the finest confession of faith in Jesus found in the New Testament."

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:24-29)

It's important to remember that Thomas didn't lack devotion to Jesus or courage – as Jesus set out towards Jerusalem before His arrest and death, Thomas had said "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)

But for him too there was this change from devotion to belief

And it was belief that Jesus was calling him to: "Stop doubting and believe!" And obviously belief, specifically belief in the Resurrection, is a very important thing for Jesus, because He stressed its importance:

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have **believed**; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have **believed**." (v.29)  
(Three times – "Believe, Believe, Believe")

For many of us, we have been around a lot of Easters and we love Jesus and are devoted to Him – some of us have even given up a lot to follow Him.

But as I've read through these passages over the last few weeks, I've been struck by Jesus' desire that we BELIEVE in the Resurrection – and maybe this is especially a message for those of us who are already devoted to Him.

And devotion becomes belief when we encounter the Risen Christ.

For the people we have looked at today, the point of Believing came at different points:

- Mary – hearing Jesus' voice
- Peter – the same
- John – seeing the evidence of Empty Tomb
- Disciples – seeing Jesus
- Disciples on the Road to Emmaus – having the Scriptures explained & eating with Jesus
- Thomas – seeing & touching Jesus

Jesus said that we can believe even though we haven't seen – and He will bless us for it.

It doesn't necessarily mean that we need to have an encounter with the Risen Jesus – although many of us have had dreams where Jesus has spoken to us other encounters that have convinced us He is alive and is The Way.

Others of us may have come to believe in Him based on the Bible or 'evidence'; some others of us may still be searching and coming to conclusions about what we believe.

But Belief at least means that we are to live all of our lives in the light of the Resurrection and then, one day, die in the hope of it.

It means that we are not just devoted to the historical Jesus of the Bible in a nostalgic way, looking back to Him as an example; rather, we are following the Risen Saviour – we have a relationship with Him; today He is alive and He is Lord.

So when we become aware of the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead and He is alive, when we think about it and all the implications of it, then devotion becomes belief – and it changes everything – we will never look at the world

the same way again if we see it through the lens of the Resurrection; we will measure our lives and our deaths differently.

And Belief leads us to worship Jesus – the Lamb who was slain and now is alive forevermore!