

How Much Does It Take to Believe?

John 20:1-18 (text: v.1-10)

21 April 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

Resurrection Sunday

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Since the rise of liberalism in the 1800's in Europe, the Church of Christ has had to face a big nonsense – the nonsense of some – yes, of even some *theologians* – who have claimed that Jesus did not really rise from the dead.

These people claim that one can still be a Christian even though you don't believe that Jesus really rose from the dead! Yes, said they, "True faith does not rest on the reliability of events in history."¹

Well, even in New Zealand, we have seen this nonsense being preached in the 1960's! (I'm referring to the Lloyd Geering saga!)

However, this nonsense is still being proclaimed – here in our country,² as well as overseas!³

When I read how *intellectual* men proclaim such nonsense then I find strength again in the words of our Lord, "***I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.***"⁴

My brother & sister, frankly, if Jesus did not really & historically rise from the dead, then our faith has had the "carpet taken from under its feet!" Yes, as the Apostle Paul says, "***...if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.***"⁵

Well, here is the main message of our text: "How much will it take for you to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead?"

And here are three points by which our text works up to the answer...

- An Overhasty Look
- A Better Look
- Belief

An Overhasty Look

My brother & sister, it's the first day of the week – it's Sunday morning.

And if we put the information of all four Gospels together, we understand that...

1) Mary Magdalene together with 2) Mary the mother of James, 3) and Salome, 4) and Joanna got up while it was still dark. They had the desire to go and anoint Jesus' body.

¹ From Burge, G. M. (2000). *John* (pp. 549–577). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

² Cf. e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lloyd_Geering

³ See, e.g. the good bit of information on this topic given in his commentary on John 20:1-31 by Burge (ibid)

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Mt 11:25–26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (1 Co 15:14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

(Now, we do not know exactly why they wanted to do this. Perhaps they did not know that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had already anointed His body on the Friday night.⁶ Or perhaps they *knew* about that, but they reckoned that Nicodemus and Joseph might not have had enough time to do a proper anointing. After all, everything had to be done in such a big haste that Friday evening, for it was already near sunset, which, for the Jews, was the time when the Sabbath started! Yes, remember – the Pharisees wanted Jesus’ body off the cross before evening so that the Sabbath would not be defiled by dead bodies hanging on a cross! And so, the removing of Christ’s body from the cross, late on that Friday afternoon – as well as that first anointing of it by Nicodemus and Joseph – seemed all to have happened in a big hurry!

No wonder, these women were keen to come do a proper anointing of Christ’s body early on Sunday morning! Thus, under the direction/initiative of Mary Magdalene (so it seems), the women got their spices ready for Sunday morning.)

Well, by now it’s dawn on that Sunday morning!

They are walking to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea where Jesus’ body had been placed! Suddenly it struck them that they might not be able to roll back the stone to the entrance of the tomb!

(Yes, although such round stones were usually rolled on a paved track that was specially made for it, *that* stone was large and heavy. Besides, that particular stone had been sealed on the Friday night, and guards had been put in place to watch that nobody would steal Jesus’ body!)

Well, as these women are still walking, suddenly they feel an earthquake! And soon they will get to know the reason for that earthquake, for look, what do they see when they arrive at the tomb?

Well, they see the stone has already been rolled away! And the guards who were supposed to watch this stone, are lying like dead men.

So, what was the meaning of the earthquake?

Well, just like those earthquakes which happened at Jesus’ dying moment, so this one too is God’s way of saying, “Look!” “Take notice!” “Something of great significance has just happened!” “My Son has just risen from the dead!”

Of course, Mary and the other women do not yet know that! And, from here, the exact sequence of events is unclear. Was it now, at this stage, that the women saw the angel and were even addressed by him,⁷ or was it on a second visit, later that morning after they had first gone to call Peter & John, that they met the angel? Gauging by our text (Jn 20:1&2), it looks like it was the latter!

In other words, the women first came to the tomb, saw the stone was rolled away, had an overhasty look at the situation, assumed that someone had taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, and then ran away and told Peter and John!

⁶ Cf. Jn 19:38-42 *After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.* ³⁹ *Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.* ⁴⁰ *So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.* ⁴¹ *Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.* ⁴² *So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.*

⁷ Cf. Mt 28:5-7 *But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”*

An overhasty look!

Are you & I also guilty of that?

Are also you & I, at times, approaching God's Word this way – in a state of distress & hurry – and then make quick assumptions, instead of praying first for a calm and ready spirit and to have the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see what God is giving us in His Word – how He speaks to us through His Word?

You see, he/she who rushes through the pages of Scripture, will not see/find our Lord!

This way, we can rob ourselves of an encounter with Christ!

Well, Mary sees the stone rolled away, has an overhasty look, makes an assumption that her Lord's body must have been stolen. Then she runs and calls Peter and John, which brings us to point 2...

A Better Look

We're told that Peter & John came running to the tomb.

John runs faster and reaches the tomb first. But he does not go in. He just bends low and has a peek in!

What does he see?

Well, he sees the strips of linen cloth lying there just by themselves without a body inside of them – yes, those were the strips which people used in those days to wrap the whole body (except the head) of the deceased.⁸

Then, as John is still peeking in, Peter (true to his impulsive character) comes rushing past John straight into the tomb!

Peter, too, sees the linen cloths just lying by themselves. He also sees the face cloth not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.

This face cloth was larger than our face cloths.

How do we know that?

Well, because it was big enough to wrap around a dead person's head – under his chin and over his head – to prevent the jaw from dropping open.⁹ So, that's the cloth which Peter sees lying separate from the linen strips of the body.

Thus, unlike Mary Magdalene's first overhasty look, these two disciples got into the tomb and had a better look!

So, what should we infer from what Peter & John saw?

Well that the grave cloths were just lying there by themselves, but in the same location where Jesus had laid!

⁸ τὰ ὀθόνια – Noun Neuter Plural Accusative of **ὀθόνιον**, **ου n**: a piece of linen cloth—'linen cloth.' ἔδησαν αὐτὸ ὀθόνιαις μετὰ τῶν ἀρωμάτων 'they bound it in linen cloths with the spices' Jn 19:40. In the NT ὀθόνιον occurs only in reference to strips of cloth used in preparing a corpse for burial (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 71). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁹ **σουδάριον**, **ου n**: a small piece of cloth used as a towel, napkin, or face cloth—'towel, napkin, handkerchief, face cloth.' ὥστε καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας ἀποφέρεσθαι ἀπὸ τοῦ χρωτὸς αὐτοῦ σουδάρια ἢ σιμικίνθια 'even handkerchiefs and aprons he had used were taken to the sick' Ac 19:12; ἡ ὄψις αὐτοῦ σουδαρίῳ περιεδέδετο 'his face was covered with a face cloth' Jn 11:44 (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 71). New York: United Bible Societies).

Also cf. "Likewise the facial cloth (a type of handkerchief) was a detail mentioned in the Lazarus story (11:44). Such small cloths were apparently wrapped under the chin and tied on the top of the head (to keep the mouth from falling open). Hence when John says that the napkin is "rolled up," it is likely in an oval loop, as it was during the burial" (Burge, G. M. (2000). [John](#) (pp. 549–577). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

*The scene, then, is not chaotic or confused. Rather, something purposeful has transpired here. If someone had simply stolen Jesus' body, surely the clothes would be missing, or at least strewn about the floor. But here is a scene in which the body is missing but the clothes appear undisturbed. Jesus' body has simply left them behind.*¹⁰

So, what do we have to make of this?

Well, I believe RC Sproul has come to a good & sound conclusion, i.e. that just as Jesus, in His new, glorified body was able to suddenly disappear from the dinner table of the Emmaus travellers – and just as He, in His glorified body, was able to come through the locked door where the disciples were gathered together that same Sunday night¹¹ – so would His resurrected body certainly have been able to simply rise through the linen cloths that were tied around it!

You ask, “But what about the stone that was rolled away?”

Well, let's understand that our risen Lord with His new, glorified body did not need that stone to be rolled away to enable Him to exit the tomb. No, that stone was rolled away for Mary and the women – and for Peter & John – so that they could enter and see for themselves (and you & I through their eyes)!

So, what do we have here?

Well, through the eyes of Peter & John, you & I have that better look – yes, a better look at what God has given us!

May that also be the way you & I approach our Bible reading – with a better (more thorough) look for Jesus!

You ask, “But what does a better look bring?”

Well, that takes us to the last point...

Belief

My brother & sister, look at v.8! It tells us that, after Peter had gone in and saw what we have just explained, John, ***who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed!***

What did John believe? Did he now believe that Mary was right about Jesus' body being taken away?

No, John believed that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead!

You say, “But hang on!” “Does the very next verse not insinuate the exact opposite – ***for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead***?”

No, my brother & sister, all that this verse means is that, up until that point, Peter & John (and the rest) only had the OT Scriptures which spoke as through a veil about Messiah's resurrection! And even with the three times that Jesus Himself had forewarn them that He would rise,¹² their minds were too full with His words about the fact that He would first be killed!

Thus, what verse 9 is then actually saying is something much more marvelous, i.e. that *even with the little foreknowledge* which John & Peter had about Jesus' rising from the dead, they nevertheless believed!

So, the question now becomes: “How much does it take for you/me to believe” – Yes, how much hard evidence do you need to have faith in Jesus Christ?

¹⁰ Cf. Burge (ibid)

¹¹ Cf. RC Sproul's audio sermon *Resurrection* on Jn 20:1-18 at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/resurrection-john/>

¹² Cf. e.g. Mk 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34.

Look, I think it's fair to say that, because John, as the disciple whom Jesus loved, lived close Jesus – and because he had seen all the miracles Jesus did – it was not too difficult for him to, by God's grace, take that final step in faith!

So, on that First Sunday *morning* – yes on the third day after Christ's cross-death – Peter and John did not yet see the risen Lord in person. But they saw enough evidence to understand (with all He had told them before) that He had risen indeed! And so, even with the little knowledge they had – they believed that He had risen!¹³

We have just said that *that morning* they did not see the risen Jesus *in person!*

But look! Only a short while after Peter & John had left that tomb, someone else did see more than just left-behind evidence!

Yes, in that same tomb-garden, Mary Magdalene had an in-person encounter with the Risen Lord! At first, she did not recognise Him.

You ask, "But why did she not recognise Jesus?" "After all, did the angels then not tell her (after Peter & John had left) that Jesus had risen?"

My brother & sister, I don't know exactly why Mary Magdalene did not recognise Jesus straightaway when she saw Him!

- Was it just that she didn't expect Him there in the garden?
- Or were her eyes still too much filled with tears?
- Or was it perhaps that His glorified body looked so new that she could not recognise Him at first glance? The Bible does not tell!

But here is something beautiful! You see, it took Jesus to say *only one word*, then she knew! Yes, He only had to say her name, "Mary!" and that was enough! Mary recognised His voice! I mean, did not our Lord once say, "*My sheep know My voice!*"?¹⁴

See? Those who live close to Jesus will recognise His voice!

How much does it take to believe?

Well, still, that morning, Peter & John did not see Him in person! As said, they only believed on strength of the left-behind evidence!

But look what great blessing also Peter & John got later that same day – yes, that same Sunday evening! Indeed, Peter & John saw the resurrected Lord Himself! Yes, remember, Thomas was not with them, but Peter & John and the other disciples – even also the

¹³ Cf. Burge (ibid) for, "*The Beloved Disciple has penetrated the deeper meaning of this empty tomb despite the fact that he does not yet grasp the larger biblical and theological context in which these things are taking place (20:9). 'They still did not understand the Scripture' (italics added) means that eventually all will become clear in their thinking. This insight is similar to the Emmaus story told in Luke 24:13–35. Following the revelation of Jesus' person, the disciples' minds nevertheless need to be opened for them to grasp the larger picture of what this resurrection means. Hence the Beloved Disciple believes that Jesus is now alive—but as yet he does not know the scriptural and theological undergirding that have made this resurrection inevitable.*"

¹⁴ Cf. Jn 10:14 & 16 and 27, "***I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd....***"

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (Emphasis mine)

Emmaus travellers were with the disciples in the upper room.¹⁵ The door was locked out of fear for the Jewish authorities!¹⁶

Yet, Jesus came through that locked door!

So, they – even Peter & John – got their faith strengthened!

Well, during the next forty days before our Lord ascended back to heaven, He often appeared to the disciples and (says the Apostle Paul), “***He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive...!***”¹⁷

Why does Paul say, “...***most of whom are still alive...?***”

Well, in saying these words, Paul is saying, “You don’t believe me when I say that Jesus has risen and even appeared to me, the untimely born!?” “Well, look!” “Most of the five hundred brothers to whom Jesus once appeared are still alive!” “So, if you don’t believe me, then go ask them!”

Dear Wainui member (dear visitor), how much does it take for you to believe in the Risen Lord Jesus?

Because John knew Jesus personally, he believed on just the left-behind evidence!

And Mary Magdalene? Well, after her initial overhasty look, it took only one word from the mouth of her resurrected Lord, and she believed!

So, how much will it take for you & me to believe?

Look, the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection is overwhelming, as can also be seen in the way Paul’s encounter with the Risen Jesus changed his life by a full 180 degrees!

My brother & sister, remember what John says towards the end of his gospel (Jn 20:30-31), “***Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.***”¹⁸

See? See the purpose of Christ’s *miracles*? They’re there to work *belief* – belief that brings *life* in His Name!

And here’s the beauty! You see, is it not so that, by His own resurrection from the dead, our Lord Jesus has given power to the words He once spoke to Martha, sister of Lazarus? Hear again those words (from Jn 11:25), “***I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.***”¹⁹

Well, here’s a last word from eyewitness, John, who, on that first Resurrection Sunday, saw the left-behind evidence as well as the Lord Himself in Person. Please hear John’s word and do not doubt, but believe...

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Lk 24:33-36, ***And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, ³⁴ saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.***

³⁶ ***As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!”***

¹⁶ Cf. Jn 20:19, ***On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”***

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 15:6). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁸ Emphasis mine

¹⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jn 11:25–26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

(Emphasis mine)

*Jn 1:1-3, That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life....(Yes), that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us...*²⁰

AMEN (2637 words excluding footnotes)

²⁰ *1 Jn 1:1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*