

Seeing is Believing
a sermon from John 20:28-30 by Phil Henry
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There is a lot about “seeing” in John 20...look at John 20:1; 20:5; 20:8; 20:12; 20:16; 20:18; 20:20; 20:25; 20:29. In fact “seeing” is a theme throughout John’s Gospel. So, my sermon is entitled, “Seeing Is Believing.”

Thomas in particular struggled with needing to “see” Jesus personally. I’m not sure exactly what they were, but Thomas had his reasons for unbelief. Using Thomas as a starting point, I’m going to discuss why many today do not have faith in the resurrection and why, if you have doubts, you can and *should* believe Jesus rose bodily from the dead.

One thing I do know: Doubting Thomas did not work for the *New York Times*. If he did, he would never have published a photograph on his paper’s website of a missile launch in Iran (as happened last summer) that turned out to have been Photoshopped by the PR team of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.¹ So much for “all the news that’s fit to print.”

This raises the question: how was reporting in the first century? Did they get their facts straight? Here is what we know. The Bible records Jesus first appeared to women, then to 2 men, and then to 10 of the disciples. A week later, he appeared to

¹ See the story, “On The Smoky Trail Of A Faked Missile Photo,” as reported by NPR in the Media Circus section by David Folkenflik at NPR.org on July 11, 2008

the 11 disciples, and later, to more than 500 people at one time. Not only this, but dozens of Old Testament prophecies predicted this happening, as did Jesus Himself.

With a "photograph" like this, you have to wonder: if it wasn't a bodily resurrection, what was it? Over the years, many *alt.theories* have been proposed.² Here are a few.

The Stolen Body Theory

One theory is that the body was stolen. This idea was first considered that very day by the leading religious authorities in Jerusalem. When they discovered that the body of Jesus had "disappeared" the Bible says they bribed the Roman guards to say that the body had been taken while they were asleep.

This "edited photograph" doesn't pass the "publication" test because (1) the huge boulder in front of the tomb would have required several men to roll away—several men who had to get by a Roman guard; (2) because the Roman guard on duty all would not have been a single man, but a twelve-man unit that took turns watching in shifts, under the penalty of death if they fail to perform their duty; and (3) because the men who are supposed to have rolled the stone away scattered like scaredy cats the night before and didn't even have the guts to show up for the crucifixion! Are we saying *these* men stole the body, took time to fold up the grave clothes, hid it, and then had the guts to tell the world he was alive again, preaching

² I found this list from a homeschool mom online who did a great job of researching and summarizing the various options. Her original list can be found here: <http://kandtkhronicles.blogspot.com/>. Way to go!

and teaching this subversive doctrine to the point that all twelve were murdered or tortured to death because of this message? *I don't think so.*

The Swoon Theory

Another "doctored picture" possibility is the swoon theory. That's the belief that Jesus never died. Instead, he lapsed into unconsciousness. The problem with this theory is that (1) he would have had to **fool the Roman guards** who, as the Gospel account indicates, thrust him through in his side to ensure that he was dead, producing a flow of bodily fluid that included water and blood; (2) he would have had to survive **three days** in sealed, cold, oxygen deprived tomb with no water or food; (3) he would have had to **evade twelve Roman guards** after heaving a huge tomb stone aside; (4) he would have had to **pretend to be a glorious resurrected Lord** to His disciples...an appearance which would have had to inspire them enough to suffer intense persecution and experience torture & death for the message.

Other Theories

Jesus didn't swoon. His body wasn't stolen. Other fake photo-theories which are equally implausible include the "wrong tomb" theory—it was a "wrong tomb" that was empty, not Jesus' tomb. (If that was true, why didn't the religious authorities produce the body when the disciples started preaching?) There is even the "twin brother" theory—that Jesus had a twin brother who pretended to be the brother who was crucified but now had risen from the dead.

An Anti-supernatural Bias?

My guess is that this wasn't the problem for Thomas, but they do touch on problems would-be believers have with the resurrection today. It strikes me, though, that a lot of energy is put into finding an answer besides what the text itself claims, namely, that supernaturally, in a miraculous fashion, Jesus actually rose from the dead.

Why are some people so intent on avoiding anything remotely supernatural?

The thinking might go something like this: a physical resurrection is *not possible*, or certainly *not plausible*; therefore, it **must have happened** some other way.

Evolutionary Biologist Jerry A. Coyne writes in the February 4 issue of *the New Republic* that Darwin didn't exclude the possibility of the existence of a Creator God; in a letter to American biologist Asa Gray, Darwin said:³

... (1) If I saw an angel come down to teach us good, and I was convinced from others seeing him that I was not mad, I should believe in design. (2) If I could be convinced thoroughly that life and mind was *in an unknown way* a function of other imponderable force, I should be convinced [of design]. (3) If man was made of brass or iron and no way connected with any other organism which had ever lived, I should perhaps be convinced [of design]. But this is childish writing.

Unbelieving scientists today mostly agree. Coyne writes, "if a nine-hundred-foot-tall Jesus appeared to the residents of New York City, as he supposedly did to the

³ From "Seeing and Believing: The never-ending attempt to reconcile science and religion, and why it is doomed to fail." By Jerry A. Coyne, *The New Republic*, Wednesday, February 04, 2009.

evangelist Oral Roberts in Oklahoma, and this apparition were convincingly documented"⁴ I would fall on my knees with hosannas.

Until then, like La Place, he is are content to do his "science" without the so-called God Hypothesis. Meanwhile, to believers, it seems that more and more desperate theories are proposed for the scientists' version of the empty tomb, the origin of life and the universe each of which seem to a believer to be "Hail Mary" passes, last ditch attempts to avoid anything even remotely supernatural.

What do the alt.theories for the empty tomb have in common with most evolutionary physicists and biologists? I believe it is this "anti supernatural bias" I've mentioned. The thinking goes like this: if it is real, it must come from within creation, within the "laws of physics" and able to be measured and tested—by me.

Where Is the Proof?

Thomas was no Darwinian biologist, but he struggled with this to a certain extent, I think. Dubbed "doubting Thomas," he is the one who refused to believe unless he could "see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place his finger into the mark of the nails, and place his hand in Jesus side" (**John 20:25**). Thomas may as well have been from Missouri: *the show me state*.

⁴ *ibid.*

As it turns out, Thomas got his chance. But it came with a caveat. Jesus, after meeting Thomas, said: "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (**John 20:29**).

Thomas got to see Jesus, but the real blessing was reserved for those who, unlike Thomas, were unable to see Jesus, and yet still had Thomas' faith.

This is a cause for frustration for all of Thomas's sons and daughters—men and women who crave some empirical, measurable, testable sign; people who long for something to suit their own sense of doubt, their own need for certainty.

The problem with this approach is found in the Bible itself: people demanded signs from Jesus all the time. They wanted him to *prove*, or to *verify his right* to the title of Messiah. But *the signs that they asked for didn't typically match what He produced*.

Nowadays, people seek different signs than they did then. Then, they weren't asking for cures for cancer or for people to be raised from the dead; that's what people ask for today, but they had that then.

But even though people seek different signs then than they do today, the sign-seeking impulse is still basically the same: prove yourself on *my* terms, on *my* standards, in *my* timing, in *my* way.

I wonder if an agnostic chemist saw the parting of the Red Sea by God through the hand of Moses—would he believe then? But did the people who followed Moses believe?

The problem here is that we aren't really being honest about the nature of our doubt and unbelief. I think we're kidding ourselves when we claim that "if a nine-hundred foot Jesus appeared in New York, then I would believe."

Besides, since when it comes to God, isn't it all about Him setting the terms of the debate, not us? Isn't the Christian faith all about God being that arbiter of evidence?

Seeing Is Believing

I want to come back to this phrase, "Seeing is Believing." I think Jesus point when he says, "Blessed are those who do not see and yet who believe" relates to this question of who decides what is enough proof? Who decides who is in charge? Is it autonomous man, or is it a Creator God?

Let's turn it around. Let's say, for the sake of argument, it is actually about "seeing is believing"—it is about:

- ...seeing that I am not the one who determines reality after all, I believe.
- ...seeing that all my efforts to control my agony, disappointment, and fear are have been pointless and that I cannot—seeing all that, I believe.

- ...seeing that the truth is that I only believe what I can personally vouch for, and that even then I often only believe when it suits me—seeing that's the case about me, I give up myself, and believe, entrusting my life to God.
- ...seeing that as a creature, I must begin first by listening, and not by speaking, seeing that I believe.

You see, "seeing is believing" is true after all. In fact, look at what Jesus says in **verse 31** of our text: "...but these are written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in His Name." (**John 20:31**)

His **Word** is what He wants us to **see**. His **works** are what He wants us to **believe**. It is not blind faith after all. It is simply faith on someone else's terms, not our own!

There is something about "seeing" that puts us in control, doesn't it? Is it hard for you to give up control? Then perhaps it is important to remember that advice Peter Boehler gave to John Wesley: "Live by faith until you have faith."⁵

Faith is not something you can work out, or work up, or convince yourself of. Faith is something that is given, it is a gift of God—even better, it is the gift of a good father, who loves to give good gifts to His children, to His children who ask.

Conclusion

⁵ As quoted in a short devotion called "believing is seeing" by Patricia Nordman here: <http://ezinearticles.com/?Believing-is-Seeing&id=193546>

I began by asking about First Century reporting techniques. I've tried to show that no matter what century you find yourself living in, the basic impulse of people remains the same as it was for Thomas: to measure truth and reality by the background of ourselves, not God. In this sense, we think we can Photoshop God out of our picture; He is a hypothesis we no longer need.

But, in an optical illusion, what you see often depends on the background the object is against. It can look bigger or smaller, one color or another, or even disappear altogether.⁶ Faith is like this. If you set it against the background of self, it looks very small—it closes in upon itself. But if you set it against the background of God, it appears quite large, and even expands in size.

The resurrection, though, is much more than an intellectual test. In the Gospels, it is a declaration of victory. It is a martial conquest over what the Bible says is the "last enemy," death.

1 Corinthians 15:3 summarizes the Easter message by telling us that 'Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ... he was buried, ... he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.'

At the cross, Jesus was murdered and dies crucified in our place for our sins—for the way we've lived our lives rejecting God. The resurrection, however, guarantees

⁶ <http://www.scientificpsychic.com/graphics/> has some excellent examples of optical illusions.

for those who trust in Jesus that their sin and guilt has been fully addressed and that they are "right with God."

Without the resurrection, our faith would be pointless. Without the resurrection, Paul says, we would still be in our sins. But if He is raised, it was not only as a victory for Himself, but for all His people. His victory is yours when you believe and you are changed. By faith in the resurrection, you are now alive in Jesus.

Maybe the reason Thomas, and people still today, have such a problem with the resurrection is that it is such a complete game changer. It makes the radical claim that our whole selves need to be redeemed, not just this part or that part. It makes the claim that our problems were that deep; that they required that radical a solution.

If Jesus actually rose from the dead, then nothing short of life as it was meant to be lived hangs in the balance—eternal life: satisfaction by faith now, and permanent, eternal affirmation in the life to come.

This is a message for believers and unbelievers alike: Jesus, as the One Who Rose from the Dead, is the only Lord who, if you believe in Him, will fulfill you completely; and if you fail Him, will forgive you eternally.⁷

⁷ Tim Keller, Reason for God, 173

Believers who have experienced this are never the same. You can't Photoshop a changed life. At the end of the day, the resurrection isn't merely a debate. When you finally discover that God raised Jesus from the dead, you are set free to be who God made you to be, and with reckless abandon, live, delight, serve, and follow a living God.