**Resurrection for Unbelieving Believers**

**Text: John 20:24-25**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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You have heard me talk about my great-grandparents, who were pioneers in Nebraska. But before they were homesteaders in Nebraska, they were farmers in Missouri. Missouri, of course, is the “Show me state.” Folks from Missouri have a reputation for being skeptical; for wanting to see the evidence. Which may explain why folks in my family have tended to be evidence-based in our approach to life. We Ervins are empiricists. We need to see the data. We need to analyze the evidence before we’ll accept something as being true.

Which is all that Thomas was asking for. When told that Jesus had been raised, he wasn’t going to accept the hearsay testimony of his fellow disciples. He had to see the evidence for himself. Nothing wrong with that.

Thomas gets a bad rap. “Doubting Thomas,” we call him. As if skeptism is a bad thing. As if examining something in order to discern the truth about it is somehow wrong. Why don’t we call him “Enquiring Thomas?” How about “Inquisitive Thomas?” Doesn’t that sound better?

Thomas is just trying to figure out the truth. That’s a *good* thing. That’s what scientists do. That’s what numbers guys do. That’s what anyone does who asks tough questions and looks at something from multiple angles.

So, I stand before you today in praise of skeptics. I stand before you today in praise of people for whom faith does not come easily. These are folks who need to probe and ask and examine and challenge and struggle before they will say, “I believe.” And I’m one of them.

Our model is Thomas. Our mentor is the disciple who had to see the evidence for himself. We don’t know why Thomas was not in the room that Easter evening. We don’t know why he wasn’t there when the Risen Lord appeared to the other disciples. Maybe he’d slipped out to get some food for everybody. They were in hiding, out of fear that the temple authorities or the Romans – those who’d arrested and executed Jesus – might come after them as well. But they had to eat, for crying out loud. In my imagination, Thomas is the practical one. He looks at a situation and he sees a problem that needs to be addressed. And the problem is this: you gotta eat! So maybe he slipped on a hoody so he wouldn’t be recognized, and he went in search of food.

In the meantime, Jesus showed-up. Recognizing their fear of arrest – and maybe even of him – he said, “Peace be with you.” He offered calm. He offered gentleness. He invited them all to take a deep breath, and let go of their panic, and trust him. “Peace be with you,” Jesus said.

Which was great for those who were in the room. But Thomas was out gathering supplies. He didn’t have the benefit of hearing Jesus’ voice, of seeing Jesus’ wounds, of feeling the wonder of his Spirit. So when Thomas returns and demands to see the evidence, he’s only asking for the same empirical data that the other disciples have already examined. Jesus already showed *them* his hands and his sides. If Peter had been the one who stepped out for food, maybe we’d be talking about Doubting Peter! Thomas is just looking for the same evidence, the same assurance, the same calm that Jesus has just offered to the other disciples.

And a week later, he finds it. The Risen Lord again somehow manages to get through doors that are shut and locked. Which is one more piece of evidence that the Resurrection has to do with much more than simply a resuscitated body. Resuscitated bodies don’t pass through locked doors. A week later, the Risen Lord comes to Thomas, along with the other disciples. Now Thomas sees the evidence for himself. And he believes.

Thomas and all the disciples believe after they *hear* Jesus’ voice, *see* Jesus’ wounds, and *feel* the wonder of his Spirit. Hmmm….Hearing and seeing and feeling: these are *sensory* words. These have to do with taking in information through our senses. And that’s what empiricism is. An empiricist is one who uses his or her senses to discover truth. An empiricist sees and hears and feels and tastes and smells. And, by extension, an empiricist observes and measures and weighs and charts and compares. He or she uses the powers of observation to take in data, and the power of reason to draw conclusions, based on that data. Those conclusions give us some indication of what is true, and what is not true.

This is how we humans approach most aspects of knowledge. So why not be empiricists when it comes to knowledge of God? Why not, like Thomas, be empiricists when it comes to discerning the truth about the Resurrection? The Bible provides us with theories about the reality of God and the nature of Jesus and the power of faith. Empiricism invites us to measure those theories against experience. If you want to know if God is real, look around. What does experience tell you? If you want to know if new life can come out of death and despair and spirit-crushing tragedies, look around. What does experience tell you? Not only *your* experience, but also that of others; the experience that we learn about as we tell each other our stories, and listen to those stories. This is how we use the tools of empiricism as a resource on the journey of faith: we test the claims of scripture against the data of experience.

I’m tempted to use the rest of this morning, and many Sunday mornings to come, to share with you my story – *all* of my story – and how I’ve used scripture and experience on the journey to belief. But I’ve got a couple of other points to make, so one story will have to do for now.

In seminary, I was a mess. I didn’t know what I believed, I doubted my calling to ministry, and I wanted to drop out. On the day I hit bottom, I told a professor that I didn’t believe *anything*. At least, I didn’t believe anything about God or Jesus or the Church or any of this *stuff* that I was supposedly devoting my life to.

And Dr. Stackhouse said “Look around. What do you see? What things can you believe in?

Well, I looked around. And I thought for a moment. And I said, “I’m alive. I can believe that.” And I said, “There’s ground beneath me, and sky above me. And the sky is beautiful. And the sun that gives us light. And the atmosphere that protects us from the sun’s harmful rays.” And I went on about the things that I could see around me; the things whose reality I did not doubt.

And then Dr. Stackhouse said, “Okay, in order for *those* things to be real, what *else* must be real?” Well, at that point my logic kicked in, and to make a long story short, I concluded that, given all of these neat things that I could see around me, and given the fact that the universe hangs together in some kind of coherent order, given the order and beauty of creation, it was more reasonable to believe that there is a Creator than to believe that there isn’t one.

So, I took the biblical notion of the Creator; the biblical notion of the reality of God. And I tested that notion, I tested that theory, against experience. And I concluded that it was more reasonable to believe than to not believe.

I still had my doubts. To this day I have times of doubt. Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King and so many of the saints had moments of doubt, for crying out loud! There’s nothing wrong with doubt. Doubt is not a sin; it is rather the context for asking deep questions. In my moments of doubt, I come back to my conclusion that it’s more reasonable to believe than to not believe. And in my moments of doubt I come back as well to my subsequent experiences of the Presence of the Living God.

But those are stories for another sermon.

I actually have 3 questions this morning, and I’ve used most of my time on the first one: What is empiricism? Empiricism is using the facts of experience – sensory experience – to draw conclusions about what is true; to discern what it is that you believe in.

The second question is this: What’s wrong with questions? What’s wrong with bringing tough questions to matters of faith? And the answer is: nothing! If you have questions about the reality of God and the truth of the Resurrection, ask away. Ask each other those questions, ask me those questions, ask the Bible those questions, ask those questions in classes and study groups and over coffee and wherever. There’s nothing wrong with questions. Think about the root of that word question: it’s *quest*. To ask tough questions is to be on a quest for truth. That’s a *good* thing! Thomas was on a quest for truth. He needed to know if Jesus was alive. He needed to see the evidence. He needed to say to the Risen Lord, “Is it really you?”

There’s nothing wrong with questions. It’s part of being a good empiricist. It’s how we seek answers from the data of experience.

So, empiricism is determining truth through the data of experience. And it’s a good thing to ask tough questions of that data. That’s a perfectly legitimate pathway to becoming a believer, whatever it is that you end up believing in.

Which leads to our final question: What is an unbelieving believer? It’s what Thomas was, but that begs the question. An unbelieving believer is one who is willing to doubt along the journey of faith. An unbelieving believer is maybe even being *comfortable* with doubt along the journey of faith. Because it’s when we set aside blind faith and entertain doubt that we make the inquiries that *deepen* our faith. Doubt and skepticism lead to tough questions that point the way to Truth. An unbelieving believer is a skeptic who asks tough questions because you want to know what is Really Real.

One more story: One reason why I believe that the Risen Lord is Really Real – one reason why I believe that the Risen Lord appeared to Thomas and all of the other disciples – is because people who’ve died have appeared to me. It happens in my dreams. Like the time when four young people were killed in a car accident. It was the end of the summer and Lisa and 3 friends were out partying one Friday night. I don’t know if it was a case of drunk driving or what but the bottom line is that the car rolled over in the ditch and all 4 occupants were killed.

I didn’t know Lisa, but her parents were marginal members of the church that I was serving. Her cousin and I worked together on the funeral. It’s one of the toughest things I’ve ever done, trying to offer words of hope to a church full of grieving teenagers. But we laughed and we cried and we told stories and we read 1 Corinthians 13 and clung to the hope that love never dies; that love is stronger than death. A week later, Lisa came to me in a dream. And she thanked me for being there for her family. It was one of the most vivid dreams I’ve ever had. It was so vivid that I had to tell her cousin about it. And her cousin said, “We had the same dream.”

I have great respect for unbelieving believers. Thomas is one of my heroes. I get a little queasy when I listen to people who are *absolutely certain* about what they believe. I’m more comfortable around people who need to see the evidence; who are asking the next right question. Because they recognize that now we see through a glass darkly. They realize that now we know only in part. There is so much more to learn. As Dr. Stackhouse use to say, “All the data isn’t in until the Eschaton,” All the data isn’t in until Jesus returns at the end of time. Until then, until we see no longer through a glass darkly but finally face to face, it’s okay to doubt, and to ask questions, and to demand evidence. Just ask Thomas. Amen.