April 4, 2021

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ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

John 20:24-29

Today is Easter, and we know that because in the stores we’ve been seeing chocolate bunnies, Peeps, kits for dyeing Easter eggs, Reeses peanut butter eggs and there are Cadbury Egg commercials on television featuring a lion auditioning for the role of the Easter bunny. I heard that a chocolate bunny went to see a therapist. The counselor asked what seemed to be the problem and the bunny replied, “I just feel so hollow inside.” How can you tell where the Easter bunny has been? Eggs mark the spot. Do you know where the Easter bunny eats breakfast? IHOP. Do you know what his favorite music genre is? Hip hop. Do you know what kind of jewelry the Easter bunny prefers? 14 carrot gold. Okay, I’ll stop.

The whole Easter bunny thing is a bit poignant for us this year. Our daughter, Carissa, has had a pet rabbit named Lily Belle. Rabbits generally live 5 to 8 years, but on rare occasions live as long as 12 years. Well Lily Belle did the seemingly impossible. She made it to 13 years. But the thing about death is, you can’t beat it. At times it seemed like Lily would just live forever, but earlier this year the inevitable happened. She is no longer with us. Her death was sad. It’s not a huge tragedy. But it is a reminder that though we live longer than 12 years, our time on the planet is not unlimited either. We also face that inevitable fate. A frustrating thing about it is there is nothing we can do to stave off that fate. Oh, perhaps if we do everything right we can delay it a bit, but we can’t stop it. It is a helpless feeling to be that powerless against such a final destiny. How valuable would it be to you if, somehow, there was a way to defeat our final foe? Surely that would be the most valuable prize of all.

Easter is not about bunnies, eggs or chocolate. It is about that most valuable prize of all. Today we will be reminded of the fact that this day we celebrate something that is far more than a wish or a fairy tale. It is a concrete hope. Let’s look at John 20:24-29 and be reminded of that hope.

THOMAS ASSURES THAT THE RESURRECTION WAS REAL

A key character in these verses is a man named Thomas. He is known as Doubting Thomas. I feel bad for him. One time in Thomas’ life he doubted, and ever since he has been Doubting Thomas. But I suspect if we’d been in his sandals, most of us would have been right where he was. In this passage we learn that 10 of the apostles had been together a few days earlier when Jesus, alive again after coming out of his tomb, suddenly shocked them by showing up. Thomas was not there on that occasion. When they told him what had happened, he didn’t believe it. He said to the others, “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.” He doubted the reports that Jesus was alive. Thus he was forever labeled Doubting Thomas. However, I am thankful for Thomas.

People today have a tendency to have chronological prejudice. They think that we have arrived at the pinnacle of human development, and those people who lived in ancient times were not as sophisticated and as knowledgeable as we are today. There is a bit of snobbery in that mindset. We certainly have more technology than ever before and more knowledge than ever before, but that does not make us more intelligent and certainly not better than previous generations were. Should this world go on long enough, there will come a time when people in the future think we were not very sophisticated.

One way that chronological snobbery shows up is that sometimes today people think of those who lived in the first century as prone to superstition. They were likely to believe in magic and ghosts and other such things. This from people who live in a culture where there are some claim to have seen Elvis, others assert they’ve been captured by aliens, there are horoscopes in our newspapers every day, you can get your psychic fortune told on line and there are palm readers in every city. Oh and Bill Gates I using a vaccine to inject microscopic chips into us. That’s absurd. Everyone knows it’s Apple doing it. Just kidding. I dare say, we don’t have the right to throw stones at anyone when it comes to superstition.

The assertion is that those first century people were prone to believe stories like the resurrection of Christ because they were superstitious. That’s why I am glad for Thomas. We ought to call him Modern Thomas instead of Doubting Thomas, because he would have fit right in today. He thought the claim that his friends had seen Jesus, back from the dead, was ridiculous. All ten of the remaining disciples, men he had spent a couple of years of his life with at this point, guys that had been together through some events that ranged from hair-raising to astounding, said they had seen Jesus. Yet he rejected their story, even though all of them insisted it was true. He said he would only believe it if he saw it with his own two eyes.

Imagine the conversation when the 10 told Thomas about seeing Jesus and he said he didn’t believe them. “Do you think we’re lying? Or crazy?” Thomas had a very modern way of thinking. There are many people in our culture who would say exactly what Thomas said. They would only believe in Jesus rising from the dead if they saw it with their eyes, if they were able to touch him. Thomas was not some gullible, superstitious rube, willing to believe any wild story his friends came up with. He had to see it to believe it. Remember that he didn’t buy the story of Jesus’ resurrection *even when all 10 of his best friends unanimously claimed they saw it!*

Thomas had to have objective proof. That was exactly what happened. Once again, Jesus showed up in that closed room. Thomas saw him, he touched him, he felt the scars, then he fell to the ground and worshiped Jesus, because he now was very clear that Jesus is the Lord of all. Thomas assures us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not an old wives’ tale, but an historical fact. It is a fact that is the most enormous news of all history.

Paul and Thomas together provide great confidence in the resurrection of Jesus. Thomas wouldn’t believe it if he didn’t see it first hand. He believed the same thing we do. People don’t come back to life after being dead. He could only believe it if he could see it and touch it, and so Jesus made that possible. Paul wasn’t going to believe in Jesus’ resurrection for any reason. He didn’t want it to be true. He despised the idea. But like Thomas, he, too, had to admit that it happened after Jesus confronted him, perhaps the most reluctant convert to Jesus in the history of the human race.

THE RESURRECTION MEANS THERE IS HOPE

In John 11:25 outside the grave of his friend, Lazarus, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die.” He claimed that for those who believe in him, death doesn’t win. Yes, they will die, but just like he died and lived again, so will those who believe in him.

We have been looking the past few weeks at the things we must survive in this world, things that are hard. Nothing is as hard as death. It is the greatest fear, the most implacable enemy of all human beings. Death is horrific. You will know this if you have ever lost someone you love more than life itself. The finality of it, the grief of it, is horrifying. Imagine a sci-fi, post-apocalyptic film. It is after some cataclysm. There are survivors who now live in a few cities. Surrounding the cities are massive, enormously high walls. The walls are there to keep the citizens from wandering out into the area that is a death trap. There is nothing outside the wall except barren desolation, destruction and death. To go out there is to die. The wall is so tall and thick there is no way to get past it or over it, but then who would want to? After some years people might begin to get curious. What is out there? But no one knows. Even if one could go beyond the wall, one would never come back.

In this world death is kind of like that wall. We have no idea what is on the other side of it, but many say it is only oblivion. But how can we ever know? No one comes back from the other side of that wall. It is blackness, nothingness there. In Shakespeare’s classic play, *Hamlet*, at one point Hamlet contemplates death. It is the famous, “to be, or not to be” soliloquy. He thinks it might be good to end the hardship of this life. “To sleep, perchance to dream.” But then he says, “Aye, but there’s the rub. For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come.” This, he says, must give us pause. He says, “the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns, puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have, than to fly to others that we know not of.” Death is the undiscovered country from which no traveller returns. Except one traveller did. Jesus returned from the undiscovered country, and now says so shall we, if we believe in him.

This past Christmas I reflected on the fact that Christmas is now more precious to me than ever. Part of the reason it is more precious is that we have grandkids that are a delight and seeing them love Christmas is a huge joy. But another part of it is that I am now an old man. I have a limited number of years left. In my earlier years, Christmas has always been there, but now I know that I don’t have an unlimited number of them left to me. As I considered this, I realized this means that at some point in the years ahead, I am going to die. Yes, that has always been true, but now it is not so much that some day, way off in the future, it is going to happen, but that it is a reality that is becoming more pressing with each passing year. It is not some day way off in the future when I’m old, because I am now old. To say the least, this is an unsettling prospect.

Imagine that someone could prove that he could bring you back to life if you died, and furthermore, he could protect you from any future threat of death. Suppose this person gave incontrovertible evidence that he could do this, and he said you could obtain this service for $5 million. What would you do? I suspect we would do anything we could to somehow come up with that $5 million to buy that service, This would be the greatest news we have ever encountered. We would do all we could to try to raise that money for us and for our loved ones.

Here is the astounding, incredible news. Jesus offers us that service and he has given proof. Thomas needed proof. He got that proof and that means I can believe that Jesus is telling the truth. This is for real. It won’t cost $5 million. In fact, it won’t cost even $1. It is free. Jesus said we obtain this service by believing in him. This is the greatest deal of all time, and it is the most important, the most precious thing that we could ever gain.

LIFE AFTER DEATH WILL BE PHYSICAL

All right, let’s suppose for the moment, that this is true. We can live again even if we die because of Jesus. But what will that life be like? People die, and then they are either buried or they are cremated. Whichever it is, the end result is the same. Their body ceases to exist. The body will either be burned up or it will decay in the ground, and eventually its atoms are recycled back into the system. There is nothing left to bring back to life. Does this mean, then, whatever life we have will be some sort of disembodied existence? Will we just be spirits floating around somewhere? I guess that’s better than not existing at all, but honestly it doesn’t seem all that appealing. I can’t envision what I would do and be in that kind of existence. It actually doesn’t sound all that fun.

There are some other passages of Scripture that we need to pull in here and connect with these verses from John 20. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul discussed the resurrection of Jesus, and pointed out that more than 500 people had witnessed it, most of whom were alive when he wrote that letter. In verse 20 he said, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Interesting that he spoke of death as falling asleep. What a weird thing sleep is. Where are you when you sleep? You go to sleep and you aren’t aware of anything. Recently I woke up early in the morning and had to go to the bathroom. I didn’t think I’d actually go back to sleep, and in fact I didn’t think I did. But I woke up and Laurie was gone. She got up and left the bedroom, and I didn’t know anything about it because I was conked out. How weird that I was there, but completely unaware of what was going on around me.

As odd as that state is, I’m not afraid of it. I don’t approach bed time in terror. Oh, no, I’m going to go to sleep! No, I usually look forward to it. I go to sleep, but it’s not forever. I wake up in the morning. Paul said this is an apt analogy for those who believe in Jesus and they die. We don’t need to fear it, because it is not forever.

Pay attention to the term “first fruits.” We have a peach tree. I look forward to July when we will actually get peaches on it. When we pick the first peach we don’t say, “Here’s the crop for this year. What else do you suppose the tree will produce this summer? Will there be nectarines, plums, pluots, pears, oranges?” That would be silly. That first fruit is a peach, and all the rest of the fruit that comes off that tree will be like it. They will also be peaches.

If Jesus is the first fruit, what does that tell you about the rest of the crop, in other words, the others who have fallen asleep but who are going to “wake up,” come back to life like Jesus did? They are going to be just like him. That means that we will be as physical as Jesus was. Thomas could see him and could touch him. In the next chapter Jesus cooked breakfast for his followers and ate with them. We are not going to be disembodied spirits in that resurrection. We will be physical like Jesus. We will be able to see each other and touch each other. Notice that Jesus had scars in his hands and his side. That means that he was recognizable. He had distinguishing marks that were still observable. I take it that means the same will be true of us. We will be able to recognize people we know and love.

We don’t know exactly what life will be like in the resurrected state, but we do know that it won’t be totally foreign. It will be much like how we live now, but in a much improved state.

LIFE EVEN NOW CAN BE LIVED WITH GOD

John 20:26 says, “Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them.” Verse 19 says he had done the same thing on the previous occasion when he met with the disciples. Somehow, walls and locked doors were not an obstacle to Jesus. He could suddenly appear in a locked room.

Physicists hypothesize that there are more than 3 dimensions plus time. In fact, some theoretical physicists suggest there could be as many as 9 dimensions. Let’s think about the implications of that. Suppose that someone could travel through time, a familiar science fiction trope. Suppose that person was sitting in this room with us and he or she decided to travel a minute into the future. That person would seem to disappear. He or she could reappear a minute later, possibly sitting in a different chair if they so chose.

Imagine a two dimensional world with two dimensional people. They are flat, for they and everything they know only exists in two dimensions. Now imagine that a friend of theirs is able to travel in the third dimension. This person could be with them, but when he goes up, off the two dimensional plane into the third dimension, to them he would seem to disappear because they don’t perceive that dimension. He seems to just be gone. Just as quickly he could show up again as he drops out of that mysterious and unknown dimension back into the two D world.

Jesus going into the spiritual realm is like that. It is a dimension that we do not perceive or know anything about. When he moves into that dimension he disappears. When he comes back into our 3 dimensional world he could appear wherever he desires.

Jesus said when he left, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” We believe he is with us. But Jesus still has a physical, resurrected body. What this suggests to me is that Jesus could be right with us this very moment, existing in a dimension that we don’t perceive. But he would be right with us just as surely as he was with the disciples in the first century.

How would you be different if Jesus were physically right with you? I am quite sure I would not stress about nearly as many things. We are meeting today in a place that we’ve never met before, and this created some stress for me. Would we be able to get the sound system to work, could we get the live stream to work, would people find us? If Jesus were right here with me I’m sure our conversation would be something like this. Jesus says, “Rick, you seem a bit tense and distracted.” “Well, yeah, Lord, because there are so many things that could go wrong and I don’t know…Oh, wait, you’ve got control of all that, don’t you?” Jesus says, “You think? Do you think a sound system is beyond my ability?” “Okay, Lord. I’m good.”

I wouldn’t fear much of anything. I’d have a lot more peace. I’d be serious about wanting to do whatever Jesus wanted me to do. I’d thank him a lot for being there and for taking care of me. Life would be very different. I’d be different.

Jesus is right here, with us. We may not see him, but that’s just because of our limitations. He’s here, as real as the chair you are sitting on. If he so chose, he could pop into this dimension at the blink of an eye. So what I take from this is that we should live in light of this reality. We should live with the reality that Jesus is with us everywhere we go, every day of our lives. We have, love and serve a risen Savior, a real, live, physical Lord who is right here with us. That changes everything. Let’s live in light of this incredible reality, and let’s rejoice.

The late British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge commenting on those nights whe he lay awake in the darkness, said, “In the limbo between living and dying, as the night clocks tick remorselessly on, I hear those words, I am the resurrection and the life, and I feel myself to be carried along on a great tide of joy and peace.”