

Renewal study and overview 9. Thomas the Realist. John 20:24 – 31

Every Easter you can bet that a spirited debate about Christ's resurrection will erupt in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. This year it began with an editorial entitled, "Resurrection, forgiveness, life and hope" (SMH March 21, 2008). Here is a short excerpt from that editorial: *"In this newspaper today, John Dickson¹ argues that the historical facts of Easter Sunday – 'an empty tomb and resurrection experiences' - are accepted by even non-Christian scholars who know it is "intellectually irresponsible" to dispute them. But, as Dr Dickson remarks, that is where history leads us and leaves us...If it was difficult for the first disciples to grasp this insight at first-hand, how much more difficult is it for us today?"* (Dickson goes on to discuss how Jesus' own disciples didn't immediately recognize him after his resurrection). To this editorial, Justin from Erskineville responded (under the subtitle, 'A ripping yarn'): *"What? The resurrected Christ didn't even look like Jesus? Talk about Monty Python. I suppose just before he ascended to heaven he shouted "Look over there!", and when the disciples returned their gaze the Messiah was gone. Nice editorial, but you ought to print actual news and leave the fables to those who still believe in them."*

Justin's letter might seem a tad harsh. But is he being sacrilegious or simply realistic? Our human experience teaches us that people don't come alive again once they're dead and buried. In fact, what would it take for you to believe a report that one of your deceased loved ones is now alive and speaking with people around town? I anticipate your answer to be, "I would need to witness this with my own eyes." Therefore, it's unremarkable that, even after hearing reports from his fellow disciples' about Christ's resurrection, Thomas replied, *"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."* (And to be fair to doubting Thomas, none of the other disciples initially accepted the evidence of the empty tomb or the resurrection reports. In fact, as mentioned above, even when Christ did first appear to them, the disciples were still slow to believe). However, this being the case, modern realists, like Justin from Erskineville, need to ask, 'So what happened to convince those first-century realists that Jesus really had walked free from his tomb?'

Although I treasure the eyewitness testimonies about Christ's resurrection recorded by the Apostle John, I'm even more gripped by Jesus' words to Thomas and the other disciples, *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* I don't think that Jesus is saying here that he has more respect for non eyewitness believers than for eyewitness believers. After all, the testimonies of the resurrection eyewitnesses have been written down so that we too will believe (John 20:30 – 31). What Christ seems to be saying is that faith isn't founded only on the physical experience of sight. Christians believe primarily because we have been given the Holy Spirit to live in us, just as Christ promised before his death and resurrection, *"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."* (John 14:16 – 17)

The above mentioned SMH editorial concludes, *"At Easter, Christians have the opportunity to strengthen their faith by recalling that [belief in Christ's resurrection] is not some leap in the dark, but a trust in the most extraordinary historical events of all, and a celebration of the forgiveness, life and hope which flow from those events."* In other words, we know that Christ lives because he lives in us. History alone can't transform lives or communities, but the risen Christ in and among us can.

¹ Dickson has written numerous Christian books and articles. A documentary based on his book, 'The Christ Files' was recently broadcast on Channel 7. A DVD of this programme is in our library.

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1. Why do you think that Jesus appeared to all the other disciples one week before appearing to Thomas? (John 20:24, 26)
2. Why didn't Thomas' trust the reports of his fellow disciples (20:25)
3. Why were the disciples still meeting together behind locked doors? (20:26)
4. How is it that Jesus appeared among the disciples if the doors were locked? (20:26)
5. With what sort of tone do you think Jesus spoke as he told Thomas to reach out and touch his wound, stop doubting, and believe? (20:27)
6. Why is Thomas' proclamation, 'My Lord and my God!' so important, especially at this point in John's gospel? (See also John 1:1 – 13)
7. What does Jesus mean, "Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed"? (20:29)
8. Write down and share with others how John's written testimony about Christ has strengthened and enriched your faith. (20:30 – 31)
9. Write down and discuss how you experience Christ living in you.