

The Resurrection and the Skeptic

John 20: 24-29 Thomas, a skeptic convinced

Intro

John Ortberg in his book, *The Empty Tomb*, relates a very humorous story. He writes, “A friend of mine used to work as a denominational official in Minnesota. One of his jobs was to travel to little rural communities where they didn't have churches to do funerals. He would go out with an undertaker, and they would drive together in the undertaker's hearse. One time, they were on their way back from a funeral, and my friend, John, was feeling quite tired. He decided he would take a nap.

Since they were in a hearse, he thought, *Well, I'll just lie down in the back of the hearse.*

Sounds like kind of a creepy thing to do, but this is a true story. The guy who was driving the hearse pulled into a service station, because he was running low on gas. The service station attendant was filling up the tank and he was kind of freaked out, because there was a body stretched out in the back. While he was filling the tank, John woke up, opened his eyes, knocked on the window and waved at the attendant. John said he never saw anybody run so fast in his whole life.” (Source: John Ortberg, *The Empty Tomb: How Will You Respond.*)

Generally there are many people who don't believe in miracles let alone a man resurrecting in the back of a hearse. We live in a very skeptical world. People are more skeptical about religion and especially the Christian faith than ever before. Young people who have been raised in Christian homes go to university and colleges and take science and philosophy courses and are taught that evolution and other theories of science can explain the natural world. They make the Bible and Christianity appear unnecessary or even contrary to reason. And sad to say that many lose interest or lose their faith when their questions go unanswered. Others keep the faith the best they can, but become adults who harbour doubts that their faith is groundless and become very skeptical.

Healthy Skepticism

But I would like to talk about a healthy skepticism. In Scripture some of the world's greatest people of faith started out as skeptics. Notice how many of them asked something like: “How can I know that this unbelievable thing you're telling me is true?”

- Abraham was skeptical and had questions; he wanted evidence to assure him that the land would really be his (Gen. 15:8).
- Jeremiah the prophet questioned God and brought a case before Him (Jer. 12).
- The apostles initially doubted that Jesus would actually rise from the dead as he had said he would do so. Jesus had to show them the evidence (Luke 24:37-40).
- Perhaps the most salient case is Paul, who once doubted the word of Jesus so strongly that he devoted himself to persecuting all believers (Acts 8:1-3).

A more recent skeptic was Lee Strobel.

This past week I went to see the movie *The Case for Christ*. It's about the story of Lee Strobel who was an atheist and became a believer. He said, “*For much of my life I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist. To me there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, of ancient mythology, of primitive superstition.*” (The Case for Christ, 1998, pg. 13). Yet he came to admit there was a hidden reason for his skepticism about God and Christianity; “*I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism – a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I*

had a strong motivation to ignore them: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to abandoned if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus” (ibid).

Accepting a challenge from his wife, however he launched into a thorough investigation concerning God, the Bible and Jesus Christ. He said, *“I plunged into the case with more vigor than with any story I have ever pursued. I applied the training I had received at Yale Law School as well as my experience as legal affairs editor of the Chicago Tribune, and over time the evidence of world of history, of science, of philosophy and of psychology began to point to the unthinkable” (pg.13).*

The unthinkable for Mr. Strobel meant reluctantly accepting he had been wrong. He spent two years carefully gathering evidence as if he were conducting a court trial, including interviewing 13 leading scholars with impeccable credentials. The results stunned him, and he grudgingly accepted that the Bible was true and that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. As a consequence, he mentions in his book, he became a Christian.

God, in His patient response gave these skeptical inquirers the evidence they needed.

Good Skepticism

There is good skepticism especially when one wants to know the truth. But good skepticism is having an open mind without dogmatic presuppositions or biases.

The word “skeptic” is derived from a Greek word meaning *“to examine.”* Healthy skepticism examines and follows the evidence to where it leads. This healthy skepticism is open-minded rather than closed-minded; because getting to the truth is more important than proving one’s side or presuppositions.

Christians have reserved the term “skeptic” for the most dark-hearted among the unbelievers. But skepticism can actually be a safer base to begin one’s spiritual journey than an emotional experience or a desperate leap of blind faith.

The strongest faith is usually the one that “examines” the evidence. May I even go as far to say that good skepticism can actually be a safer base to begin one’s spiritual journey than an emotional experience? Eventually the questions we avoid will return probably during the most challenging times of our life. The honest and best way is to meet them head on.

God welcomes skeptics

-In Isaiah 1:18 we read, *“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord.* We are invited to reason.

-Also in Isaiah 41:21 says, *“Present your case,’ the Lord says. ‘Bring fourth your strong arguments.”*

-And in Job 38 God reasons with Job *“Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding?”*

The Judeo-Christian Scriptures present a God who is too big to be shaken by skepticism. I believe that exercising skepticism is a normal healthy part of using our God-given ability to reason. The faith of a Christian is not afraid of open, honest inquiry; and no truth fears investigation.

Thomas the skeptic

In John 20:24-29 we read about another skeptic who wanted to examine the evidence. You see, Thomas was a rational empiricist. Meaning he was a rational thinker who needed evidence that Christ

was indeed raised from the dead in bodily form. Many people can relate to Thomas. Let's look at the passage.

John 20:24, "Now Thomas, (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not the disciples when Jesus came."

First of all Thomas reminds us of people who for one reason or another do not gather together with God's people. Why was Thomas not with the other disciples when Jesus manifested Himself to them? Thomas missed a blessing. He missed a personal encounter with Christ. Perhaps he was too busy, too tired or didn't feel in the mood. Whatever he was doing that night was not worth it. He lost an opportunity.

Isn't it true that at times we miss out on a blessing when we don't attend a meeting or service because we were too busy, tired or didn't feel like it?

John 20:25, "So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, '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 it.'"

Thomas did not believe the testimony of the other disciples. He refused to accept their word and he demanded tangible proof. It's interesting that throughout the gospels we can read about characters who reveal human qualities much like our own. That is why the Bible is relevant and pertinent. Many of us can relate to Thomas. Thomas simply refused to accept the testimony of his colleagues.

Like Thomas, many throughout history have refused to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. They do not accept the testimony and witness of the disciples who wrote the New Testament.

The bodily resurrection of Christ has been an issue of controversy throughout history. Many people have attacked the credibility and the authenticity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Many thinkers, both in the secular realm and in theological circles have questioned the truthfulness of the resurrection. In the last 100 years or so liberal theologians have interpreted the resurrection as a metaphor; a figure of speech, thus rendering it as a spiritual symbolic incident rather than a literal physical occurrence.

Does it matter whether or not our Saviour rose from the dead? The apostle Paul certainly thought so. He wrote, "*If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain . . . and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins*" (1 Cor. 15:14, 17).

If Jesus did not come back to life then why did the early disciple and followers suffer persecution for preaching the resurrection of Christ? Many Christians died as a result of believing in the resurrected Lord. If it weren't so, why give up your life for someone who is not alive or real?

Thomas was not an agnostic or an atheist but rather a reluctant believer with a stubborn will.

- An agnostic says, "I can't believe."
- An atheist says, "I don't believe."
- Thomas says: "I will not believe it" (verse 25).

The problem with Thomas was not simply doubt but doubt reinforced by stubbornness of the will. He didn't take the word of his fellow colleagues.

John 20:26, “A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”

A week had transpired before Jesus appeared a second time to his disciples. The doors were locked for fear of what the Jewish rulers would do to the disciples. Jesus appears and assures them of His peace and presence.

John 20:27, “Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Here Jesus expresses exactly word for word what was uttered by Thomas a week earlier. The Lord’s omniscience made a deep impression on Thomas. The Lord now offers proof, physical proof to Thomas. He was not a ghost or spirit; He was not a dream or vision.

Jesus says to Thomas, “You can touch me.” Christ is pleased to accommodate Thomas’ request, rather than leave him in his disbelief.

Jesus exposes His wounds and invites Thomas to touch his hands and His side. Every eye in the place must have been riveted to Thomas and the Lord to see what was going to happen next. But Thomas was already overwhelmed. The presence of the Lord before his very eyes was enough. He did not need to touch, for he was convinced! Finally his doubts were dispelled.

Doubt

But look at what Jesus says to him, “*Stop doubting and believe.*” or better translated, “*Stop becoming an unbeliever and become a believer.*”

Jesus didn’t immediately scold him for his doubts, but challenged him to make the test that he had suggested. But a person who doubts is very unstable and double-minded. They are unsteady, wavering in character, feelings and in their thinking.

James 1:6-8 says, “*But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.*”

Basically when you doubt you are oscillating, swinging to and fro like a pendulum, swinging between belief and unbelief. You are trying to serve two masters. Jesus taught this in Matthew 6:24 where he said, “*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.*”

There’s a story in Mark 9:14-27 of a father who had a son with an evil spirit. In verse 22 we read the father saying, “*But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*” In the next verse Jesus replies, “*If you can?*” Then Jesus continues, “*Everything is possible for him who believes.*” In verse 24 the father says something that sounds absolutely contradictory. “*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*”

Basically this father was admitting the imperfection of his faith, mixed with doubt. He was pleading with Jesus to help him have a greater faith. He wanted a strong uncompromised faith that trusts in Christ without any reservations.

Believe

You see that word believe has a deeper meaning. Throughout the gospels we encounter it many times. In the original it means to be persuaded, to place confidence in, to trust, to rely upon and not mere credence. That means not just believe that God exists.

When you doubt the Lord you are doubting his trustworthiness. Some people at times say to the Lord, I believe in you but I'm having a hard time trusting you completely.

John 20:28, "Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Now comes a powerful confession: "My Lord and my God!" Here we have the first recorded post-resurrection confession of the deity of Christ. This is a tremendous declaration of who Jesus is.

- "My Lord"- that declared that Christ was on the throne of his heart.
- "My God"- that declared that Christ is on the throne of the universe.

Thomas speaks with an ardent affection as one that took hold of Christ with all his heart and might. It was a personal acknowledgement and commitment. – "MY Lord, MY God."

John 20:29, "Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Basically Jesus was telling him, "Thomas, you needed the eyes of sight to make you believe; but the day will come when people will see with the eyes of faith and believe."

By the time the Apostle John wrote this Gospel the apostolic age was over and the physical appearances of Jesus had long since ceased. Faith had to replace sight. The church age is one of faith, not sight. As the Scriptures declare, "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

Also in Hebrews 11:6 it says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

God rewards true faith, it pleases Him greatly when we trust Him completely.

Conclusion

In his book, *Has Christianity Failed You?* Ravi Zacharias points to one of the greatest proofs for the truth of Christ and the reality of his resurrection: the changed lives of Christians. He writes: "During the course of nearly forty years, I have traveled to virtually every continent and seen or heard some of the most amazing testimonies of God's intervention in the most extreme circumstances. I have seen hardened criminals touched by the message of Jesus Christ and their hearts turned toward good in a way that no amount of rehabilitation could have accomplished. I have seen ardent followers of radical belief systems turned from being violent, brutal terrorists to becoming mild, tenderhearted followers of Jesus Christ. I have seen nations where the gospel, banned and silenced by governments, has nevertheless conquered the ethos and mind-set of an entire culture."

One of the greatest evidences for the truth of Christ and the reality of his resurrection is changed and transformed lives. That my friend, skeptics cannot deny.

Oh, by the way, the stone from Jesus' tomb was removed supernaturally not so that Jesus could come out of the tomb BUT was removed so people could go in and examine the evidence that He is alive. We know for a fact that Jesus appeared a couple of times in a house in which the doors and windows were locked (John 20:19, 26). Therefore we know that the tomb stone was removed to let people in. Even at Jesus' tomb God welcomes skeptics to "examine" the evidence of the empty tomb! Jesus is risen, he is alive and real!!