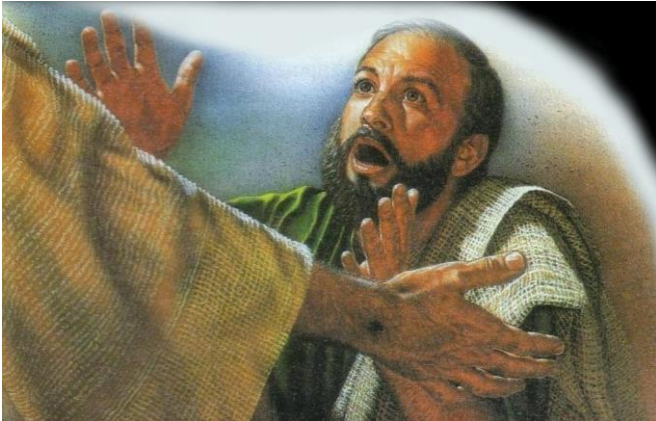


High St Uniting Church Frankston
John 20:19 - 31

Faith not facts



When you read the account of the crucifixion and resurrection in John, you get a feeling of detail, of a fullness of story, of an eyewitness account. More than the other Gospels, there is a sense of evidence beyond the simple stories for both the death and the rising. Scholars say that this is not so much that John wanted to prove that Jesus had died and was resurrected, but that he wanted to disprove the sceptics and deniers. John's Gospel was the last of the four to be written, towards the end of the first century, and he

had heard all the objections and alternate theories from the Jews, from the Romans, and from the Gnostics. Jesus didn't really die, he swooned and then recovered. The disciples came in the night and stole the body to make it look like resurrection. Jesus wasn't really human; he was a spirit being who couldn't be killed. And so, more than the other Gospels, John has details and little extras to the story to answer all those objections. Only John has the spear in Jesus side, with the blood and water, to show he really was alive and really did die. John has Mary say, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him", only to have her grief interrupted by the risen Jesus calling her name. Only John has Jesus appearing in a locked room to show that he wasn't just a resuscitated human. And it would be easy to continue that theme and add today's story of Thomas demanding to see and touch the wounds in Jesus body to John's anti-objectors list. Except that would be a misreading of the Thomas story. The main point of the encounter with Thomas is Jesus' reply, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

I believe that Thomas is a misunderstood character. Rather than 'Doubting Thomas', he was simply asking for what he had missed out on, and the other disciples had experienced – the same disciples who had rejected the words, "we have seen the Lord!" when the women told them! Also, for John there is no such thing as doubt, it's a mistranslation. A bit like Yoda in *Star Wars*, "Believe or do not believe, there is no doubt." Thomas wanted something to bring him to belief beyond a simple story or account, and Jesus graciously offered him all he asked for. A close reading of the story shows that he didn't need anything beyond Jesus standing in front of him; he didn't take up the offer of touching the wounds. And yet, despite all that looks like evidence and proof in this story, Thomas's exclamation of faith and Jesus' response is still the important heart of the account. Blessed are those who believe without having seen. Asking for a personal visit from Jesus isn't something we can do, but we have many stories of the sort of attesting that people have experienced, not least John Wesley's warmed heart! We are in that group of those who are called blessed because we have believed without being able to see. Some of us have had spiritual or physical experiences, all of us live by faith.

Over the centuries there have been many attempts to prove the resurrection. People have looked to the writings of the Roman historians, Tacitus, and Pliny, who wrote about Christians and their beliefs, although some of those passages appear to have been edited by later generations of Christians. C S Lewis, and other writers, have applied philosophical logic; Jesus is either a lunatic, a liar, or Lord. There is the still popular book, *Who Moved the Stone*

by Albert Ross, from 1930, and the more recent series, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, by Josh McDowell, from 1972, and revised and reprinted in 2017. All of these come from people stepping outside the Gospel stories to find proof to support their belief in Jesus. And while this is a useful exercise on many levels – if you have read *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, you will see that there are those who doubt Jesus' ever existed, let alone his death and resurrection – we still have Jesus' words to deal with, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe". Facts can only take you so far; we are still in the faith business.

John was writing to a community of third and fourth generation Christians; those who had heard from those who had heard from those who had heard from those who had experienced. He is speaking directly to his readers when he calls them blessed. They hadn't seen, and yet, they believed. They were not a community of facts and evidence; they were a community of faith. And that's who we are, a community of faith; captured and gathered by our Risen Lord. Living the life of the resurrected. We have all died to sin and been reborn in Christ to live life everlasting. In one sense, we are the evidence of the resurrection; 2000 years later, across many cultural and linguistic barriers, the Spirit still brings faith alive, faith in the resurrected Jesus.