

## What We Now Know

Sometimes I think, wouldn't it be great to be able go through High School again knowing what I know now?! I'd be so much more confident, avoid a lot of the mistakes, but alas, I don't have that option. In a sense, when we read the Bible right up until the resurrection, it's like looking at ourselves in an earlier day. Those people didn't know what we now know – for we know HE LIVES. And in the words of a famous Gospel song, you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart." Fine, says the one looking in from the outside. But. . .

### How do you know you know?

I can *say* that I have a personal relationship with God; but it would be totally appropriate for someone to ask, "Well, Doug, how do you *know*? Perhaps your *God* is a psychological illusion, something existing purely within your mind. That doesn't make it real for *me*. Look, perhaps "God" was something you were taught about as a child, and you came to believe it, and now you can't let it go. It's that tattered memento you keep in your sock-drawer: you know is useless, but for sentimental reasons your just can't bring yourself to throw it away. How do you know you know?

In a multi-cultural society in which we are aware of the depth and diversity of the spiritual beliefs of other, how *dare* we speak of "God" as if what *we* know automatically becomes public truth – truth for all people and all times? For there is no such thing as an unbiased point of view.

When Thomas says "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." he sounds remarkably modern. And like it or not, these *are* fair questions which drive us daily back to witness borne to God in the Bible.

For when you think of it, the resurrection appearances of Jesus recorded in the Gospels are really *all* that prevents us from descending into purely irrational religious fanaticism. For from these Scriptures we learn that Christian faith has never been an individual subjective experience. On the evening of that third day after the crucifixion, the disciples of Jesus were *together*. When "Jesus came and stood among them, they could turn to one another say to one another, "do you see what I see?"

But on the other hand, Christian faith isn't based on *objective observations* either. There are no photographs, surveillance videos, fingerprints, signed documents, or DNA evidence that the risen Jesus really did appear and stand among his followers that evening.

What those disciples experienced in the upper room was totally unique, totally unexpected, and will never be explained by the known rules of evidence. We simply believe the witnesses. Why? And more importantly, how could their experience possibly have any bearing on our lives today?

Well if we insert ourselves into that room – imaginatively – let's say, 30 seconds before Jesus walks through the walls and locked doors of that upper room, we would, at that moment, find ourselves among . . .

### The people of Israel's God

From the beginning, until now, chosen vessels, certain special people, had over long centuries addressed a Word from God to his people: Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah. . . But there

were always false prophets too – those who terrorized others with the dire threats of coming judgments that never materialized; or others who lulled a guilty nation into unrepentant sleep when in reality disaster was just around the corner. But over time, the certain words *rang* true and *came* true and the false ones fell flat by the wayside. Eventually, the people of Israel's God had a *book*. They became the people of that Book. That book was their witness to God – not just any god, but God who had always been faithful to Israel.

Thirty seconds before Jesus walked through the walls of that upper room, their God was the God of the Prophets, the one revealed in the Scriptures. God had spoken. God had been fully uttered. God had moved in the mighty acts of Israel's history, it was written in the Book and nothing more could be added, nothing could ever be taken away. And this evening, this God was remarkably SILENT.

For the people who held the Hebrew Bible sacred, this Book was a living word, one that could continue to speak in very real ways to every new generation. But never had anyone heard a Word that had risen from the grave. A word born afresh after death – after going beyond what any living human could ever know or speak about or hope for. A word that had slipped beyond the embrace of all human love and onto a cross, but which after the silence of three days in the tomb, had risen and now spoke:

*“Peace,”* he said.

And with that, everything changes about how human beings know God. For this word, Peace, spoken by the risen Christ is not a disembodied word on a page, not a scroll handed down from faithful forefathers, but now, a spoken word in a familiar voice, live and in person. The resurrection *revealed* God to these disciples in a whole new way, one beyond their comprehension. For they are about to find *their* God, *Israel's* God, is no longer confined to the pages of the Scriptures, or even in the voice of a prophet. They will . . .

### **Find God in the wounds**

“He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

First of all, the wounds proved that this was in fact *Jesus*, the one who was crucified. The wounded one now stands before them. But this is much more than their friend and teacher miraculously returned from the dead. He is here as a promise keeper. Before he died, Philip, speaking for them all, asked, *“Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough.”*

Really, Philip expresses the deepest yearning of the entire human race. Isn't this all we really need? Isn't this the end and goal of every human religion: Wouldn't that be enough? To know that what lies beyond what we can see and hear and touch is the embrace of eternal love. If we could just *know* that with a certainty, it would be enough. *Wouldn't it?*

For the Jewish disciples, it would be enough just to know Israel's God *as a loving heavenly Father*. It they knew *that*, if Jesus could show them that God waits for them arms open in a loving embrace. Show us *that*, and we will be satisfied . . . *or so they thought*.

And in reply Jesus says *sure, I will show you the Father*. I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you. . . and on that day you will know that I am in the Father and

the Father is in me.” (John 14:18,20)

But what Philip and every one of those other disciples failed to grasp in that upper room *before* Jesus went to the cross was that, in Jesus, the full glory, grace and truth of God already stood unveiled before their very eyes. Jesus was God in human flesh.

Yet for Philip and the others, though God was made visible before them in the flesh, it was still *not* enough. Why? What was yet missing?

*The wounds.* For even if your spiritual eyesight is 20/20, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus is not enough without the wounds. It took the wounds to make the Father’s *love* visible. Actualized. Made it real. It took the wounds to *sufficiently* reveal the *depth* of it’s reach. The unconditional offer of forgiveness. It took the wounds to reveal just *how far* the Father was really willing to go to save us. God didn’t send someone else to die for us. He didn’t just pick someone randomly from the crowd and say, here’s Jesus I’ll send him to die for you. No. God came and in his own being felt the death. And now, in seeing the risen Lord for the *first time* then and only then they do they *realize* the total union Jesus had with Father and how through him they could now participate in the rebirth of the human race. And it was by the witness that these first disciples that

### **The circled of reborn life reached us.**

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

In other words, the witness that these disciples would bear to their meeting with risen Jesus in the upper room was the pebble tossed into the middle of the pond, the circles of witness would go out person to person, on and on and on. These things, said John, were written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that you might have life in his name. Jesus sent these people into the world to bear a *true witness* to the nature of God. And in doing so, his earlier declaration of 13:20 goes into full operation. Let me read it: “ Very truly I tell you, that whoever receives the one whom *I* send receives *me*; and the one who receives *me* receives the *one who sent me* ”

This is a very profound statement and we should think about what it means for a moment. In the exact same way God sent Jesus into the world Jesus sends us. In what way? God sent Jesus into the world to bear a cross, to die, to rise again. The *reason* God did that was so that these frightened disciples huddling in a locked room for fear of being ripped them limb from limb would encounter the risen Son of God, see *the wounds*, lose all fear and believe that *Jesus is Lord*.

The beginning of the story will never be repeated. No one will ever again have to die for the sins of the world. But the *witness* to those wounds continues through us today We tell this story. We continue to to proclaim this same Gospel: Jesus is Lord. We have received the witness of the upper room as true. They saw the resurrected Jesus, and his wounds proved that he is our Saviour and our God.

We say it today without a single shed of evidence beyond what’s written in here in these few ancient documents. Totally bias accounts. Written from their viewpoint. Expressing their *opinions*. “ Jesus is Lord.”

That does, at first, seem totally absurd, does it not? It does seem to be what a modern

skeptic would call the epitome of pure myth. With the absolute confidence of a doubting Thomas they will say "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Yet the apostle Paul can say, "I am not ashamed of the *Gospel of God* for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. . . ." Romans 1:16

In other words, when I make to you this declaration that Jesus is Lord, I don't have to prove anything to you – show anything to you. That's not my responsibility. It's not my reputation that's on the line. I don't care if you think I'm a fool or insane or even if you think I'm evil. I am *unashamed*. Why?

Because I've been taken in by the ever widening circle of God's transforming power. Just like those men and (probably) women in that upper room so long ago, I am bearing to you the witness that *Jesus* himself once bore. The Lord didn't hand his mission on earth over to his disciples and then just leave it to them; he took them in to the ever-widening circle of empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus himself, the disciples were sent out with the full revelation of God's redemptive plan for all creation: Jesus crucified and risen.

And when we think about *that*, we need to stop and . . .

### **Take a deep breathe.**

Verse 22: ". . . he *breathed* on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Let's take a deep breath together, shall we, [inhale / exhale]

What was *that* all about? What was Jesus doing? Why is he blowing air all over his disciples? Well, he is symbolically *re-enacting*, re-creating, re-envisioning, the original creation of humanity described in Genesis 2:7

"the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*; and the man became a *living being*."

As it was in the old creation, so it is in the new. Through Jesus, God is breathing life into the new creation.

There is also another Old Testament echo here, this time it's Ezekiel 37:9-10. This is Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones:

"Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the *breath*: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and *breathe* upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they *lived*, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

So when Jesus *breathed* on them and they received the Holy Spirit it was the beginning of the new human race in the new creation that came into being with Christ by his incarnation, death and resurrection. The same Holy Spirit that brooded over the depths of the sea, now broods again over the formless void of unredeemed humanity with the power of the new creation. Humanity is restored, creation is restored. Dead bones will rise to life.

So take another deep breath. Take in the life of the Spirit, receive it. Now exhale it back into the world. For knowing what we know now we can . . .

### **Proclaim forgiveness**

Verse 23 “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Here’s a picture a judge in the lawcourt declaring guilt or innocence. One is either “bound” or “loosed,” condemned or acquitted. Jesus sends his disciples out so that other might find God in the wounds. God is fully revealed in Jesus and has born the burden of our sins. Whether or not one is forgiven or not is not dependent on the whims of the proclaimers but according to how people respond to the witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is Lord! Do you believe it?

The messenger receives total authority. Yet the messenger is not the judge. A rejection of the revelation, is actually a rejection of the Revealer, and that will lead to a negative judgment on the rejectors.

Undoubtedly, it is the mission to the world that Jesus primarily has in mind here. But the Gospel of John was written to be read *in the church*. As believers we, too, stand in the constant need of a fresh revelation of God’s love and forgiveness. We too must constantly be finding God in the wounds. And that’s why this story is a deep well to which we must return time and time again.

There’s no evidence here that the power to forgive sins and discipline offenders is only given to a select group within the church. There’s no case for a priestly group who alone can declare absolution. Forgiveness is something all Christians must give to each other: if your are troubled by guilt, if you are in need of word of forgiveness and release, we here today let me say to you, not as a pastor or preacher but as a simple Christian: in the name of Jesus, *you are forgiven*. Knowing what we know now as witnesses to the resurrection, we are closer to being able to address the skeptics because we are free to let go of . . .

### **All the things we thought we needed.**

Which brings us back to our friend Thomas. Jesus said to him, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Some think that Jesus made a special exception in Thomas’ case. He’s special. He get’s to believe because of what he’s seen. But I don’t think so. Because when Jesus asks, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" I think Thomas would have been the first to have said “No!” For he realized in that moment that seeing and touching were not really what he needed in order to enter into the fullness of knowing God.

The dilemma of the modern mind is we are taught to seek tangible proof for whatever we believe, when the real transformative power of lies in something as totally *intangible* as the sense of total love and forgiveness. You can’t see it, you can’t touch it, It doesn’t need to say a word. Thomas knows he is loved. And that’s all he needed.

In his cameo appearance Thomas, demonstrates for all what faith does not need. Thomas wanted knowledge he could control. He wanted objective evidence of God’s faithfulness to him. But when Jesus confronted him and offered him the very proof he thought he needed – go ahead, touch my wounds. . . “ Thomas immediately realizes he doesn’t need the physical touch. . He didn’t really even need to *see* Jesus. For it is in the certain knowledge that I am loved and I am forgiven that I and accepted by God that my life is transformed.

And with this he confesses “My Saviour and my God. “

So knowing what we know now, having inserted ourselves into this upper room, into this story – having received the witness of these disciples as true, we realize we’ve got the new creation on our hands here! In the resurrected Jesus, God what God will do for all creation at the end of the age he has already begun in raising Jesus from the dead and giving us . . .

### **Life in the Spirit**

If we’ve come into this ever-expanding circle of witness that started in the upper room, then we too have the Spirit of Jesus breathed onto us. And this brings us back to our encounter with the skeptic who asks us how do you know you know God? You *say* you know God, but what’s to say that you are not simply mentally deceived? Perhaps that “God” of yours is just *part of your culture*. You call it the “Holy Spirit,” but could it, after all, be merely an emotional experience? People get so worked up about religion. You call it the Spirit but maybe it’s just too much coffee. How do you know?

What makes for a genuine life in the Spirit? How do we make it work? Paul told the Ephesians this:

“Do not get drunk on wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.”

It’s not just the act of drinking that’s in mind here, it’s a whole lifestyle of perpetual, wasteful purposeless existence. But to be filled with the Spirit – the alternative– is likewise a communal and continual experience. Just as drunkenness involves a perpetual return to the tavern night after night and the constant company of bad companions, so too being filled with the Spirit is a constant continual return to the upper room to *encounter the risen Christ*. It is a steady progress towards the goal, not a one time event. To be filled with the Spirit means we make a choice for life with God that involves how we use our time, where we spend it. It’s opening ourselves to God being willing to be changed. To be amazed. To be forgiven. To be shocked.

True spirituality spills out of the upper room and into the streets with songs of joy that demand from others an *explanation*. Such a spirituality can’t be produced by spiritual exercises or cleverly crafted worship – as valuable as those things may be. But it comes in the remembrance that the early church didn’t start from a set of new religious beliefs that they went about trying to make people believe. They started from an *experience of the risen Jesus*. This is what led them to worship him. What they believed grew out of that experience, not vis versa.

The same is true in the contemporary church. This is our upper room. The experience of the risen Christ here today is the basis of our worship and our daily life. He breathes on us again – “Receive the Holy Spirit”

And in receiving we become those who are “*blessed*” for though we have not seen yet we have come to believe.”