

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: Easter**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **John 20:24-29**

#### **Jesus Appears to Thomas**

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (also known as Didymus<sup>[a]</sup>), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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."

<sup>26</sup> 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!" <sup>27</sup> 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."

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

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**Transcript:**

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Well, hello, happy Easter.

Happy Easter.

Good to see all of you here. And those of you who are joining us online, thank you for being here. Let me just pray quickly. Lord, as we turn to your word, help us to understand Easter better. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, my car, the car that I drive is a 23-year-old piece of junk. There's just no other way to describe it. It makes weird sounds. At one point, the bumper was falling off, so I just duct taped it back on. It's a mess. Recently, I was in the parking lot with one of our staff and he looked at my car and he said, "Dudley, it's time. Pull the plug already Dudley. This thing is dead and is never coming back." He did not believe in the future potential of my car because after all, dead is dead, right? Or is it? Because what we celebrate today is that after Jesus was crucified, he was raised from the dead three days later. And that is really hard to believe. But if it's true, it changes everything.

There's lots of evidence that shows Jesus really was raised from the dead. And some of you have heard me say all these things before like why were women the first witnesses of the resurrection. Because in that culture, women were considered pathological liars never to be believed. So you wouldn't make it up. So it must have happened. And that's just one of lots of reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead. You can read all of those reasons on our website, [belpres.org](http://belpres.org), all the reasons to believe in Easter. But I'm not going to dwell on those because the deeper reason we don't believe Jesus was raised from the dead, I think it isn't about evidence, it's more about experience. We haven't experienced it in our own life.

So for instance, maybe you don't believe in Jesus because of Christians who are judgmental, angry, little jerks sometimes, which I find very embarrassing. Or maybe you do follow Jesus, but you're facing a huge health or relationship or career or school problem or whatever it is and you're like, "If Jesus was raised from the dead, then why isn't he helping me with this?"

Well, if you doubt Jesus was raised from the dead, you are in good company because his disciples doubted it too, like a guy named Thomas. And even if you don't go to church, you have probably heard about Thomas before because of his nickname, which is what?

Doubting.

Doubting Thomas. Okay, is that fair? He has one little moment of doubt and for 2,000 years, that's his name. So to quote a friend of mine, Pastor Scott Scruggs, I prefer to think of him as legitimately questioning Thomas. He has some good questions. When he first hears that Jesus was raised from the dead, he says, "Unless I put my finger where the nails were

and put my hand into his side where Jesus had been stabbed, I will not believe." But he ends up believing for I think at least three reasons all starting with a letter P.

So a week after that, one week later after Jesus' resurrection, it says the disciples had gathered again and it says Jesus came to them and stood among them. This is the first reason that that Thomas believed, is because Jesus pursued him. A whole week has gone by since Easter morning and since Thomas was told about it, but apparently he didn't bother to go check it out, to go find Jesus to see if he really was raised from the dead, which is weird, right? If you or one of your friends had been raised from the dead, wouldn't you go check that out to see if it was true? But Thomas didn't, so Jesus came to him. Even when we doubt, Jesus pursues us. Even when we sin, Jesus pursues us. Even when we run away, Jesus pursues us. Even when we are indifferent and don't care about him, Jesus pursues us because he wants a relationship with you and with me.

So whether you are happy to be here today or you are dragged here much against your will with only the promise of brunch at the end, you are not here on accident. You're here because Jesus is pursuing you. And then Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side." Okay, this is gross, right? If someone walked up to you and said, "Hey, touch my wounds," you'd be rigged out, right? You'd be like, "Whoa, slow your roll." That's a little too personal. And that's the point. It's the second reason Thomas believes, because Jesus gets personal, uncomfortably personal with us.

In fact, I think sometimes the reason we don't believe in Jesus isn't because he's so far off, but because he comes so uncomfortably close. Because he doesn't want to make you religious. He wants to make you brand new. He doesn't want to make you religious. He wants to make you fully alive. And that's why he died, to pay the penalty for our sins that deep inside we know needs to be paid, or there's no justice. Because there's just something in us. When someone does something hurtful, there's something in us that wants justice, wants a price to be paid. And so Jesus on the cross pays the price for our sins in our place so we can be forgiven.

Now, in our culture, that doesn't have a lot of traction because we've kind of gotten rid of the idea of sin. But man, for people who say we don't need a savior to forgive us for our sins, we sure are awfully anxious to show other people that we're good people, right? We read books about self-esteem because we don't have any. We keep insisting, "No, I'm a good person" because we know deep down we are. Because if you know you are, don't have to say it all the time.

My wife is a writer and she writes clean historical romance novels. That's an actual genre. That's a real category. And people ask me all the time, "Do you read your wife's books?" I don't. I know I'm a terrible husband, right? I mean, I'm just terrible. Part of the reason I don't read her books is because historical romance is not really my thing. But I think one of the other reasons I don't read her books is because romance novels always follow a pattern where there's this handsome, desirable man that everyone hopes the heroin marries, and then there's an undesirable man, and all writers draw from their own life experience. I don't want to know which man I am. It's just best not to know. So I don't read her books. That's called insecurity. That's why I need Jesus, because I am crystal clear there's a mountain of empirical evidence that I am a sinful soul. I am a sinner. But Jesus said greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for a friend. See, Jesus gets really close and he says, "I see you down to the bottom of your soul. Oh, yeah. Even that thing. Even that thing you don't want anyone to see. That thing you keep secret, I see that and I still love you enough to die for you." Jesus gets uncomfortably personal because what sets us free from guilt and shame isn't pretending we don't have any. It's to be fully known for all of our stuff and still fully loved. He pursues us. He gets personal. And finally, he empowers our potential.

Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And what you need to know is the word peace in the Bible never just means absence of conflict. Every time it says peace in the Bible, it means complete total flourishing of everything. Spiritual, emotional, social, flourishing, vibrant families and marriages, the elimination of poverty and racism and loneliness. For a long time, pastors like me have said that Jesus' resurrection changes us so we can go to heaven. That's 10% of it. Jesus' resurrection doesn't just change me, it changes everything.

He empowers his followers to bring his flourishing all over the world, which makes life way more exciting like a businessman I know whose life was great. Everything was great, great job, great family, but he still felt unfulfilled because his entire life was about him, his pleasure, his joy, his fun. Whole life was about him until Jesus nudged him to use his business skills to help people in under-resourced neighborhoods start businesses to get themselves, and in fact their whole neighborhood out of poverty. He loves it because it's exciting. He sees Jesus empowering his potential to set other people free. And it is so rewarding and it is so fulfilling.

Jesus pursues us. He gets personal and he empowers our potential. When Thomas experiences that, he believes. Now you might say, "Well, of course he believes. I mean, Jesus is standing right there in front of him, I'd believe too." Are you sure? Are you sure?

Because another place in the Bible, it says that after Jesus was raised from the dead, when his disciples saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. So even when they were looking at the risen Jesus, they still doubted because evidence isn't enough. What convinces Thomas isn't evidence. It's an experience of Jesus. And when he has it, he says, "My Lord and my God. Not the Lord and the God, "My Lord. My God," it is intensely personal. This is not intellectual ascent to theological doctrine. This is a relationship with a living Lord. And later on, Thomas went all the way to India and he healed people and he told people about Jesus. He was once arrested for giving away too much money to the poor. Now, the other disciples traveled, but none made it as far as India. Thomas was the most vocal about his doubts, but he went the farthest, not because of religion, but because he experienced Jesus' love.

A couple months ago, I mentioned in a sermon that my daughter managed to get tickets to four different Taylor Swift concerts in three different cities, which was hard to do. And I said, "look, nobody needs to go to four different concerts. That's called greed. It's a sin. Let me help you. Give one of those to me." And she said, "No." And I said, "Do you know how much money I've spent on you over the course of your life?" I didn't actually say that. I just thought it real loud.

Well, a few weeks later, she told me that one of her friends had to cancel, couldn't go, and would I like that friend's ticket. And I said, "Yes." But then I looked at my calendar and realized I'm officiating a wedding that day, so I can't go. And that's fine. I mean the groom, I've watched him grow up. I'm one of his mentors. I really would rather do his wedding. But when I met with him and his fiance for the first time, I said, "I want you to know how much I love you. I gave up Taylor's Swift tickets to do your wedding." And he said, "Oh no, we can change the dates." I think he was joking. His fiance was like, "You better be joking." I said, "No. No. Just remember this. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down your Taylor Swift tickets for a friend. Just know how much I love you."

Easter is Jesus saying to you, "Just know how much I love you. I pursue you. I get personal. I empower your potential because that's how much I love you." So two action steps out of this. First, give your doubts to Jesus because your doubts are holy to him. Jesus doesn't get mad at Thomas for doubting. He says, "Come and try me. Test me." Read the reasons to believe he really was raised from the dead on our website. Pray to the Jesus you're having a hard time believing in and ask Him to make Himself real to you because I believe he will. And then second, give Him your impossible. Crucifixion was one of the ways the Roman Empire displayed its power. It was a way of saying, "We have conquered the whole world and if you mess with us, this is what happens to you," because nothing is stronger than

Rome. But what Easter showed is that actually there's nothing stronger than Jesus. Not your loneliness or addiction or broken marriage or whatever impossible you face, not even death, because if we know Him, we'll be raised again just as he was. Give your impossible to him and experience what he will do with it.

When I was in Rwanda this summer, we met a woman whose husband and kids were killed in the genocide against Tutsis in 1994. Whole family was killed. And after that, she couldn't talk for 17 years. It was just a trauma response. But then one day in church, she suddenly felt God's presence and she got a thought. She knew it was not her thought, and it was from God and it said, "My son was killed too." And she felt just a supernatural sense of his presence and felt his love. And miraculously, after 17 years, she began to talk again. It was a miracle.

Well then a little while later, she began to feel God nudge her to go to the house of the man who had killed her family. And she did not want to do that. "Do you know what he did to me?" But eventually she went, started a relationship with this man who had killed her whole family. They went through a Christian reconciliation process that focuses on how Jesus paid the price for every sin, even genocide, and the perpetrators confess their sins and seek to give restitution in the ways that they can. And then they worked through the long, painful, difficult process of reconciliation. And as she told us this story, the man who had killed her whole family was standing right next to her nodding in agreement saying, Yep, it's true. Through Jesus, we have been reconciled."

And now she's a leader in her village doing reconciliation work between all the different tribes so that it will never happen again. And you would never know that she spent 17 years of her life not speaking because she's incredibly articulate. And she said, "Because of Jesus, I'm leaving my past behind." Now, she still has pain and loss of course, but she has seen Jesus bring resurrections out of all that death. He pursued her in her pain and doubt. He got very personal. So she experienced his love deep down in a supernatural way. And He empowered her potential, making her a leader that's making sure it never happens again. And if Jesus can do that miracle for her, then what can He do with your impossible?

It is significant that Jesus' wounds remain even after he is raised from the dead. They don't go away. And when he says, "Touch these wounds," He's saying, "See how much I love you, how much I want a relationship with you." There is nothing stronger than his love. His love shattered the shackles of death and it will shatter every shackle in your life and mine.

Because see, Easter doesn't mean hard things won't happen. Easter says, "Even if, he still is." Even if the worst happens, he still is resurrection, still is victory, still is life. He is still with you and for you. He still is stronger than whatever impossible we face. He still is the one who

turns despair to dancing, bored to brave, bland to big, fearful to ferocious. Even if the worst thing happens, He still is risen yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Even if, He is still risen. Indeed. And that is our hope. Amen?

Amen.

So Jesus, thank you that you receive us in our doubts and meet us there and do not scorn us or shame us, but you convince us. So Lord, whether we don't know you at all or whether we followed you for decades, but still live like we doubt you're real, meet us in our doubts, show us that you're real, change us and then send us into the world to bring your healing wherever we go. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What is the closest that you have come to going through what Thomas went through?
- When was a time Jesus was real to you? Explain.

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing Group Prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.