

2021-04-11 Faith and resurrection

What do you believe and why?

Let's start off with some voting. Who believes...

...that today is Sunday?

...that the earth is flat?

...that $2+2=5$?

...that King Alfred the Great died in 899?

...that a tomato is a fruit?

...that Sydney is the capital of Australia?

...that the AstraZeneca Oxford vaccine is safe?

...that we should impose sanctions on Myanmar?

...that I'm wearing socks?

...that you're alive?

There are millions of things that each of us believe and act on every day. Some things we feel pretty certain about - and for those things we say "I know...", other things we are less sure of and might say "I think...", and other things are less certain still, and we might say something like "I suspect..."

But it what we believe really matters. What we believe about the world, about other people and about ourselves has a big impact on the way we feel, what we do, and how we live.

We see from the gospel accounts, and the testimony of history, that difference the belief that Jesus is alive made to his followers. From a small, fearful group, hiding away, they became a group of bold, joyful evangelists, fearlessly sharing their conviction that Jesus is the Saviour and Jesus is alive, even when persecuted and threatened with death. Our beliefs make a big difference.

But how do we come to believe what we believe? Perhaps we can go back to our earlier questions. Why do you believe...

...that today is Sunday? Maybe because you had become convinced that yesterday was Saturday and that you had only been asleep for one night and not several, or maybe it says 'Sunday' on your mobile phone

...that the earth is not flat? Maybe because you've seen the satellite pictures, know of people who have sailed around the world, or you believe the testimony of the astronauts who have seen the earth from above?

...that $2+2$ doesn't equal 5? Because you've been told by teachers? Because you can check on your own fingers? Because you just *know*?!

We could carry on. There are lots of reasons we believe the things we do: because we trust the people who have told us, because of our own experience, because the belief makes sense of everything else we know.

And sometimes we believe – or disbelieve – things because of our desires. We might want to believe that we are better than someone else at something because it makes us feel better about ourselves. We might want to believe something because it fits in with everything else we believe.

The early Christians did not believe because they wanted to believe. They didn't believe just because it was an inspiring story. They believed because their encounter with the risen Christ was such an overwhelming experience that they were forced to believe in spite of everything they actually thought.

It seems likely that Thomas' disbelief was driven more by his emotions than by his mind. Having missed the appearance of the risen Christ to the other disciples that first Sunday, he seems to take a reasonable – almost scientific – stance. OK, you claim to have seen him, and I will only believe if I see him, too, and also can check out that it is not a ghost or hallucination, by touching him. But Thomas' attitude is betrayed by his words. He says not that

he *cannot* believe without this evidence, but that he *will not* believe. And in the original account he even uses a double negative to make his point; I will definitely not believe unless...

Of course, we should not be too hard on Thomas, particularly remembering what he – and the other disciples – had recently been through. He seems from the gospel accounts to be somewhat melancholic at the best of times, and maybe following the horrors of the week before, he is maybe now in the depths of depression. There is a lot going on for Thomas, and so for all of us.

Belief if not just about the head, it is also about the heart. Even when faced with very strongest evidence for something some people will just not believe. And that is because beliefs can fundamentally impact our lives. It is not just about what we hold in our heads, but how we live our lives.

The Christian faith claims to be more than a set of beliefs – intellectual propositions to which we are asked to assent. When the Bible speaks of believing in God it is not about merely acknowledging of his existence. James make the point that even the demons believe this – and shudder! Our beliefs should drive our whole lives.

When I believe that my SatNav has the correct route to get me somewhere I've not been before, and will not take me off the edge of a cliff, I put my faith in the directions, and trust that I will reach my destination. Biblical faith is that sort of faith; it always demands a response and makes a difference.

When Jesus appears to Thomas, he is gentle and gracious. Jesus climbs down into the pit of his unbelief to lift him out to the freedom of faith. In the original, he tells Thomas not to stop doubting but to stop being unbelieving. Having doubts is part and parcel of faith and the story of many heroes of faith both in the Bible and in more recent history. Doubt is almost a corollary of faith. To have faith does not mean to be without doubt, or to have 100% intellectual conviction. To have faith means to decide – even in the midst of doubt – to live and act on the basis that Jesus is alive and that the Bible is true.

The challenge that Jesus gives to Thomas is to take the step from being an unbeliever to being a believer. These are the two options that each of us get to choose from.

Everybody lives by faith. The only difference is in the object of that faith. Christians put their faith in God and His Word, while others put their faith in themselves.

Putting our faith in ourselves inevitably leads to failure and disappointment. Belief in the risen Jesus on the other hands unlocks eternal life and then releases to us the life-transforming power of his resurrection, transforming fear and hopelessness to the peace which passes all understanding and the joyful conviction that we are saved by God through Jesus.

We each believe millions of things, and need to in order to live. But the most important is whether or not we believe that Jesus is our Lord and our God, and by believing we are saved.