

4. Seeing is believing

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 July 2010

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer before we begin now. Our gracious God, we know that by nature we are dead in trespasses and sins, and yet you have had mercy upon us.

And for those who are believers, you have made us alive together with Christ. And therefore we ask you, dear Father, to stir up more strongly within us the life that already you have placed within, that you'll bring us to life more and more, that you'll tune our ears to hear your word and to rejoice in it.

And we pray therefore that you will strengthen all of us so that we might love you and serve you and delight in you and be better equipped to pass on the message of the good news.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well friends, perhaps you'd turn with me please to John's Gospel, chapter 20, which you'll find on page 906 in our church Bibles.

And this morning I want to ask the simple question, what is a believer, according to the teaching of the evangelist John?

[1 : 30] What is a believer? If you're here this morning as somebody who is not a believer, you will know that that is a very important question. And if you are a believer, I hope that John's distinctive teaching on what it means to be a believer will be a source of revival and fresh strength to you, rather like a draft of cold water on a hot afternoon.

Of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, John is the real expert on belief. You might call him the world's leading authority on belief and unbelief.

Not that it's unimportant, of course, to Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's very important to them. But let me give you an interesting statistic. In the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, combined, put together, there are about 20 uses of the word belief.

Whereas in John's Gospel alone, the word occurs nearly 60 times. So it's one of the dominant themes of John's Gospel in a way that it's not in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Now in John chapter 20, I'd like to take as a starting point, verse 29. We're heading really for verse 31 and we'll spend quite a bit of time there. But I want to start with verse 29.

[2 : 49] Jesus said to him, that's Thomas, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

And this little section, verse 24 to verse 31, is the point in John's Gospel where the evangelist really begins to press his message home. Let me read verses 30 and 31 again.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So there in verse 31, John tells us in the plainest language what is the purpose of his book. He's written these things, he says, so that the reader may become a believer in Jesus.

Now verse 31 is a very striking verse because in it, John tells us his agenda very clearly. His purpose in writing is to persuade the reader. John is of course a careful historian, he's keen to get his facts down accurately, but he's also very interested in how the reader responds to his message.

[4 : 07] He's not like a dry old history professor from the university. Do forgive me if you're a dry old history professor just for a moment because I'm going to quote you. Imagine the dry old history professor who's just come out of the university library covered with dust and he toddles across the street to the lecture theatre and he says this to his students.

I want you to know that I've just completed my book on 16th century Scotland and in this book I have sought to be no more than the analytical observer of people and events.

Now, my dear young people, how you read these events is of course entirely up to you. I deal in facts, my dears, but you must be your own interpreters of these facts.

Now, John is the complete opposite of that. He is of course dealing in facts. He's recording faithfully the things that Jesus said and did, but he is not saying to the reader, you must make of all this what you will.

He's pressing upon the reader that the only right way to respond to everything that he's written here is to believe in Jesus. Now, just notice this.

[5 : 18] It has taken the apostle 20 chapters to get to the point of saying what he says there in our verse 31. He's not saying to the reader, just become a believer for no good reason because it's the only good thing to do.

Not at all. He's carefully building up his case, his evidence, over 20 chapters. John the evangelist knows very well that people don't become believers unless they have been presented with a strong case.

So by the time we get to the end of chapter 21, we have the cumulative weight of 20 chapters of evidence upon which to base our response. Now, if you're not a Christian, but you're beginning to think that you ought to become a Christian, what you need to do, what you have to do, is carefully to weigh the evidence of these 20 chapters.

The fact is that people don't normally become Christian believers through some blinding, overpowering, instantaneous revelation. That may happen very occasionally, but it's not the normal way.

Most of us who are Christians would say that it took us months, perhaps even years, before we really got to the point of being convinced and persuaded that Jesus is the truth.

[6 : 32] And the Apostle John knows this. He recognizes it. That's why he presents his readers with 20 painstakingly written chapters before he says, I've written all this down so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

So let's notice John's understanding of how people become Christians. It's really very simple. Evidence, says John, leads to belief, and belief leads to life.

Now once you've got that simple idea into your head, you've understood the principle on which John has written his Gospel. John is placing before the reader the evidence about Jesus.

Once we've carefully thought about this evidence, we shall come to believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. And once we have become believers, says John, we shall have eternal life.

Now look at verse 31, because that's where John states this very principle. Verse 31, these things are written down. All these excerpts from Jesus' life and teaching are now written down and they act as evidence.

[7 : 43] Once you've considered them, you will come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and once you believe, you will have eternal life in Christ's name. So that's John's way of teaching the Gospel.

Evidence, he says, leads to belief and belief leads to life. Now let's hold that simple pattern in our minds and we'll see how John works this out in the four episodes recorded here in chapter 20.

We'll call this the source of believing. Not source as in horseradish sauce, but source with an R, source as in origin, the source of believing.

So first let's look at verses 1 to 10, which record the discovery, the initial discovery, that the tomb of Jesus was empty of a corpse. Mary Magdalene is the one who goes to the tomb very early, verse 1, while it's still dark.

She discovers that the big stone has been taken away from the entrance to the tomb. So she then runs to find Simon Peter and John. John is the one who describes himself here as the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.

[8 : 49] He doesn't actually name himself, but it is John. And she reports the disappearance of Jesus' corpse. So Peter and John set off running, running together, as verse 4 puts it, but John records that he was the one who got there first.

I guess he was younger than Peter. He'd perhaps eaten fewer Glasgow salads than Peter, and therefore he was in better shape physically, so he gets there first. Then, verse 5, stooping to look in, John saw the discarded grave clothes lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Peter runs up a few moments later, and perhaps a bolder man by nature, he goes right into the tomb, which was probably a small cave cut in the hillside. He also saw the grave clothes, but in addition he saw the cloth which had been wrapped around Jesus' head.

And then, verse 8, John himself goes in, perhaps his courage is raised when he sees Peter being prepared to go in. And, look at the end of verse 8 here, he saw the evidence and he believed.

Now that's the key thing John is saying here. He saw and believed. I saw and I believed. And in verse 9, he clarifies it further for us. He says in verse 9, you mustn't think that we believed Jesus was raised because we knew our Old Testament scriptures.

[10 : 10] Not at all. We hadn't understood the Old Testament scriptures which prophesied the resurrection of the Messiah. We were biblically clueless. The reason I believed, John is saying, is that I saw.

I saw the evidence. There were the grave clothes and there was no body in them. It was the evidence of my eyes that produced belief in me. That's what he means when he says I saw and believed.

Now just notice this word saw because it occurs again and again. verse 1, Mary saw that the stone had been taken away. Verse 5, John saw the linen cloths.

Verse 6, Peter saw the linen cloths. And then verse 8, John saw and believed. So John is presenting us here with the evidence of eyewitness testimony and that is why it is reliable.

We saw these things. That's just the same in the next paragraph, verses 11 to 18, where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus. Look at verse 12. Sorry, verse 11 first.

[11 : 16] As she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb. And then verse 12, she saw two angels. Verse 14, she turned around and saw Jesus standing.

He then reveals his identity to her and in verse 18, in her joy, she goes and finds the others and says to them, I have seen the Lord. It's the same again in verses 19 to 23.

It's now 12 hours later. It's the evening of Easter Sunday. And in verse 19, Jesus comes to the disciples and he says to them, Peace be with you. And then, verse 20, he showed them his hands and side.

In other words, he presented them with evidence that was intended to be seen. Then, verse 20, the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. And then we get, we reach what I think you could call the climax of this whole sequence in verses 24 to 29.

This is really the most persuasive section on seeing and believing because Thomas is so sceptical. Peter and John and Mary were simply clueless.

[12 : 30] You might almost say they were naive. But with Thomas we meet a stubborn resistance. Don't you think that Thomas is a little bit like a Yorkshireman in disguise?

If there was a corner of ancient Israel called Yorkshire, Thomas came from it. I won't attempt a Yorkshire accent because I'm not good at Yorkshire accents, but just look at the way Thomas speaks in verse 25 here.

Imagine the Yorkshire accent. Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

And that is my final statement as I was born in Doncaster. Nobody pulls the wool over the eyes of a Yorkshireman. Do they? So the point that John is making here is very clear.

If a man as hard-boiled as Thomas can be persuaded that Jesus really has been raised from death, then even the most sceptical reader had better do some hard thinking.

[13 : 32] So what happens? Well, a week then passes. Look at verse 26, eight days later. And Jesus comes again. And this time, of course, Thomas is with them. So Jesus says in verse 27, Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands.

So he's inviting Thomas not simply to look but also to touch him. Put your finger here and put out your hand now and place it in my side to feel the place where the spear went in, where there's still a scar.

Do not disbelieve, he says, but believe. So Jesus is urging Thomas to believe on the evidence of his eyes and his fingers, both sight and touch.

Evidence leads to belief. That's John's way of teaching the gospel. And how does the hard-baked Thomas respond at this point? Look at verse 28, my Lord and my God, he says.

In other words, I'm completely convinced you have been raised from death and this proves to me that you're my exalted master, my Lord, and indeed God incarnate. And then Jesus says to him, have you believed because you have seen me?

[14 : 45] Answer, yes. Of course, seeing is the very thing that has led to believing. It's what the whole chapter has been about. Mary saw, Peter saw, John saw, the disciples gathered together saw, and now the most compelling witness, because he was the most stubborn, also saw and could do nothing else but believe because the evidence placed before him was irresistible.

John is saying, we believe that Jesus really rose from the dead because we have seen him and have touched him. Now, friends, just think history for a moment.

Think of the centuries that are rolling backwards and forwards. Think back over the last 20 centuries. You know your history. Queen Victoria, Britannia rules the waves, George III, Queen Anne died in Julie, 17, something like that, yeah, early 18th century.

Julie's a historian so she knows these things. Queen Anne, sorry Julie, I didn't mean to do that, Charles I, James VI to you and the first to me, Mary Queen of Scots, think of her, Robert the Bruce, King David, King Malcolm, Macbeth, Duncan, Dark Ages, Venerable Bede, Constantine, the Roman Emperor, Nero, that brigand, Tiberius Caesar, 30 AD, we're back into the first century, 20 centuries of history quickly done.

So there we are, think of those 20 centuries. Now Jesus is speaking to Thomas in 30 AD. Have you believed because you have seen me? Answer, yes.

[16 : 23] Now John is writing up his account of all these things at least 50 years later, probably in the year 80 or even 85 AD, a lot later when John was an old man.

Peter was long dead, Paul was dead, so was James, John's brother, probably all the other apostles had died and also most of the other people who had seen the resurrected Jesus had also died by that time.

John was virtually the last in his generation. Was it possible then in 85 AD to become a believer? Was it possible to become a believer without seeing the risen Jesus, without being able to touch his hands and his side and prove that it really was he?

Well, Jesus tells us in the second half of verse 29, his words, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. So Jesus is saying here, remember John is writing in 85 AD, Jesus is saying to John's first readers late in the first century, yes, of course, you can become believers too, without seeing and touching me.

In fact, he says, there is a great blessing reserved for those who have not seen and yet have believed. There's no disadvantage for those who have not seen. Now that principle, of course, is still fully operative for us today.

[17 : 47] We too can believe without seeing and touching the risen Jesus. Now, you might want to say to me, but Edward, aren't you contradicting yourself here?

Haven't you just said a few moments ago that it's evidence, the evidence of sight and touch that leads to belief? So how can we in 2010 believe? In the nature of the case, we can't see and touch the risen Jesus.

We're 2,000 years too late. How can our belief be based on the evidence of sight and touch? We cannot see and touch. Well, the answer to this is straightforward.

Our belief today is based on the evidence of sight and touch. Not our seeing and touching, but the seeing and touching of Peter and John and Mary and Thomas and all those others back in 30 AD.

Of course, you and I cannot have the evidence of our own eyes and fingers, but we have the reliable evidence of their eyes and their fingers. And this is exactly what John goes on to say in the next two verses, 30 and 31.

[18 : 53] Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you, my readers now, later on, may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So, our belief today, our possibility of being believers today is based on the reliable testimony, the eyewitness testimony of John and the other apostles.

John has written the foregoing 20 chapters so that we of later generations who cannot see and touch can still become believers because our belief is anchored in the rock-solid and truthful testimony of those who did see and touch the risen Jesus.

We, therefore, can be convinced of the resurrection of Jesus because they were convinced of it. It's the evidence of their eyes that led to their believing and it's the evidence of their eyes that leads to our believing today.

So, there's our first point. The source of believing is the eyewitness testimony of the original disciples. Now, I've got two more points to bring to you.

[20 : 09] I'll be brief on the second so as to allow a bit longer for the third point. So, here's the second. The content of believing. Let's notice the content of believing which comes halfway through verse 31.

These things are written so that you may believe what? Well, here is the core content of Christian belief. So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Now, just notice how this phrase occurs in the whole flow of verses 30 and 31. Jesus, says, verse 30, did many other signs. By signs, John means miracles that act as signposts to the identity of Jesus.

Just to give one or two examples, think of the feeding of the 5,000 people. One picnic basket's worth of fish and bread are multiplied so greatly that they feed the hunger of 5,000 and more people.

That's a sign that the one who creates a meal for 5,000 is the creator of everything. or take the last and the greatest of the signs, the sign of Jesus' resurrection, which indicates that his life is indestructible and therefore divine.

[21 : 24] The resurrection of Jesus is not some opaque, incomprehensible event. It's a sign of Jesus' divinity and power. It signposts us to his real identity.

And this, says John, is the reason why I've written down all the signs that I've recorded in my book to reveal the true identity of Jesus, so that you, my readers, should come to believe that he truly is the Christ and the Son of God.

The Christ, of course, is the anointed king of Old Testament expectation, the king of David's line, whose rule and reign is everlasting. And the Son of God is as much fully God as is God the Father.

Not a diluted form of God, but God revealing himself fully in human form, a man, a human being who reveals the full and true nature of God the Father and who accomplishes God's will and purpose which is to save his people.

To become a believer on the basis of what John has written in his book is not just some vague matter of saying, oh yes, now I believe or I'm a believer.

[22 : 36] The Christian believer is the one who is able to say specifically, I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In other words, Christian belief has content and definition.

It's not vague. You know how you sometimes hear people saying, oh, I believe there's something up there. You've heard that. That really means I'm inclined to believe that perhaps God does exist after all.

But believing in the existence of God never made anybody a Christian. The core of Christian belief is all about Jesus. And John defines it for us here in verse 31.

To be a Christian is to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. So that's the content of believing as John teaches it to us here. Well now thirdly, let's look at the goal of believing.

And there it is at the end of verse 31. And that by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, by believing you may have life in Christ's name.

[23 : 40] That's the goal. So John is not teaching that belief in Christ is an end in itself. It's a wonderful thing of course, when any person comes to the point of saying I believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

It's a miracle, a miracle of God's divine power when anybody comes to that point because it shows that their eyes have been opened to the truth about Jesus. But it's not the end of the story.

God's desire, God's purpose for you and me is not simply that we should come to believe the truth about Jesus. His purpose is that we should then finally enjoy eternal life with him, which indeed begins in this life, but has its fullness in the life to come.

Now that prospect of enjoying eternal life with God the Father and the Lord Jesus is very wonderful for two reasons. First, it's very wonderful in itself.

Just think of what the Bible teaches about eternal life. The Bible tells us that to enjoy eternal life with God is to live in a new realm altogether after our life in this world is over.

[24 : 51] And this new realm described as the new heavens and the new earth is not like the old realm that we live in today. This old realm is a pretty unhappy place characterized by, let me give you a few D's, disaster, disease, depression, defeat, disillusionment, despair, and death.

I'm sure you could invent a few more D's that would all be equally true. Whereas the new world, which God is going to reveal, has none of these things in it at all. No tears, no mourning, no pain, no death.

Just think of that friends, no death, no funerals, no fatal accidents, no wars, no hatred, no murder or violence or bloodshed, no deceit, no poverty, no famine, earthquake, tsunami, no adultery, no robbery, no fear, no frustration, nothing in short which demeans and diminishes human life and creates misery and wretchedness.

I imagine that we will weep tears of joy when we are able to say goodbye to all that. The human race is deeply disfigured by suffering and sin and it is our endemic rebellion against God that causes the suffering and the sin.

But the new world, the new creation will be perfect. Above all, those who inhabit it, those who belong to it, will be restored in our relationship to God as our true father.

[26 : 26] We shall be reconciled to him. We shall be with him. No longer will his judgment and curse hang over us. We shall be with him, we shall see him, we shall talk with him and he with us.

And we shall be with the Lord Jesus as we are with each other here today. With him. We shall be able, just think of this, we shall be able, each of us personally, to thank him for what he has done for us.

And we shall never forget what he has done for us because the scars of his suffering will still be there to be seen in his hands and feet. And the relationship that we shall enjoy with all the other redeemed people in the new world will be absolutely perfect.

Can you imagine that? Perfect relationships with everybody. No suspicion, no misunderstandings, no mistrust, no lying, no envies and jealousies, just pure delight in each other's company as we share the wonderful realm together and learn to explore together and understand and praise the perfection of our Father God and of the Lord Jesus and of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament doesn't tell us a huge amount about eternal life, but it does give us a lot of little snippets of information, moments of revelation, so as to encourage us and help us persevere in the midst of our struggles as we struggle away in the old world.

[27 : 51] But we can be certain of this, that this life, life in the old world, is the preliminary and eternal life is the real thing.

This life is the first episode, you might say, but eternal life is the real thing. It's eternal life for which God has made us. And this fact is so much misunderstood.

Have you noticed how people speak of the afterlife? Is there an afterlife? What kind of a wretched word is the word afterlife? Just think of it. The implication of the word afterlife is that this life is the real thing, the important thing.

But what comes after is just like an echo, a little consolation prize, a bit like the ninth infusion of a Chinese tea bag. So weak as to be not worth bothering about.

Afterlife, my foot, who wants the ninth infusion of a Chinese tea bag? life. It's this life which is the frail end of things, characterized by weakness and tears and shortness, 70 or 80 years and death.

[28 : 59] But the life of the world to come is real life, life with God, and it's everlasting. So there's the first thing we're to understand about life as the Bible teaches it.

It's wonderful in itself. Those who believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God will certainly enjoy this eternal life. So friends, let's develop an appetite for it.

Are you hungry for it? There are good ways of developing an appetite, whetting an appetite for eternal life. Let's make use of them. But now secondly, this eternal life is not only wonderful in itself, it's doubly wonderful because of the way John contrasts it with its opposite.

Throughout his Gospel, John is contrasting eternal life with death, eternal death under the condemnation of God, the righteous condemnation of God.

So for example, in chapter 3 verse 36, John writes this, whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

[30 : 08] In other words, to remain an unbeliever is to be still under the wrath of God, to be debarred from eternal life, to be unsaved.

John's Gospel, of course, is in line with the whole Bible, telling us plainly that in the end, all people who have ever lived will belong to one of two groups, and two groups only, the saved and the lost, those who have eternal life, and those who are condemned by God righteously, because they have refused the Savior.

Now, if everyone were saved, if everyone were able to enjoy eternal life, eternal life would still be wonderful, but it's even more wonderful for Christian believers, because it's not given to all people, and those who do enjoy it don't deserve it at all.

It's a free gift to us. So if you and I are people who believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, when we finally step into the new creation, we shall know that this bliss is not ours because we've done well, or been good, or tried hard, it's ours purely because of the goodness and kindness of God towards us.

And we will know then, in a way that we can only dimly perceive now, what we have been rescued from. We shall understand then that we've been rescued from death, eternal death, and condemnation and ruin in hell.

[31 : 39] That's why eternal life will be doubly wonderful for us. Yes, wonderful in itself, but also wonderful because of what we have been rescued from. You might even say trebly wonderful because we don't deserve it at all.

So do you see what I mean when I say that believing in Jesus is not an end in itself? The goal of believing is not believing. The goal of believing is eternal life.

And that's just what verse 31 is saying, that by believing you may have life in his name. Now friends, the Apostle John, our Apostle, our friend, it's good to think of the Apostles as our friends and teachers.

The Apostle John is very serious about getting this message into our heads and into our hearts because this message about eternal life through Jesus is quite the opposite of what the non-Christian world believes.

the non-Christian world believes that this life, this 70 or 80 years, is the only life there is. The non-Christian believes that this life is a bit like one of those rockets that gets fired off on the 5th of November.

[32 : 50] It rises up in a brief blaze of glory but quickly peters out into the darkness. Now if that is the truth, then of course death is to be very greatly feared.

If the non-Christian account of this life is true, death is to be feared. Death stalks us like a man-eating tiger. We might manage to keep it away for a certain while.

We might manage to prolong our lives by a few years by giving up eating saturated fats, stopping smoking, going jogging, taking up badminton, keeping our brains active with Scrabble and Sudoku.

We smile with pleasure, don't we, when our friends say to us, you're 73 years old, are you? You could knock me down with a feather, I wouldn't have thought you were a day over 60. But the person who is not a Christian is afraid.

He looks into the mirror and he sees how he's changing. The firm, chubby complexion of youth is fast disappearing. He sees the shape of the skull beneath the skin and he's afraid.

[33 : 57] But that non-Christian way of thinking is so pervasive, it is so dominant in our society that it begins to creep into Christian minds as well.

It seeps in like fog under a barn door. It gets into our systems so that even Christians can be afraid, even Christians can fail to grasp the message of John chapter 20 verse 31.

To become a Christian, to start believing that Jesus is the Christ, the risen Christ, whose resurrection we will share with him, and the Son of God. To start believing is to move decisively and permanently from the realm of death to the realm and rule of eternal life.

If you're not yet a Christian, if you're holding Jesus Christ at arm's length, you must reckon with these things. Don't trifle with Jesus Christ. He laid down his life so as to save yours.

That's how precious you are to him. Don't trifle with the message of the Bible. This is the book of books. Its message is the truth. To come to Jesus, to submit to him as your king, is to begin the adventure of eternal life, even in the midst of life in this old world.

[35 : 13] And for those who are Christians, how deeply persuaded are you by John? Do you believe what John says here in verse 31? If you're a bit wobbly in your faith, why not this very afternoon, have lunch first, but this very afternoon, sit down and write out verses 30 and 31 on a piece of card and stick it up over the kitchen sink and read it and re-read it.

I assume you do the washing up at least once a day. Stick it over the kitchen sink and read it until by next Sunday you've really understood the purpose of John the evangelist in his gospel. Because the purpose of John's gospel reveals the purpose of Jesus' coming into the world, namely, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Let us pray together. Thank you.