

## John 20 vs 24-31 Jesus' encounter with Thomas

### Introduction

We tend to assume the boundaries between death and life are always clear. Yet in the real world there are some extraordinary examples of when the boundaries get blurred –take Lorna Baillie's story, for example. Lorna was declared dead after she suffered a massive heart attack. She astonished doctors and her grieving family when she suddenly came back to life. On Sunday 10 February 2013 she collapsed at home late that afternoon around 4:30pm. Paramedics battled to resuscitate her before taking her to Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary where, at 8.45pm, a doctor told the family she had died. Leanne, her daughter, said: 'His words were that she was technically dead, but they had to wait until she had stopped breathing before they could pronounce her medically dead.' The family had gathered around her hospital bed to say their goodbyes after doctors told them the 49-year-old grandmother was 'technically dead', being kept artificially alive only by a combination of adrenaline, electric shocks and CPR. It was then, 45 minutes later, that Mrs Baillie's disabled husband John, 58, whispered 'I love you' to his wife. As John, his son and three daughters sat beside Mrs Baillie, they were surprised to see her colour gradually improve. A nurse present in the room assured them this was a normal side effect of prolonged emergency treatment. And when Mrs Baillie's eyelids flickered and she appeared to squeeze her eldest daughter Leanne's hand, the nurse again assured the family that 'involuntary movements' were to be expected. Unconvinced, the family demanded the nurse call in a doctor, who found a pulse and rushed Mrs Baillie to intensive care. Daughter Leanne Porteous, 31, said: 'I asked the nurse if it was normal that she squeezed my hand and that she had opened her eyes and she said it was. 'We are so close as a family and we are not the kind of people to just give up. We were telling my mum to be strong. I kept saying to her, "Come back, Mum, come back". "At one point my dad said, "Lorna come back, I love you," and then –just like that – she was there again.' Two weeks later, the former auxiliary nurse from Prestonpans, East Lothian, has even managed some 'high-fives' after sitting up in bed and communicating with her family [*Daily Mail* 27 February 2013]. Family life for them will be very precious in the coming months after such a remarkable restoration to life.

### 1. The indisputable fact –Jesus had died (John 19:33-35)

<sup>33</sup> *But when they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.*

<sup>34</sup> *Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.* <sup>35</sup> *The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.*

(a) **The death of Jesus** This story of Lorna Baillie, though remarkable, is still much less of a miracle than the amazing events of two thousand years ago in Jerusalem. Jesus' disciples and others of His followers were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and that, despite His words to the contrary, He would transform their country and as a result the occupying Roman army would have to leave for good. On many occasions Jesus patiently explained that His mission included death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection (for example, Mark 8:31-32; Mark 9:9-10; Mark 10: 32-34). Yet they did not listen, instead filtering out the things that did not fit with their existing theological worldview. How much of that was intentional and how much simply 'happened' is impossible for us to discern all these years later. After all, this is exactly what we do in everyday life. A scientist, for example, hearing a colleague propose a new hypothesis will immediately evaluate what is being suggested in the light of existing knowledge and personal scientific experience. What is guaranteed is that anyone proposing something that challenges an assumed standard belief or theory will have a hard time winning over the doubters – and often with good reasons. Even at the level of conversations with family and friends we interpret what they say in the light of both our knowledge of them and our wider experience of life in the world, in order to contextualise this communication. For example, if a phone line is poor and we can only make out snatches of the conversation, we try and make sense of the rest by 'filling in the blanks' and hoping we

have compensated for the missing words. If the individual concerned is someone very close to us then there is a good chance we might be successful, but if the caller is a complete stranger who is giving some detailed factual information then it might be an impossible task.

Two thousand years ago there was no communication problem. The disciples of Jesus like everyone else knew that the one they had pinned their hopes on was dead. This fact comes out very clearly in the conversation of the two people with whom Jesus walked on Easter Sunday afternoon on the road to Emmaus. <sup>17</sup> *He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, **their faces downcast.*** <sup>18</sup> *One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' <sup>19</sup> 'What things?' he asked. 'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. <sup>20</sup> The chief priests and our rulers handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified Him; <sup>21</sup> but **we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place*** (Luke 24:17-21). The basis for their acknowledgement of Jesus' death was the eyewitness reports that confirmed it. John 19:33-35 gives the details: *But when they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. <sup>34</sup> Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. <sup>35</sup> The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.* It is not possible to be certain with the medical explanation here, though two theories appear to be plausible. What we do know, though, is that Romans soldiers were experts in executing people and knew whether someone had died or not. They were very surprised that Jesus had died so quickly so in order to check one of them thrust a spear into His body possibly piercing the pericardium which surrounds the heart. If this is correct it is possible that the fluid of the pericardium and His blood came out together. Another possible explanation for the eyewitness observation was suggested by American doctors who performed tests on cadavers whose chests had been severely injured but without penetration. In each case haemorrhagic fluid, up to two litres of it, gathered between the pleura lining the rib cage and the lining of the lung. This separates the clearer serum at the top, the deep red layer at the bottom. On this scenario, if the chest cavity was pierced at the bottom, both layers would flow out [for further details see D.A Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 623]. What is abundantly clear is that the observers of that scene had no doubts that Jesus was dead.

(b) **The burial of Jesus** The other fact from that first Good Friday was that Jesus was buried in a tomb. John 19:38-42 records the names of the prominent individuals who took responsibility for the burial and the known location of the tomb where the burial took place. <sup>38</sup> *Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. <sup>39</sup> He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about thirty-five kilograms. <sup>40</sup> Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. <sup>41</sup> At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. <sup>42</sup> Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was near by, they laid Jesus there.* Mark records the same details but notes, in addition, that *Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where He was laid* (Mark 15:47). It is therefore, abundantly clear to everyone in Jerusalem that weekend that Jesus had been certified dead, a diagnosis confirmed by the actions of the Roman soldier. Once that was established the body was released for burial and placed in the family tomb of a prominent member of the Jewish Parliament, the Sanhedrin.

## 2. The Resurrection of Jesus

John 20 records the reaction of Mary Magdalene, Peter and John and then on the Sunday evening that of ten disciples who met with Jesus in a house where they were keeping a low profile. It was an extraordinary turn of events. Other Gospel accounts have a slightly different emphasis but in John 20 the author concentrates on Jesus' meeting with Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning and then with Thomas one week later on the following Sunday evening. John 20:16-18 records the interaction of Jesus with Mary once she recognised who it was speaking to her in the Garden. *Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned towards Him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher').<sup>17</sup> Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. **Go instead to My brothers and tell them,** "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God."<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that He had said these things to her.* The question for the ten disciples and later Thomas was how willing were they to accept that Mary had met with Jesus and trust her that Jesus was alive again. If the story was untrue it would never have been written that way. In that culture a woman's witness to an event was deemed of significantly less value than a man's account. God took a dim view of such prejudice and allowed the first witnesses of the resurrection to be women. However, these men were very cautious about what they were told until they met with Jesus personally on Easter Sunday evening. This fact does not portray them in the best light in that culture, though their initial scepticism does accrue merit in our culture as that would be a natural reaction today to such a claim. Only after their personal encounter with Jesus did they accept wholeheartedly that He was alive again and risen from the dead. This quite clearly stemmed from the fact that they were totally certain that Jesus was dead. Yet a perfectly healthy person stood before them on Easter Sunday evening. John 20:20 records that: *the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.* Unfortunately one of the disciples, Thomas, was absent that evening. Would he accept their witness? It is a reminder that each person's conversion is personal. We cannot believe for someone else. Have you put your faith and trust in Him?

## 3. The response of Thomas (John 20:24-31)

<sup>24</sup>Now Thomas (called Didymus), 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 it."<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."<sup>30</sup>Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

(a) **Thomas missed the blessing** Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came (John 20:24). Where did Thomas' biggest problem start? He had absented himself from meeting with the other followers of Jesus. Had he been there on Easter Sunday evening then his week would have been a great blessing. Instead it was a thoroughly miserable and irritating seven days. Other people were saying Jesus is alive! Thomas, a sceptic by nature, was anything but convinced. Dead people don't come back to life? Unless I can touch it, taste it, see it and hear it...I will not believe. Is that the kind of person you are? Deep down trusting nothing and no-one to avoid being disappointed and let down? You've

been hurt and your trust betrayed before and to avoid that happening again you've been on your guard? People do let us down and our hopes can be dashed. Sometimes when life is tough and we are feeling very low as Christians we may be tempted to give church a miss for a week, or two or too many weeks... the very place where God might meet with us in blessing and restoring and strengthening grace and we miss out by our absence. It was us not God who had moved out of the place of potential blessing? Have you allowed things to slip and your attendance at God's house and maybe at a house group that you had benefited from so much have been neglected. If that is your issue God's message to you this morning is simply this: don't be like Thomas and miss out on the blessings I have for you? Make a point of putting Me first, says God, and don't neglect your most important spiritual priorities. As your heavenly Father I have blessings to give you, but you were not there to receive them at the time I made them available to you. Make a conscious choice not to let that happen again.

(b) **Thomas doubted the resurrection** *"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 it."* (John 20:25). 'When in a hole stop digging!' we know it but do we practise it? Thomas put up the defences to justify not believing in the resurrection of Jesus. I want proof. I want to see the evidence. No-one will pull the wool over my eyes! Thomas of whom we know only a little was a loyal but pessimistic disciple of Jesus. He was of the 'cup's half empty' temperament. In John 11 when other disciples were worried about Jesus going to Jerusalem for the festival in case there were problems, Thomas was willing to support Jesus' decision, but his reasoning was hardly likely to encourage the others. John 11:16 states: *Then Thomas called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with Him.* Maybe Thomas was more perceptive in some respects than the others, certainly he appears to have grasped before the others that Jesus was going to die in Jerusalem. However, he had absolutely no comprehension of any notion of resurrection –at least in the sense that Jesus was meaning with reference to Himself. Are you a sceptic by nature? Jesus doesn't mind our questions, but are you willing to look at the extraordinary evidence for the resurrection. No disciple had expected it. They had thought it was all over. The tomb had been guarded by Roman soldiers so the body could not have been stolen. The disciples had not imagined it. Men and women at all times of day or evening; in a variety of geographical locations they met with the risen Jesus and saw their lives transformed. Most of them were willing to pay the price of losing their lives rather than deny the reality of what they had seen and heard. The disciples had been a group of terrified people in Jerusalem, but through meeting with the risen Jesus and being empowered by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when the Christian Church began, they became bold and courageous and even their enemies *took note that these men [Peter and John] had been with Jesus* (Acts 4:13). A challenge would be given by Jesus to Thomas. Sometimes He needs to challenge us as well. God was at work in a mighty way, but how often God's own people miss what He is doing –not intentionally, but because their (our?) expectations of how God might work are different to how He has actually chosen to work in a given situation. Thank God Thomas was willing to meet with the other disciples that second Sunday evening. His decision to keep away cost him a week of blessing. How often people miss out on blessings by delaying committing their lives to Christ? Sometimes we who have professed faith do the same as believers when we struggle to open ourselves to trust the Lord with some aspect of our lives. Has God to speaking to you about something –he calls us to trust Him to take care of our future and to guide us into the paths He has chosen for us. Do you need to take a step of faith today? Thomas' good choice that day would transform his life and will, no doubt in time, also transform yours and mine as well when we live in the way God has planned and prepared for us.

(c) **Thomas acknowledged Jesus as Lord** *Thomas said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)* A week later (than Easter Sunday) Thomas had been persuaded to meet up with the other disciples. What a tragedy if he could not have been bothered. He would have missed out on the greatest day of his life? Thank God that you are here today! God has a message for you like He had for Thomas. However, Thomas had to take the necessary steps of faith –will you do that? <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!"* The key moment was Thomas' willingness to lower the barricade he had built of unbelief. Is there anyone here who entered this morning in that frame of mind? Like Thomas you need to lower the barriers and encounter the risen Jesus, by faith. We can do that by studying the four gospels carefully reading and reflecting on what Jesus has said. We can come to church and hear God's Word expounded and apply it to our own lives; we can attend courses, like Christianity Explored, that allow us time for thought and reflection to look more closely at who Jesus is, why He came and the significance of what He did for your life and mine. Listen to these words from Jesus to Thomas and to us.<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.**"*<sup>30</sup>*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. **The purpose of Jesus' coming and the purpose of the Gospels being written:***<sup>31</sup>*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.* Will you receive the blessing of the salvation Jesus offers to you? Will you as a Christian trust Him with the choices ahead of you in the weeks, months and years to come? Will we as a congregation do that walking by faith and not expect to see everything by sight? I trust we will for Jesus' sake, Amen.