

John 20:19-31 Epistemology

It's difficult to overstate how significant our Gospel text is. Books can be written on the many topics this text informs.

It informs how we view the nature of Christ. He is, as Thomas said in our text, "Lord and God." The Spirit proceeds from him as he gives it to his disciples. And he, exalted and omnipotent, is able to be bodily behind locked doors and upon our altars.

This text informs how we view the Church. Is it a mere man made institution, a club of like minded people, is it run by socioeconomics or politics? Sometimes it seems like it. But "Jesus said, 'Peace be with you, even as the Father sent me, so I am sending you.'" He Calls and He sends His Church. That more might receive the gifts of his work on the Cross and Empty tomb.

Speaking of those gifts, this text is significant for how we view the absolution. "Why does some sinful man stand up there and say 'I' forgive you all your sins?" Well, its because Jesus told his apostles, his Church, to say it. "If *you* forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven, if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." Why? Because God wants law and gospel applied to his people. That you might know the truth, and, when you fall short of that truth to be called to repentance and set free from sin and its consequences.

This text informs how we view the scriptures. Is the Bible just Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth – a set of rules alone or, “These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and by believing have *life* in his name.” Is it a rule book, or a gift that brings *life*?!

This text informs how God deals with doubts. He does not scream at his followers, but gives them what is needed, as we just read the Bible does, to believe. He will break down walls and bring people to faith.

This text informs how we view faith. And this is what I want to spend time on. It’s almost blasphemous to skip over all those other topics. Books and books can be written on these things. But we will focus (and this should be no surprise to you who know my cynical mind) on faith.

We, of course, pick on “Doubting” Thomas but he wasn’t the only one to believe only *after* he saw the Lord. Those 10 other disciples were *afraid* and they, according to Luke’s Gospel, thought the women’s account from the empty tomb was an “idle tale.”

Can you blame them? Imagine how jolting this was for them. And perhaps we don’t give this enough thought - how significant this is to our worldview - you believe a dead person rose again! That’s crazy! I didn’t say it’s untrue. I said it’s crazy!

I dusted off my history and philosophy of science text book. That's right, buckle up, were are going to get nerdy, and talk a bit of epistemology: How do we know what we know? How do we establish whether something is true or not? Answer: It's because we have networks of evidence, we have puzzles, as DeWitt illustrates, of logical pieces that fall together. Some of those pieces are based on empirical evidence, others not so much. And we "smart" modern westerners sit here and think "well, I'm no caveman, I base all my truth on the empirical evidence." And congratulations: you are a liar.

Did you test the tensile strength over time of these beams before coming in here to trust, in faith, (faith is trusting something, afterall) that the ceiling will not fall down? And weigh it against the likelihood of a seismic event? And yet you have faith this ceiling will hold.

You all think the sun will rise in the east tomorrow but you have little empirical evidence for that. You have *circumstantial* evidence: it's risen every other morning in the east. But that in no way means it is true that it will rise that way tomorrow. Ask the chicken who, each day their farmer brings them feed, until the one day the farmer brings an axe. You have faith it will rise tomorrow. And good reason to believe it will. But that's not empirical.

And then we get into elevators and we see a certificate in the plastic holder, and think “Oh yes, this has been serviced, I can trust this, I have faith in this.” And no elevators ever break down, do they?

We talk of love and hate, but tell me, are those observable? And we can get into the resulting actions of love and hate – those are observable, we could even get into dopamine receptors, but tell me, by what philosophical or empirical rule are those the arbiters of what is real or true or accurate? What if someone has a disorder? And who is to say why one person, whom you love, gives you more dopamine than another person when they smile? And yet love is very, very real and true.

And we read our articles written by people you think you can trust for a particular set of non-empirical reasons – you don’t know them. And we see pictures online, but in the age of photoshop and AI, can we even know that those are real? And yet we still make our inferences on non-empirical evidence about others. And we sit and think everyone else is ridiculous to come to some other conclusion on a topic because it is “so obvious and if only there was more common sense around...” And we marvel at our puzzle of truth and reality, and ignore the other pieces shoved under the rug in our cognitive dissonance.

And from Aristotle to Galileo to Newton to Einstein our puzzles of what is true and real and trustworthy assemble and crumble apart when new evidence comes to

light that we can no longer ignore. Like, for example, a dead man, healed and whole and alive again standing in an upper room. That's right, I know this is supposed to be a sermon. But bear with me...

We laugh at Aristotle who thought the earth was the center of the universe and say he and the ancient people just thought that because they were religious bigots. But have you considered that every observable, empirical, phenomenon available to them at the time pointed to the "fact" that the earth was the center? Go out at night and look up. Guess what? The stars go around you. And we think, "but those silly people didn't realize we were spinning at 1000 miles per hour." Really? What empirical observation leads you to believe that? Do you go out and hang on for dear life because we are spinning so fast? Do the birds hovering in the atmosphere start lagging behind? Better back up that claim, with some evidence, I think.

Now, before you think your pastor is about to join the flat earth society (which, by the way, the ancient people figured out the world was round a loooooong time ago with far less tools than we). Let's go back to what this is: a sermon about faith; about what we think is true or not. We have a network, a puzzle of evidence from smart people with telescopes, who've figured out a lot of smart things. And we trust them. But that doesn't mean we are smarter or the ancient people were dumber. Because I would venture that most of us don't particularly know the experiments that led to those conclusions even though we all have that puzzle piece

in our puzzle of truth: “the earth spins.” And that is precisely the point: We have networks of evidence, some more empirical than others, that we trust, and we knit together a view of what is true. And I think we grossly underestimate how much we take on “faith”: the unseen *word* or *testimony* of others. And my point is not, by the way, to say that we are all unreasonable. In fact it is just the opposite, it is perfectly reasonable to fashion belief systems, and no, I am not just limiting that to religious belief systems, it is perfectly reasonable to fashion belief systems from a network of empirical and circumstantial evidence. We do this all the time! From the news, to ceilings, to elevators, to planetary movements.

And so the people gather in the upper room and there are a few things they just “know”. And one of them, with the most apparent empirical evidence ever, is: dead people don’t get back up. The bodies are everywhere. It’s so obvious. Everyone with common sense knows that. And so when news comes that Jesus is alive again that piece doesn’t fit into the puzzle of what is true. So they have to make another piece: they think it is a fairy tale from the women’s grief. That piece will fit. So they put that in.

Until the empirics stand before them. They can touch it, and talk with it, it’s him, Jesus, standing there! And they see that puzzle piece is real.

And so there is nothing left for them to do but rip the rest of the puzzle apart and rebuild. And they do it “gladly.” Because now, now that the bodies in all the cemeteries of the world are *circumstantial* evidence that the dead stay dead, now that they have seen the *empirics* and seen and touched that the dead can be raised. Then they can take despair, and move that out of the puzzle, they can take certain death and meaninglessness and throw those pieces away too. And they can rebuild their reality with courage, and hope, and forgiveness, and the certainty of Jesus’ *Word*.

Which brings us to us. We do not have the empirics standing before us, walking and talking. But do we have a network of evidence from real historical documents, in and outside the bible, and stones and inscriptions to come to the conclusion, far more certain than an elevator certificate, that Jesus and his followers were real? And that their lives somewhere around 30ad were changed dramatically? *Yes, we do.*

And do we have enough evidence to see there is a Crafter of matter and space time? That’s right I didn’t even get into Relativity where space and time are linked, they are thing(!), something malleable, bendable! Not to mention quantum mechanics and quarks... Do we have enough evidence to say those came from somewhere? Or do you have the puzzle piece in there that “nothing” exploded into “everything”? I’m sorry, I don’t have room in my puzzle for that piece. Instead I

have a strong Creator who can create life, and who is beyond space and time, and beyond life and death. And could it be true that this very same Creator has come to die and rise to save his Creation, just as he said? Just as these witnesses *testify* to?

Blessed are you, you who have not seen the empirics, but believe. Not because you *blindly* believe, but because you have found the puzzle pieces, due to God's grace and a network of testimony, that say, there is a Creator, there is a Risen Savior, and His Word is true.

Have you come to trust and believe that our King is real and that he is good? In a world of death, and war, do you trust our King works to save? And that he does not lead anyone into suffering he has not endured already for their sake and their salvation? Have you come to see that this one is stronger than death!?! Then fear not, blessed are you.

Let us listen and rejoice in that word. This does not mean there aren't questions or we need, again, be blind. It means just the opposite, it means "come and see," come and see the reason to trust in a Risen Lord, come and see how he has worked and is working to bring life to a dying world. Come and see, come and rejoice in the courage he offers, in that death is dying, and life eternal is real and it is in His name - His name, by the way, which is upon you in baptism and in faith. Oh yes,

that is something you can *know* is real. Because He has promised it, he has done it,
and there is nothing in existence more *real* than Him.

Amen.