

Today we continue our sermon series – Questions that Jesus asked. We've had questions that Jesus asked before he died. We've had questions that he's recorded asking as he's dying, and we are now onto questions that he is recorded asking after he rose from the dead. What we have found in this series is a God who is pro-question. He is a God who invites and encourages questions. He is a God who is much more interested in asking questions to stir curiosity and reveal the inner workings of the human heart than a God who settles for superficial and pat answers.

In the passage we are considering today, in the Gospel according to Luke chapter 24, Jesus asks...**'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? and...Do you have anything here to eat?'**

To help us enter into the story we've got Caravaggio's painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* on the screen. It hangs in the Palais at Sanssouci in Berlin if you want to see for real. The title and the expression on Thomas' face is brilliant...as is the invitation from Jesus to *come close, to look and see and touch and investigate further*.

I wonder if you got to see the chalk graffiti from our Easter service? There were fabulous Jesus is alive drawings and words. Including the words...**Jesus is alive**. And one of our young folk wrote beside it...**Just as he said**. Brilliant! However, the wind and bit of rain and footsteps kind of rubbed off the **as he said** bit which left us with...**Jesus is alive - just**. That is a very different message! I wonder if that is how any of you feel given your circumstance or the season of life you are currently in?

What's amazing about the passage today and the painting is that they reveal a Jesus who...

1. Is not *just* alive but...very alive...stronger than death alive!
2. leaves us room for all kinds of thoughts, feelings, doubts, fears, and questions
3. is risen (just as he said) with a new resurrected body which bears scars
4. gets up close and personal and calls us to draw near.
5. Promises to give his Spirit to empower his followers to live (even when it's hard) until he comes again to renew all things which include our bodies and the earth itself.

**<sup>36</sup> While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’**

**<sup>37</sup> They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? <sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.’**

**<sup>40</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate it in their presence.**

**<sup>44</sup> He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’**

**<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He told them, ‘This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’**

I’ve shared before with you about the death of one of my closest friends when I was aged 26. He was 29. I remember well the feelings of disbelief and denial – *no this can’t be, impossible!* clashing with the brutal reality that they were gone. I remember in this period of intense grief, seeing someone that looked like him and for a brief moment thinking – *There they are!* If someone sounded like him or someone said a phrase or shared a mannerism, then for a moment I thought – *that’s them!* On some occasions, in particular situations, I heard their voice as a quip or comment in my head. That was over 20 years ago! Not that long ago I saw someone who reminded me of my friend and for the briefest of moments I again wondered *is it...!?*

But it wasn't, because he is dead – dust to dust and ashes to ashes dead. His memories may live on, but he doesn't. And missing him and being sad about him cannot bring him back. It's possible to say that loved ones who die, live on in our hearts but that's not really true. If we are being accurate, it's the memory of them that stays alive/lives on. Death is a powerful robbing enemy. It's surer than taxes. As hard as we may try, as clever or cunning as we may be there is no death avoiding or dodging! Death comes to us all.

Even in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western, sanitised *don't talk about death, don't think about death, shut our eyes and hope it goes away*, world there is no escape. Being removed from Ukraine, Gaza or South Sudan and the fighting and killing might let us think about death less, but as C.S. Lewis reminds us *it does not make death any less frequent*. This is from an address he gave during World War II and seems appropriate given it is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of V.E. Day on Thursday. For your information, our service on Wednesday will have a special focus on V.E. day.

C.S. Lewis says...

*"Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice...there is no question of death or life for any of us; only a question of this death or of that—of a machine gun bullet now or a cancer forty years later. What does war do to death?...It forces us to remember it...[but] it certainly does not make it more frequent; 100 per cent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased..."*

(C.S. Lewis, *Learning in Wartime*, 1939).

At some point in our lives, we are confronted by death - the death of a loved one or our own mortality.

Those living in in the Ancient Middle East, under Roman occupation were confronted by death on daily basis and in some ways more resourced because of their world view to deal with and navigate and acknowledge the loss and sorrow.

Those living in Jesus' day knew that dead people don't rise from dead. In the same way that they knew that babies don't just miraculously 'appear' in a virgin's womb. That's why Joseph's initial reaction was to break off the engagement with Mary before God intervened. People in Jesus' day were not gullible, naive, backward fools. They knew how the world worked.

They knew as I know, as you may well know - dead people stay dead.

The claim of the Bible, the claim of Christianity, however, is that 3000 miles away, 2000 years ago in Jerusalem a man in his 30s walked out a tomb after he had been killed by trained executioners whose lives depended on their killing skills.

The claim is, that if there had been a camera filming the tomb, it would have recorded the crucified, embodied Jesus walking out the tomb very much alive.

In the same way I would have been shocked, sceptical, disbelieving if my friend had paid me a visit a few days after his death and funeral, Jesus' friends were shocked and incredulous at Jesus' appearance. They tried their best to explain away what they were seeing and experiencing even though Jesus had over and over said, *I must suffer at the hands of the rulers and die but on the third day I will rise*. Jesus' friends thought (because it was so unconceivable and out of bounds of the realms of possibility)...It must be a...ghost!

A ghost seemed more plausible! But what is attested in the Gospels is an embodied, physical, flesh and blood, back from the dead Jesus. A Jesus with a new resurrected body that also bore scars. A Jesus that was hungry and who wanted to and was able to eat with his friends. The Bible leaves us no room for us to say... what the disciples really meant when they said *Jesus is alive* was...*Jesus is alive in our hearts, Jesus' memory lives on, the philosophy and teaching of Jesus lives on*.

**<sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'**

**<sup>40</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate it in their presence.**

I really like reading that the risen Jesus was hungry and enjoyed food with his friends, because I like food and food with friends! It seems that there is still eating and meals to be enjoyed post resurrection! With Jesus and the resurrection and heaven, the physical and natural world is not dialled down to disappear, it is turned up, enhanced, enlivened and more real. There is more to it not less!

Another thing that is fascinating, is that Jesus' friends are recorded experiencing joy, amazement and disbelief at the same.

The literal translation is *while they were disbelieving* (refusing/rejecting/doubting) they were experiencing a sense or source of joy and gladness and wonder.

Jesus' question **Why do doubts arise in your minds?** is a really good question. It's a question that helps us to see...

...that faith and doubt co-exist

...that feelings can be complex and contradictory

...doubts are a natural human thing that Jesus encourages us to be honest about and think about and talk about.

That's not really something we get to do in the Sunday morning service because of the particular social space it is. That's why we encourage small groups/house groups and things like the Alpha course.

Being honest about our doubts is a good and healthy thing. Examining our doubts and doubting our doubt is part of how we exercise our faith. It is not something we should be afraid of, if Jesus is the way the truth and life.

Here's a quote from Tim Keller that I've shared before and share again because it's really helpful. It's from his book *The Reasons for God: belief in an age of scepticism* (p16-17.)

*A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do, will find themselves defenceless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart sceptic.*

*A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection. Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts — not only their own but their friends' and neighbours'.*

*It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide the grounds for your beliefs to sceptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And, just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, to respect and understand those who doubt. [or have different views]*

*But even as believers should learn to look for reasons behind their faith, sceptics must learn to look for a type of faith hidden within their reasoning.*

*All doubts, however sceptical and cynical they may seem, are really a set of alternate beliefs. You cannot doubt Belief A except from a position of faith in Belief B. For example, if you doubt Christianity because “There can’t be just one true religion,” you must recognize that this statement is itself an act of faith. No one can prove it empirically, and it is not a universal truth that everyone accepts.*

*If you went to the Middle East and said, “There can’t be just one true religion,” nearly everyone would say, “Why not?”*

*The reason you doubt Christianity’s Belief A is because you hold unprovable Belief B. Every doubt, therefore, is based on a leap of faith.*

*... The only way to doubt Christianity rightly and fairly is to discern the alternate belief under each of your doubts and then ask yourself what reasons you have for believing it. How do you know your belief is true? It would be inconsistent to require more justification for Christian belief than you do for your own, but that is frequently what happens.*

*In fairness, you must doubt your doubts. My thesis is that if you come to recognise the beliefs on which your doubts about Christianity are based, and if you seek as much proof for those beliefs as you seek from Christians for theirs — you will discover that your doubts are not as solid as they first appeared.*

*I’ve shared before too that with the death of my friend at the age of 26 I started to doubt my doubts about God. Like what if...*

*...there is a God?*

*...my view of him being unloving and distant and angry isn’t right?*

*...there is something to Jesus?*

*...the accounts about Jesus in the Bible are true?*

*...God is more like this Jesus than the frowny, beardy man in the clouds I imagine?*

*...I will have to give an account of my life?*

*...in Jesus’ suffering, pain and weakness and love and power and goodness somehow come together?*

*...God might...despite my choices and wayward ways...want to have something to do with me?*

*...God actually loves me?*

*...a dead guy 2000 years who died on a cross did come back to life?*

What are the alternative explanations to...

...the empty tomb?

...fearful Jesus followers ending up risking their lives to tell the world about him?

...Christianity going from persecuted minority to 2.4 billion people of all nations and races and classes claiming Jesus is Lord?

How well do other world views answer the big questions of life?

The Question of...

1. Origin – where did I/we come from?
2. Meaning – why am I here, what is our purpose?
3. Beauty and Brokenness – why is there such a thing as beauty and love and what is wrong with the world and what do we do about it?
4. Morality - Who decides what is right and wrong?
5. Destiny - What will ultimately happen to me?

One of the doubts I started doubting was that I wouldn't have to give account for my life and that my life was mine to do with as I saw fit. I had an increasing sense that when I died, I was going to meet my Maker and if I did it wouldn't be as friends.

I doubted my primary purpose in life was to look and feel good. I sensed the Bible would help me with finding out what God was actually like. I sensed that there was a turning around was required, and I needed help.

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Here I want to turn our attention to repentance. The call to ‘repent’ is for many folk associated with a particular kind of fire and brimstone preacher and street preacher. So, what are we to make of Jesus’ call for repentance? What does that mean, what does that look like? Well, the word ‘repent’ literally means to turn around. To turn *from* something *to* something. So, what is Jesus saying we should turn from and turn to? When Jesus is saying to his followers **preach repentance**, what is he wanting us to communicate? Jesus is asking us to turn from ourselves to him.

In a sense, repentance is woven into the natural and physical world and gives us a good insight. All flowers (in seed form) turn outward rather than inward and turn from the darkness of being underground towards the sun. (With the snowdrops leading the charge!)

Just in case we miss what’s going on underground, there are some flowers that turn away from themselves towards the...sun and track the sun’s movement! This phenomenon is called heliotropism. Flowers such are daises, poppies and sunflowers literally turn their heads towards the sun.

A flower that turns outward from itself towards the sun, experiences the life-giving power of the sun and lives. A seed or flower that does not turn to the source of life and light does the opposite. There is a natural consequence in the natural world.

I think this is a really helpful repentance analogy when it comes to the spiritual world, us humans and the ultimate source of light and life and love – Jesus! What’s also really interesting in this analogy is that it’s not the cold and darkness that persuades or enables the seed to turn. What persuades and enables the seed and flower to turn is the warmth of the risen sun and the energy or power it radiates.

So it is in today’s passage. The risen Son of God comes and radiates divine power to give life and light and love. The risen Son of God helps those who receive it to reflect it. I was thinking that the best flower I know that reflects the sun is the buttercup! Did any of you play that game when you were wee with the butter cup? You got up close to someone and put it under their chin and said let’s see if you like butter. If there was a yellow/gold mark under their chin it meant?...They liked butter! What it really was, was the buttercup reflecting the sun on the person’s chin!

Jesus says...<sup>48</sup> **You are witnesses of these things.** <sup>49</sup> **I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'**

Jesus is promising the Holy Spirit - His life-giving, heart changing, empowering Spirit, and goodness do we need Him! Because life can be incredibly hard. The world continues to be both incredibly beautiful and broken. Now to close and bring together Jesus' presence and promises in the future in the passage and in the present – a poem and prayer and then a song...

### **The birch, the wind and the returning King**

Gilded in silvery bark that's paper smooth,  
the dancing birch, lost in wonder finds its groove.  
Green, yellow, orange, gold-leafed and flecked with light,  
A choreographed forest of delights.

Bowed down low, then branch and bough to the sky,  
Gone with the wind in plentiful supply,  
Who blows and goes wherever he pleases,  
Moving stems and heads and leaves with breezes.

Giving the sea and the sky a roaring voice  
Trees of the field wake to clap and rejoice!  
Creation that groans in birthing pain  
Also joins together in sung exclaim...

*Our Maker has a returning hour  
When he'll come with such enlivening power.  
He will waken the dead not just the dawn  
And chase away all that's dark and forlorn.*

*Animating us to the n<sup>th</sup> degree  
The children of God we will truly see!  
The breathless will breathe and rocks will cry out.  
Those in Christ will rise, adding to our shout...*

*Hail the loving King who is just and true!  
Hail the risen King dying to renew!  
Hail the King of the mountain and the tree!  
Hail the King of the birch and you and me!*

**PRAY:** Come Lord Jesus.

Bring peace, speak peace to our troubled minds, hearts, souls and world.

Help us to see you, enjoy you and know you not just as a memory or wishful thinking or a story but as a person and God and friend.

Help us to know you as the crucified and risen Saviour.

Open our minds to understand scripture.

Help us to see you as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets and the Psalms and the true hero.

Jesus, help us to read the Bible in light of you.

Help us to know that you are alive – just as you said.

Come with truth and kindness – forgive us for turning in on ourselves.

Help us to turn to you and live even when it is hard.

Thank you, Jesus, that you will come again.

Help us to know that future reality and help us as we wait – painfully wait.

Help us to know you and that you are for us and with us in our present reality.

Holy Spirit, come revive us, enliven us, cleanse us, empower us in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,*

*Because He lives, all fear is gone;*

*Because I know He holds the future,*

*And life is worth the living,*

*Just because He lives!*

I wonder what you think or feel about singing the *Because He lives all fear is gone* line? Maybe singing that sticks in your throat because you have fears. I wonder if it would help to think of this line as shorthand for this...*Because Jesus lives all fear is going, going, gone!* I know thinking of it like this helps me.

**SONG:** Because he lives