

21 April 2024 at 9.30 am and 10.30 am services

# FAITH AND THE INTERPLAY OF REASON AND REVELATION

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell  
Presbyterian Church



## READINGS:

**Acts 5:27-32**

**27 The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned**

by the high priest. 28 “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

29 Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

## **Revelation 1:4-8**

The Greetings and Doxology

**4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne,**

**5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,**

**6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.**

**7 “Look, he is coming with the clouds,”**

**and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”;**

**and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”**

**So shall it be! Amen.**

**8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”**

## **Gospel John 20:19-31**

### Jesus Appears to His Disciples

**19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.**

**21 Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”**

### Jesus Appears to Thomas

**24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 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.”**

**26 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!” 27 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.”**

**28 Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”**

**29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

The Purpose of John’s Gospel

**30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

## **COLLECT**

**Alleluia, God Eternal;**

**locked doors or closed minds cannot bar you. Let our questions and our doubts lead us to you. Let us seek your truth, discern your will, and trust your love.**

**For you are alive and reign with the Father**

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen

## SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'  
John 20:27

## INTRODUCTION

But Thomas 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."

Allow me to ask this morning, what is the nature of faith and what do you think is the interplay between reason and religious belief?

What is the relationship between rational thinking ... driven by evidence and logic ... and religious belief.

What should be our response when we are asked to believe apparently unreasonable truths?

So, what is the role of reason in Christian belief and doctrine?

**The miracle stories of the Gospels can be divided into four fairly distinct groupings:**

- Healing miracles (curing of physical impairments and illnesses)
- Exorcisms (casting out demons and unclean spirits)
- Nature miracles (calming storms, feeding multitudes.)
- Restoration miracles (raising the dead, restoring to life)



So, what should be the role of rational thought ... I mean ... evidence based logical thinking ... with regards to the Gospel accounts of miracles and indeed to all religious truth claims?<sup>1</sup>

I recall speaking with [The Revd John Brook](#), who was the chaplain at Massey University – my alma mater – on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I asked John, what is the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? How do I know that it was an historical fact?

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<sup>1</sup> [Māori prophet Rua](#). Now, there is a very amusing story, from early New Zealand history, where a man who called himself the “new Messiah”, name Rua who said he could walk on water.

His followers were asked to a gathering, specifically to watch him walk on water. After a long and arduous journey, through bush and hill country, they gathered at the water’s edge.

He asked them again, if they did indeed believe, I mean really believe, that he could walk on water.

They said yes. (imagine in it!)

So, he said to them, “Well then, I don’t need to prove it to you, do I?” and he walked away<sup>1</sup>.

Think about it, if you had been there, would you have believed that the so called “new Messiah” could actually walk on water, or not?

And John graciously attempted to clarify the role of reason and revelation in Christian truth claims.

Revelation being an understanding of truth that is not derived from rational thought alone. It is truth revealed through divine activity, i.e., revealed by God.

Now that is a big subject ... and I encourage you to pursue it privately ... as indeed I did, and still do.

Now, this morning, I should like to disavow what I believe to be a very unhelpful reputation about Thomas, the disciple of Jesus.

You know, he is widely called “doubting Thomas” as if he had some kind of awful transmissible life-threatening disease ... a super-spreader of doubt and unbelief.

I don't believe that nonsense at all. In my opinion, he doesn't deserve that reputation.

I believe Thomas was an ordinary guy, on the level, and intelligent, a good bloke.

In fact, do you know that Thomas was not alone in questioning whether Jesus was raised from the dead. All the disciples did. Have look at Luke 24:9-11

**<sup>9</sup> Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup> It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary *the mother* of James, and the other *women* with them, who told these things to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> And their words seemed to them like idle tales [nonsense], and they did not believe them.**

Thomas should not be called doubting Thomas because, at that point in time, all the disciples doubted.

I would like to have a rhetorical conversation with you this morning.

**I WANT TO ASK THE QUESTION, WHAT IS THE ROLE OF REASON – I.E. EVIDENCED BASED LOGICAL THINKING – WITH REGARDS TO OUR FAITH**

OK, this subject is of crucial importance and has given rise to an extraordinary debate and controversy over the years.

Occasionally, it has, apparently, destroyed people's faith, and, yet, at other times ... energised believers ... with bursts of life and growth in the church.

Now we know that the **Enlightenment** was a reaction to truth being defined ex cathedra.

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was an intellectual and cultural movement in the eighteenth century that emphasized reason over superstition and science over blind faith.

**"We were blind, says Immanuel Kant, now we see. The iron grip of dogma has been loosened. The mists of superstition are dissolving in the warmth of the dawning day."**

In Kant's phase "dare to know" was summarised the new approach to knowledge.

Reason, so understood is sovereign in this enterprise. It cannot bow before any authority other than what it calls facts.

No alleged divine revelation, no tradition, and no dogma ... have the right to veto reason's exercise.

And with the rapid rise of science came the scientific method, which works by the observation of phenomena, and induction of truth from the results of observation.

Mathematics enables all reality to be quantified and arranged in a relatively comprehensible structure.

You see, the age of reason had arrived. The scientific method and reason became the jury and judge of truth.

And this created enormous problems for religious affirmations concerning the existence of God, concerning moral thinking, and pertinent to this morning's sermon, the claim that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

And the debate rages on.

Recently, we note and mourn the death of **Hans Kung**, the Swiss theologian, who died aged 93, at his home in the university town of Tübingen, in Germany.

His book *On Being a Christian and Does God Exist?* were largely an answer to the atheism of the European tradition, which climaxed in Feuerbach<sup>2</sup>, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

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<sup>2</sup> (Feuerbach pronounced **foy·uh·baak**). His most important work, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841), was translated by Mary Ann Evans (later known as [George Eliot](#)) into English as [The Essence of Christianity](#).

Feuerbach's theme was a derivation of [Hegel's](#) speculative theology.

In Part I of his book Feuerbach develops what he calls the "true or anthropological essence of religion". Treating of God in his various aspects "as a being of the understanding", "as a moral being or law", "as love" and so on, Feuerbach talks of how humankind is equally a conscious being, more so than God because humans have placed upon God the ability of understanding. Humans contemplate many things and in doing so they become acquainted with themselves. Feuerbach shows that in every aspect God corresponds to some feature or need of human nature. As he states: In the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature.

Instead, Feuerbach concludes, "If man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God."

Thus God is nothing else than human: he is, so to speak, the outward projection of a human's inward nature. This projection is dubbed as a chimera by Feuerbach, that God and the idea of a

The **Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell**, recently published a kindly and thoughtful pastoral letter seeking to engage the citizens of England ... during this post-Brexit ... and devastating pandemic ... moment in history.

It is called Dear England: finding hope, taking heart and changing the world.

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higher being is dependent upon the aspect of benevolence. Feuerbach states that "a God who is not benevolent, not just, not wise, is no God", and continues to say that qualities are not suddenly denoted as divine because of their godly association. The qualities themselves are divine therefore making God divine, indicating that humans are capable of understanding and applying meanings of divinity to religion and not that religion makes a human divine.

The force of this attraction to religion, though, giving divinity to a figure like God, is explained by Feuerbach as God is a being that acts throughout humans in all forms. God "is the principle of [man's] salvation, of [man's] good dispositions and actions, consequently [man's] own good principle and nature." It appeals to humankind to give qualities to the idol of their religion because without these qualities a figure such as God would become merely an object, its importance would become obsolete, there would no longer be a feeling of an existence for God. Therefore, Feuerbach says, when humans remove all qualities from God, "God is no longer anything more to him than a negative being". Additionally, because humans are imaginative, God is given traits and there holds the appeal. God is a part of a human through the invention of a God. Equally, though, humans are repulsed by God because "God alone is the being who acts of himself".

In part II, he discusses the "false or theological essence of religion", i.e. the view which regards God as having a separate existence over against humankind. Hence arise various mistaken beliefs, such as the belief in revelation which he considers not only injures the moral sense but also "poisons, nay destroys, the divinest feeling in man, the sense of truth", and the belief in sacraments such as the Lord's Supper, which is to him a piece of religious materialism of which "the necessary consequences are superstition and immorality".



So, this morning - for a moment – let's consider a rational discussion on the resurrection Christ. And I will call it the case of the empty tomb.

But the real point of my sermon, actually, comes at the very end, like Jonny Wilkinson's famous drop goal, in the Rugby World Cup Final, in 2003.

So, wait for it.

You see ... we can struggle all we like ... through rational and logical thinking ... on the resurrection ... then, out of nowhere – boom – we see the answer.

OK, until then, let's consider the real historical problem of the resurrection, which is how do you explain the empty tomb?

Or, where is the body of Jesus? There are several possibilities.

## 1. WRONG TOMB

Well, maybe it was the wrong tomb?

Some people think that Mary and the other disciples went to the wrong tomb.

So, what they really saw were not resurrection appearances, but some form of hallucination induced by intense grief.

Although this sounds quite plausible ... there are a number of things which work against it.

Firstly, it seems highly unlikely that Jesus's mother, and all his close friends, were so uninformed ... about knowing ... what tomb Jesus had been buried in.

**Secondly**, there was a Roman Guard placed around the tomb ... at the request of the Jewish authorities.

When it was rumoured, that Jesus was raised from the dead ... all the Romans or Jews had to do ... was to present the body of Jesus ... whom they had crucified.

But they didn't ... because they couldn't.

And I have no doubt they would have searched ... high and low to find his body.

## **2. Resuscitation**

OK, so maybe Jesus didn't really die, he just had a tough time on the cross ... a bad day in the office, so to speak ... and fainted from exhaustion ... and loss of blood.

The spear in the side of his body ... apparently resulting in the outpouring of blood and water ... was merely an uncomfortable experience; but it was not fatal.

The roman soldiers, it must be concluded, didn't really know how to kill people.

And everyone thought Jesus was dead ... but later ... he was resuscitated ... so the disciples thought it was a resurrection.

Thinking about this David Friedrich Strauss said:

**“It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given to the disciples**

the impression that he was the conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life ... the impression that lay at the bottom of their future ministry.

Such a resuscitation ... could only have weakened the impression, which he had made upon them ... in his life and death ... it had no possibility to have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm ... or elevated their reverence into worship.”

Wrong Tomb? Resuscitation?

### 3. Body stolen

Alright, so maybe the body was stolen by the disciples while the Roman-armed-guard slept.

The disciples were really body snatchers. Hmmm

But don't you think this would run totally contrary to all that we know of them: their ethical teaching, the quality of their lives, their steadfastness in suffering and persecution?

Nor, I believe, would it explain their dramatic transformation from dejected and dispirited escapists into witnesses ... whom no opposition could silence ... and through whom the world was changed.

The disciples and Mary are body snatchers? ... Really?

There is much more that could be said, but I am running out of time.

After examining the evidence from a judicial perspective, Lord Darling, the former Chief Justice in England, concluded that:

**There exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.<sup>3</sup>**

Now, if you find some of this interesting but, sadly, ultimately unpersuasive, then you are in good company ... because neither were Thomas nor the other disciples persuaded, initially.

Despite the evidence of eyewitness accounts ... from known and trusted sources ... what ultimately grounded Thomas's faith ... was an encounter with the risen Christ himself.

**And I believe... the same is true for us today.**

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<sup>3</sup> Josh McDowell, More than a Carpenter, p95

That is the drop goal, if you like. Right at the end of today's sermon.

You see, reason will only take us so far because, ... and this is important, ... we require divine activity ... a revelation from God ... perhaps a theophany.

**Then Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”**

**28 Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”**

You see, Jesus revealed himself to Thomas.

So, my concluding words this morning come from [Archbishop Stephen Cottrell](#):



**We can never be so lost that God cannot find us, never so lonely that God will not embrace and befriend us, never so locked in ... that God cannot break through. It is never so dark ... that the radiance of Christ cannot illuminate the way ... p168/9**

**So, friends, may the Lord be with you.**

**May Christ reveal himself to you ...**

**that you may know him ...**

**as the risen saviour ...**

**the lamb of God ...**

**who takes away the sin of the world ...**

**and who reconciles us to God ... through our faith and repentance.**

**AMEN**

