

“Hope Renewed” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Second Sunday of Easter April 16, 2023

- I. **John 20:27-28** – Jesus said to Thomas,²⁷ “...Do not disbelieve, but believe.”
²⁸Thomas answered Him, “My Lord and my God!”
- II. **Isn't wonderful when you find out someone is a Christian like you?**
 - a. When you pass by the same stranger on your walk every day, and finally you strike up a conversation and find out they also love Jesus?
 - b. Or, you go to a store and meet a Christian... Michele went to iCandy in downtown Gresham recently, and she talked to the new owner who used to do church work and is still heavily involved in Rise City Church where they moved into the old SkateWorld building.
 - c. Or, we had to get a new furnace installed when ours went out, and I learned the salesman was a Christian after we talked for a while, then he was at another member's house, and she also found out he was indeed a Christian (hopefully he's not doing that to get sales 😊)
 - d. It's also encouraging to me when I find out an actor, sports star, or influential person is a Christian.
 - i. Not that I'm endorsing or saying these people lead perfect lives, but actors like Chris Pratt, Denzel Washington, and Mark Wahlberg.
 - ii. Musicians like Carrie Underwood, Justin Bieber, and Bono from U2.
 - iii. Sports stars like Patrick Mahomes, Russell Wilson, & Deion Sanders
 - iv. I could go on and on with names that would surprise you, as they were spotted attending church somewhere.
 - e. Maybe you saw a short clip of Jim Carrey, the actor and comedian, that resurfaced from 2017?
 - i. It's been making the rounds recently, and I had never seen it before.
 - ii. He was attending an event for former gang members who were changing their lives after being in prison...
 - iii. He said, “I've had some challenges in the last couple of years myself. And ultimately, I believe that suffering leads to salvation. We have to somehow accept and not deny, but feel our suffering. And then we make one of two decisions. We either decide to go through the gate of resentment which leads to vengeance which leads to self harm which leads to harm to others. Or we go through the gate of forgiveness which leads to grace. Just as Christ did on the cross. He suffered terribly and He was broken by it. To look upon the people who were causing that suffering or the situation that was causing that suffering with compassion and with forgiveness. That's what opens the gates of Heaven for all of us.”¹

iv. Now, I cannot vouch for Jim Carrey's faith life, nor his specific beliefs, but I will say that this very genuine statement from him brought a tear to my eye.

1. He has gone through many challenges in his own life but brings it back to Jesus dying on the cross – unbelievable suffering – and yet Jesus looks upon the people around Him with love and forgiveness... it sums up God's love for us... and all people.

f. As I see others come to faith when it seems unlikely... my hope is renewed... God's work through Jesus "brings many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:9) because of His perfect suffering, death and resurrection.

III. **Thomas and the other disciples were on a roller coaster of emotions.**

a. They had to come to grips with the fact they abandoned their Lord in His time of distress...

b. They went through the sadness and fear of Jesus' death... and the finality of burial.

c. They experienced a jolt of hope and excitement hearing that Jesus was risen from the dead...

d. And except for Thomas, Jesus has now come to be with them in the flesh, offering them the peace that only God can give, and to help them see their mission of delivering forgiveness and the Gospel to the world.

e. But Thomas was absent, and the excitement and hope his friends were showing didn't seem to impact him as he heard about it second hand... he wanted living proof.

f. Of course, his famous words come from seeing the true, and in-the-flesh Jesus who had risen from the dead – "My Lord and my God!"

i. There is something so powerful about that statement to me... you can just sense the tension in the air and emotion that came over Thomas.

ii. All the doubt or reasons to prove Jesus was alive melted away, and Thomas, flooded with emotion, blurts out, "my Lord and my God!" as his hope is renewed.

iii. Coming to faith in Jesus and watching others do the same is a product of the resurrection of Jesus... and as 1 Peter says today, "According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3)

iv. And earlier in John, chapter 2, it says, "When [Jesus] was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He [told them He would rebuild the temple of His body in three days], and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." (John 2:22)

1. In other words, the resurrection is our source of faith... and it will always be the central blessing that gives us hope beyond the grave.

- IV. **Yet, when we look around, do we really feel hopeful about Christianity?**
- a. We aren't getting any younger... who will be in these pews in 20-30 years?
 - b. The world is very hostile to traditional Christian teachings – at least interpreting the Bible in ways that call out sinful behavior.
 - c. I was telling members at our last Church Council meeting that of the 16 congregations in our circuit, six have vacancies, one is closing its doors at the end of this month, and five or more of the congregations in our circuit worship around 20 people a week on average.
 - d. Remember the days when every church seemed to be full?
 - i. Remember when our Sunday School had so many kids... and our early childhood education center had well over 100 students?
 - e. Yes, the Christian Church was a huge part of America at one time, and it still is – we just don't always see it from our vantage point.
 - i. More people are attending megachurches rather than sticking with their small churches and denominations they grew up with
 - ii. Also, many people are not going to church regularly, but have faith in Christ...
 - 1. Unfortunately, there is a large group of people who don't think "religion" is necessary to love God and live for Him... which I disagree with wholeheartedly – but they don't like church.
 - iii. Finally, many people who left their faith behind in their younger years come back around and start to attend as God calls them back.
 - f. No, the Church is not dying, and in many places around the world, it is on fire as people are coming to faith in large numbers...
 - g. As you leave here today, I want you to have your hope renewed.
- V. **Jesus, our risen Savior, is hard at work keeping Church alive.**
- a. As I gave all the examples of other Christians all around us, it may not always be evident, but believers are here!
 - b. In the trouble we find in our world of trials and unbelief, it can be easy to get down on the lack of faith in people – but then we hear a story like Jim Carrey's, or about those we had no idea believed in Christ – and our hope is renewed.
 - c. God's Word is working to bring the lost home to Jesus, and the more struggles and suffering they experience, the more Jesus and His saving grace looks appealing.
 - d. Jesus died and rose again so that all people might come to know the truth that He is God and Savior – and He's alive and actively seeking to know us
 - e. Each time we see Jesus at work in the world it renews our hope in God...
 - i. when we see others come to faith...
 - ii. when we hold each other up in the challenges of life...
 - iii. when we see the vast number of Christians who profess Jesus as their Savior.

- f. There is no shortage of Thomases in the world, but thanks be to God that He is able to overcome doubt with His Word... just as He does with us.
 - i. And so we join Thomas and all the Christian faithful as we declare...
“My Lord and my God!” Amen.

¹ <https://waynation.com/video/jim-carrey-shares-how-his-suffering-led-him-to-jesus/>