



Doubtful Design

John 20:19-31

a professing Christian is an agnostic at best. His new book maintains that Jesus never claimed to be God but essentially the church made him God. In his newest essay *Why I am Obsessed with Jesus*, he tries to explain why someone who does not believe Jesus is God would care about knowing Jesus. Michael Bird is a theologian from Australia who commonly is in academic debate with Erdmann over many of these topics. He also has a new essay entitled “Hey Bart Ehrman I am Obsessed with Jesus Too, But You’ve Got Him All Wrong.” In Bird’s essay he writes:

I grew up as a “none.” My family wasn’t particularly anti-religious; we were just not interested in religion. I live in Australia, a very secular country with low church attendance. It has more Buddhists than Baptists. Jesus was a complete non-entity in my suburban world. I am ashamed to say that, growing up as a Gen-Xer in the 80s and 90s, everything I knew about Jesus I learned from Ned Flanders of *The Simpsons*.

Then a funny thing happened. While serving in the Australian Army, I visited a local church at the invitation of a friend. It turned out to be a fateful encounter. I had all my presuppositions blown away. These Christian folks weren’t the hypocritical, moralizing geriatrics that my parents and primetime TV had warned me about. These ordinary church folks were nice people — and not merely nice, but crazy nice, and they made a big impression on me.

Hanging out with them, I started to learn about Jesus. I read the Gospels and realized that I had been sold a lie. Jesus wasn’t a fiction — he was a historical figure, and if he really rose from the dead, then it was a game changer.

My game changed. I did my homework. I got religion.

After some soul searching, I resigned from the army, went to seminary, and eventually earned my PhD in religious studies. Now I’m a seminary professor who gets to spend his time talking about his one, all-consuming passion: the Lord Jesus Christ. Bird closes his essay with:

Ehrman is a competent historian and a great communicator. We can affirm much of what he says. But he simply gets some things wrong — things like

Jesus’ self-understanding, Jewish burial customs under Roman jurisdiction, early Christian claims about Jesus, St. Paul’s remarkably “high” estimation of Jesus, and the Christo-logic of the church’s teachings about Jesus as both fully human and fully divine.

I encourage you to read both books. Regardless of what one thinks about who is right in this scholarly melee, Ehrman and I would both agree on one thing: the debate matters. If Jesus is God, then the story of Jesus is the most important story of them all. If not, then worship of Jesus is at best a fanciful fiction and at worst has engineered the manipulation of our entire civilization. But make no mistake about it. Who Jesus is matters, and each of us needs to respond to the gnawing question that Jesus once posed to his disciples: “Who do you say I am?”

Jesus comes to us when we are locked up in our fear and our doubts and gives to His peace, His presence and most of all... Himself. We serve a risen savior. Our faith is in a person. Jesus.

It is interesting that the word in our text for locked door is the Greek word *Klessia*. The word means to be locked up or closed off. When the word church was chosen to describe the gathering of the followers of Jesus the word that has become the word that describes us is the *Ecclesia* or not closed. It describes a visible, open, public gathering people.

God raised Jesus from the dead, but Jesus did not immediately ascend into heaven. He came to those who followed Him. Those who were filled with fear, doubt and trouble so they would know that He was alive but also to release them into the world.

On this Sunday after Easter, we must also determine if we are *Klessia* closed off or are we *Ecclesia* the church. As the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. Jesus sends us with His peace, presence and person. If we are to be the church, we cannot be locked away but we must be on our way.



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TRINITY PULPIT

The Sunday after Easter is always an odd Sunday in the church. We pass through Lent and the reflection on our sins. We arrive at Easter with great joy of the resurrection. We come and we celebrate with such energy. Then...Monday comes and it is back to reality and back to living. The Sunday following Easter, we find ourselves asking the question did that just happen? Did anything really happen? Have things really changed because of Easter? I think we are much like those in the locked room from our text today. They too had heard of the resurrection. Some of them had been to the empty tomb and yet, they are still locked away hiding and fearful. Wondering to them selves, “Did that just happen? Have things really changed?”

It seems that the disciples, like us, have a doubtful design. As much as they wanted to believe and as much as we want to believe, sometimes the return to life following resurrection is hard.

As we said last week, it is almost unbelievable that there is so much unbelief in the first resurrection stories. Yet, it is there. The followers of Jesus do not automatically become believers when they see the empty tomb or hear the story of Jesus’ resurrection. There are moments of seeking understanding. There are moments of wondering to themselves, “just what has happened?” There are moments of confessed doubt when the disciples simply say the women’s words are nonsense. Then, of course, there is the story of what we call doubting Thomas.

The story of “doubting” Thomas is one of the more famous ones in all of the gospels because it speaks to a deep human condition. In the face of confusion, conflicting evidence and a world that requires empirical evidence before making a decision, doubt seems to be the norm for many people. Now doubt can be helpful. It really is the ants in the pants of faith. Doubting can lead to questioning. Questioning can lead

to serious inquiry and seeking of the truth. We should never be afraid of seeking the truth of digging deeper, of asking the questions of our faith and of God. Because God is truth. When we seek with all of our heart what is true, what is loving, what is good, what is just... we will find God and when we find God we will find God expressed in Jesus. That is the essence of our faith. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We need not fear our moments of questions and doubts. We bring them to God and we earnestly seek God in those moments.

However, we must admit that there are times doubt can lead to atrophy and emptiness, especially when it causes us to neglect the hope of faith in the risen Christ. When the story opens, we find the other disciples (minus Thomas) cowering in a house “for fear of the Jews” (v. 19). If Thomas is the one who often gets branded as the doubter, we must remember that the other disciples were equally guilty of doubt after they heard Mary Magdalene’s announcement, “I have seen the Lord!” (v. 18); otherwise they would not have been huddled together afraid. We might say that Thomas is at least not a coward. In fact, we know that it was Thomas who had said let us go to Jerusalem and die with Jesus, when Jesus first said he was to go to Jerusalem where there were those who were plotting against him. Here after the resurrection while the others were dealing with their own fears and doubts, Thomas is out and about. We might say that doubting Thomas should be called Brave Thomas. It’s not until the risen Jesus actually shows up that they believe and understand. Thomas isn’t any different than his colleagues. It’s just that he’s behind in assessing the situation.

Doubt permeates the whole situation after Jesus’ crucifixion and the discovery of the empty tomb. It’s doubt that leads the disciples to remain in hiding and it is doubt that caused Thomas to say let me see for myself. What did Thomas and the others forget that led them to hole up with their doubt? What did they need from Jesus, so they

no longer were those who were locked away but those who were on their way? What do we need to hear from Jesus on this Sunday after Easter for us to also be on our way with the good news?

The first is the peace of Christ. Four times in the text Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Peace is a word that means do not be afraid. It means to have a sense of well being. It means to be free from the anxiety and worry of life that is so debilitating. Peace is one of those words that Jesus repeated. Jesus would say to the storm "Peace be still". Jesus would say "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (14:27). Peace is a word that Jesus repeats.

A little girl would cry out for her mother in the night after she was put to bed. When the mom would come into the room she would say Mommy do you Love me? Of course honey, you know I love you. Over and over again this would be repeated until one night the Mom asked, "honey why do you keep asking if I love you? You know your Daddy and I love you? Why do you ask?" The little girl said, "I know you love me, I just like to hear it over and over again."

There are some words that are worth repeating. Words like, I miss you. Words like, it is going to be okay. Words like, I forgive you. Words like, I love you. We can't say these words enough or hear them enough when it comes to people we love. Peace unto you is such a word from our Lord. We long for it. We yearn for it. We need to hear do not be afraid. Be at peace.

Jesus says the world gives a peace that is different. The peace that "the world gives" is peace that seeks to alleviate fear by relying on the security of wealth, the protection of armies or the isolation of a locked door. But there's really no peace in these things. The problem with the way we seek peace is that it ultimately passes away, or even if we can manage to stay isolated and protected we spend our energy on guard our whole lives. That is not really peace. It might be safety, but it is not peace.

What are moments of life that steal our peace? There of course are health issues; death of loved ones, uncertain days and months, a changing culture that we just don't understand. Many of us are troubled by events in our lives and in our world. Whether it is the rumor of war, the randomness of violence, or the risk of a relationship there is so much that disturbs our peace, our sense of well being.

There are many things we attempt to gather peace. We

try to hold up like the disciples. Notice what the disciples do in their doubt and fear thinking this will bring them peace. They get together and they lock the doors. They may be the first to ever cocoon. Notice they come together. That is they surround themselves with those they trust or at least trust enough to let in. There are no strangers in the room. There seems to be no one allowed behind the doors, except for the who were known.

They locked the doors. They literally locked out the world. The locked out those they feared. The locked out those that threatened them. They got together and they locked the doors. Surely, they thought this would protect them and give them peace.

There are so many in our culture, and especially those of us who follow Christ, who have determined that the way to live a life of peace and well being is to gather those around us who we can trust, or think we can trust. Then gather in our own little room of our making and then lock out the world. We are threatened by those who see things differently. Those who live and believe differently threaten us and so our conclusion is simply to lock the doors. Now remember at this point, the women have already seen Jesus and the disciples have already seen the empty tomb, but they still find their peace in a locked room. Yet, here they are and there is no peace. Not until Jesus speaks it.

Notice you cannot lock Jesus out. Now matter how they tried, Jesus came and stood in their midst. When He did, He said Peace be with you. Here is the great part of this. Jesus did not come and stand in their midst and say I am glad you are hiding here. I think I will hide with you. No, look what happens. Jesus said, "peace be with you as the Father has sent me so I am sending you."

The Peace of God is not found in hiding and locking away the world. It comes when God's people go into the world with the message of Christ.

There is a story from a major university in Tennessee, not mine, who planned a new gym and convocation center. They were so excited about the new athletic facility. In particular they were excited about the new locker rooms for the athletes that would play for this University. These new locker rooms for the home team were going to be state of the art with the locker areas, the showers, the therapy rooms, the nice sofas and chairs to lounge in before and after the game. Great detail and time was spent planning this facility and the new locker rooms for the men and women's team. However, well into the project, someone noticed something that was fairly significant. In their excitement to plan for the home team, they had forgotten to include anywhere in

the facility a locker room for the visitors. They were so concerned about themselves they had not even included a closet for the visiting team to change and gather before and after the game. The architects had to be called in to change the plans late in the process.

I wonder how much the church can be like that when it comes to our pursuit of peace. So many times we think the peace of Christ is to be found when we can be alone, separate from the people and the issues that trouble us. Yet, here in the resurrection story of Jesus... peace comes as Jesus ascends. They were going out and the peace of Jesus was going to accompany them.

Second, they needed the presence of Christ. Jesus "breathed" on the disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Christ in their lives (v. 22). The Spirit would give them the power to do "even greater things" than Jesus had done (14:12) and provide the comfort, advocacy and peace that enabled them to carry out God's mission in the world. When doubt and fear creep into our lives, we must rely on the witness of the Spirit to remind us that our lives matter and have purpose in Christ. It's the Spirit that enables us to be people who forgive sins, who speak boldly and who demonstrate the character of Christ (v. 23).

Jesus was sending them out, however they were going not only with the peace of Christ but also with the presence of Christ. This passage is known as the Johannian Pentecost. Acts tells us that the disciples waited in Jerusalem on the Holy Spirit to come in power. When they were gathered after Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit came. John directly ties the Holy Spirit as a gift of Jesus. Jesus breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive sins they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them they are not forgiven.

What are we to make of this passage? First, we should not say that John is giving us a different version of the Pentecost. John is reminding us that the power of the church is the power of God through the Holy Spirit. We are powerless without the Holy Spirit. Our purpose is not really our purpose, it is the continuation of the purposes of God. God sent Jesus, Jesus sends us. God's story is continuing through us.

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There is a privilege in the presence of Jesus. The Holy Spirit dwells within us and because it does, we have the presence of Christ in our lives. We have the indwelling of God's spirit to grant to us peace and understanding and courage. Yet, the presence of Jesus also has a responsibility.

This is where the passage concerning forgiveness of sins makes sense. It is not that we have the power to forgive the sins of another. There is no one who has the power to forgive sins except God. However, the power of the gospel that we have been entrusted is a powerful force. You and I not only have the presence of Christ, but we are to be the presence of Christ in this world and we must begin to take this very seriously. We might look at this statement as almost an exaggeration about the power of the witness of the church as the person of Christ. If the message of the forgiveness of sins is going to be proclaimed and heard, it will be because you and I go with the presence of Christ and as the presence of Christ.

The presence of Christ is our gift, but it is also our responsibility to the rest of the world. We take with us the Presence of Jesus. It is an awesome responsibility that is ours.

The third gift we receive in our doubtful design is Jesus himself. We not only get the peace of Jesus and the presence of Jesus, we also get the person of Jesus. Jesus shows up in person a week later, when Thomas is present, and invites the doubtful disciple to touch his wounds. It's a touch that's only possible if Jesus is more than a concept, but a person who was "in the flesh" like us; who suffered as we suffer; who was tempted like we are tempted; who dwelt among us and gave his life for us (1:14). Thomas finally believed because he saw Jesus -- not just on that day, but on all the days he had spent following Jesus around Judea

A great reminder to us in our moment of trouble, doubt and fear is that we do not place our faith in a religion, a concept or a philosophy. Our faith is in a person. That person is Jesus.

In or text it is ultimately the person of Jesus who makes all the difference.

Many in our area and those who nominally follow religious debates know of Bart Ehrman. A professor at UNC Chapel Hill, he is a well-known scholar and once