

“It’s a Conspiracy!”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – April 7, 2024

Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-31

Conspiracy theorists continue to thrive, in part because a new controversy always seems to bubble to the surface: Who really shot JFK? Were the moon landings real or staged? Did Elvis really die in 1977, or did he fake his death to get some privacy? Was Paul McCartney replaced by a look-alike when he allegedly died in 1966? Was 9/11 staged by the U.S. government? Are all these questions crazy? Maybe it depends on the thickness of your tinfoil hat.

Americans love a good conspiracy theory, and our weakness for paranoid fantasies is embedded in our history from the very beginning.

The 21st century has seen a rise in conspiratorial thinking with the internet being an unfiltered clearinghouse for theorists. “Truthers” continually look for new information to explain what *really* happened.

Their conspiracy theories usually gel around events of historical significance or the deaths of famous people. When someone famous (or infamous) dies, the thinking goes, there must be a reason behind the reason.

Conspiracy theorists have a reputation for being a little nuts, but the truth is that we always need people who are looking for the truth.

When it comes to the most famous death in history, the death of Jesus Christ, conspiracy theories abound, but in the center of the story we see someone who is really trying to get at the truth. And this figure is no outsider but one of Jesus’ own disciples. The disciple Thomas has often been maligned because he’s been cast as a doubter. All he wanted was the truth.

The death and resurrection of Jesus have long been the target of conspiracy theorists trying to explain it away. The general idea of these theories is that the disciples acted in concert to claim that Jesus was alive when he really wasn’t; that he died, and the disciples “helped” him become “alive” again.

Some theorists, for example, speculate that Jesus didn’t die but just “swooned” on the cross and eventually staggered out of the tomb. There are just a few problems with that theory — namely that the Romans were pretty good at the industrial application of death, and John tells us that Jesus was speared in the side (19:31-37). That would have been a heck of a swoon, and Jesus must have been in great shape to survive all that — more Superman than Savior!

Others suggest that the disciples took the body of Jesus and hid it (a genuine concern of the chief priests, according to Matthew 28:62-66), and then claimed that he was alive.

Some speculate that the disciples had a mass hallucination of Jesus after his death caused by grief, or that they saw a ghost.

Despite 2,000 years of conspiracy theories, disproving the rumor of the resurrection has proven elusive. Indeed, it seems as though the gospels themselves have an answer to the conspiracy theorists in the text, and one of the places we see this most clearly is in the apostle John's account.

After the death of Jesus, the disciples are hiding behind locked doors in fear of the Jewish leaders. They have just heard from Mary Magdalene that morning that she has "SEEN THE LORD," but they could have easily dismissed her words as fake news (v. 18). *Women were not considered reliable witnesses in a court of law in the first century, thus they may have chalked up her claim to hysteria.*

But then, suddenly, Jesus appeared among them with the greeting, "PEACE BE WITH YOU" (v. 19). And then he shows them the evidence of the wounds in his hands and side. It's a strange combination: Jesus is risen in a physical body and yet can also appear through locked doors. The disciples "rejoiced" after seeing the evidence (v. 20). Mary's testimony had been vindicated.

All of this happens without Thomas present, however.

When the others tell him, "we have seen the Lord" (the same words used by Mary Magdalene), Thomas is rightly skeptical (v. 25). He's not taking their wild speculation for gospel truth just yet. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (v. 25). After all, the other disciples had the benefit of seeing the nail marks. Why shouldn't Thomas?

We know Thomas was a thinker, a questioner. He wasn't going to buy into any kind of fake news. He wouldn't sell his own life cheaply based on false information or wild speculation.

We often call Thomas a "doubter," but the truth is, that we all need a Thomas in our community, someone who is willing to push back on what seems to be craziness. Thomas isn't a doubter so much as a legitimate "truther." He simply wants the truth, which is something all of us should be seeking. Thomas simply

wants more evidence — the same evidence the other disciples had apparently received. He wants to experience the risen Christ for himself.

And then, suddenly, he has the opportunity. The pattern repeats: a locked door, an appearance by Jesus. Jesus seems to know that Thomas had expressed some skepticism and offers the evidence that Thomas was looking for. “Put your finger here and see my hands. reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (v. 27).

Please note that Jesus never refers to Thomas as a doubter. **First**, keep in mind that the other disciples had the benefit of evidence which they saw with their own eyes — evidence that was not available to Thomas. **Second**, Thomas’ doubts are not about the resurrection of Jesus, but about the reports of the resurrection of Jesus. When he saw Jesus, he had no doubt that Jesus was alive. He was quite skeptical, however, about the veracity of what he was hearing. **Third**, although Jesus says to Thomas, “do not doubt but believe,” he is not saying that Thomas has a problem with belief. He’s really saying, “Thomas, it’s me, in the flesh. don’t doubt what you see. Believe. It’s okay.” And finally, what Jesus says to Thomas in verse 29 applied equally to all of the disciples, not just Thomas. He said, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” All the disciples believed that Jesus was alive only because they saw Jesus in the flesh. Like Thomas, they did not believe the reports of Jesus’ resurrection at first. So, you must ask: How are the disciples any different than Thomas?

Thomas responds to Jesus, “my Lord and my God!” (v. 28). It’s a confession of faith.

And what John implies, powerfully, is that the presence of Jesus should be enough for us, too. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29). John is speaking to his audience and to future generations like us about the truth of the gospel. He is giving us the evidence and asking us to believe it, but not just on the basis of the evidence itself. He wants us to believe also because the Holy Spirit continues to act as a witness to the resurrection and ongoing presence of Jesus with us.

We have the eyewitness testimony of the gospels, the evidence of the early church’s growth despite all the factors organized against it, and the witness of

subsequent generations of Christians and martyrs. All attest to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

If it's a conspiracy theory, it's one that has stood the test of time and the scrutiny of generations of debunkers.

John wrote his gospel not only to give us evidence for Christ, but also to bring us to faith in Christ. As he puts it later in the text: "But these things are written so that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (v. 31).

Ultimately, our belief in the resurrection of Jesus is a matter of faith, backed by evidence. When we believe, we begin to see all that God has done, all that God has made possible through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

And when we live out that belief, it's then that we become living examples, proving that the gospel is more than a theory. It's a way of life and the way to life! Amen.