

“If You Run, He Will Chase You”
John 20:24-29
April 5, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

It’s Easter Sunday. And we’ve just heard a testimony from Katie Raines about her grandmother’s conversion.

Why would we tell a story like that this morning ... about such a reluctant convert ... about someone who persistently resisted the Lord, before finally coming to faith in him?

That question brings up the fact that stories like Anita’s are not that uncommon among Christians. Which is itself kind of strange.

C.S. Lewis, who went on to be one of the most well-known spokespersons for Christianity in his day, said that at the moment he came to accept God as God – the moment he accepted Jesus as Lord – he was, he says, “the most [...] reluctant convert in all England.” [Lewis, 125]

Others too have written about their resistance to Jesus and his claims ... but how eventually they felt compelled to accept him, despite their attempts to avoid or even reject him.

The Bible itself tells of several individuals who tried to resist the Lord, to fight him, to flee from him, even to persecute his people ... but the Lord continued to come for them ... and one day, in spite of themselves, they called out on the name of the Lord in faith.

Now, we might be so used to hearing this kind of talk from Christians, but we need to recognize how odd it really is. You don’t, for example, hear people talk about how they were a reluctant convert to Aristotelian philosophy ... how they tried to avoid it, they tried to deny it, but the claims of Aristotle pursued them, and they couldn’t escape it, and so, reluctantly, they admitted to the truths of Aristotle’s teaching.

Now, maybe someone who works in or studies a specialized field will talk about reluctantly coming to a conclusion or a theoretical orientation they had long resisted. But that’s in a field they want to study. Usually someone completely outside a specific field doesn’t find themselves reluctantly pulled into a specific view within that field. And so, a man with no interest in philosophy doesn’t usually find himself pulled, almost against his will, into Aristotelian philosophy.

And yet, both history and the Bible are full of people who said they had no interest in Christianity or even in religion at all ... and yet they found themselves, almost against their will, becoming Christians. Even after years of fleeing from the claims of Christianity, they felt compelled to relent, and came to believe in Jesus Christ as their risen Lord.

Why is that?

Well, to better answer that question, I want to look at one well-known example of such a story, which we find in the Bible itself. And that's the story of Thomas.

Jesus had come to earth. He had claimed to be the Messiah – the Son of God – and he had carried out an earthly ministry over several years. Then, at the height of his ministry, Jesus was arrested, tried, and executed: nailed to a cross by soldiers – professional executioners – until he was dead. Once he was dead, the soldiers pierced him, in the side, with a spear to confirm his death. Then, his body was taken down and buried in a tomb.

But three days later, some of Jesus's followers made an astounding claim: They claimed that Jesus had risen bodily from the dead. They claimed they had seen him, not as a spirit or a ghost, but in the flesh, filled with new life, walking and talking with them. In addition, the tomb he was laid in was empty, neither the soldiers who had guarded it, nor the officials in charge of it, could produce his body, and as more and more people encountered the risen Jesus, word began to spread that Jesus, the Son of God, had overcome death and was now alive.

But Thomas, one of the 12 who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry – Thomas was not with the other disciples when they saw the risen Jesus. And Thomas, famously, did not believe their words.

And that then brings us to our sermon text this morning: John 20:24-29.

As we hear it, please do listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

The Apostle John writes:

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, as we come to your Word this morning,
Give us eyes to see it and ears to hear it,
minds to understand it and hearts to accept it.
Do this, we ask, for your glory and for our good.

We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

Introduction

Our text this morning tells us of Thomas's encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

Not unlike Anita, not unlike C.S. Lewis, not unlike so many other Christians, Thomas came to faith in Jesus Christ reluctantly. Thomas came to faith in Jesus Christ not because he heard the claims and was ready to believe and so he quickly embraced the ideas presented to him here ... he instead came to faith after resistance, and even after fleeing from the Lord, in a sense.

And so, while Thomas's story is unique in some ways, it also gives us a window into how the Lord works in many people's lives – not just centuries ago ... but even still today.

And key to what we see here is that: If Jesus were just a dead teacher or an interesting idea, then we could pretty easily ignore him. But because Jesus is a risen Lord: he can know us, he can want a real relationship with us, and he can even chase us, and we'll eventually have to respond to him.

Let me say that again: If Jesus were just a dead teacher or an interesting idea, then we could pretty easily ignore him. But because Jesus is a risen Lord: he can know us, he can want a real relationship with us, and he can even chase us, and we'll eventually have to respond to him.

Let's consider that big claim one piece at a time.

If Jesus Were Just a Dead Teacher, We Could Ignore Him

First, one thing we see here is that if Jesus were just a dead teacher or an interesting idea, then we could pretty easily ignore him.

There have been many interesting, and intelligent, and insightful, and inspiring human beings throughout history. And what they all share is that, for the most part, if you don't like their teaching, you can pretty much ignore them. Especially once they're dead.

Yes, ideas from the past shape our present. But even so, once the teacher is dead, there's nothing they can really do to pursue you. If you don't like Aristotle, you don't have to read Aristotle. Aristotle can't pursue you, and harass you, and make you pay attention to him.

The same is true for Karl Marx, and Ayn Raynd, and many famous thinkers who have died. Yes, their ideas may still shape the world around us – even maybe people close to us. But that doesn't mean we need to give in to, or accept, or even engage with them as thinkers.

And this isn't that different from the attitude Thomas seems to adopt in verses 24 and 25.

In verse 24 we're told that Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus, raised from the dead, first miraculously appeared to them.

We're not told where Thomas was. Perhaps, after Jesus's death, deeply distressed and in grief, Thomas sought to get alone, to process it all by himself. Either way, when Jesus first appeared to the other disciples, Thomas was not there. [Bruce Milne, quoted in Keller, 91] Then, when Thomas hears the story of the other disciples, he is unconvinced.

Somewhere in his own processing of what had happened, Thomas placed Jesus in the category of a good, maybe even wise and beloved teacher ... who was now dead. And as such, Thomas no longer had to interact with him any more than he wanted to. Even if the other disciples – men he was close to and had spent much of the last few years with – even if they were emphatic now in believing that Jesus had risen, Thomas was confident that he could put that aside, he could reject it, he could even ignore it.

Because if Jesus was just a dead teacher, then he could be ignored.

Because Jesus Is a Risen Lord, He Can Know Us

But then, in verse 26, that assumption – that category which Thomas had placed Jesus in – that way of thinking is blown apart. Jesus, risen, in the flesh, shows up. He's not dead. He's alive.

And that changes everything. It has major implications for Thomas, and for us.

The first implication is that if Jesus is a risen Lord, then he can really know us.

And we see that in this text.

In verse 25, Thomas lays down his demands. He says that unless he sees the mark of the nails in Jesus's hands, and places his finger in those marks, and even places his hand in Jesus's side, where the spear pierced him – Thomas says to the other disciples that unless he does those things, he will never believe.

Now ... between verse 25 and verse 26 there's no intervening story of Jesus coming to the disciples, and them telling Jesus about Thomas's demands.

And yet, when Jesus shows up in verses 26 and 27, Jesus repeats those exact demands right back to Thomas. Jesus already knows Thomas's demands. And so, he says to him: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

And in verse 28 Thomas's immediate response is to say to Jesus "My Lord and my God!"

"It is possible," one commentator writes, "that it was the *words* of Jesus more than anything that brought conviction [for Thomas], for they showed that Jesus [had been] perfectly aware of what Thomas had laid down as his demands. How did [Jesus] arrive at this knowledge unless he [had been with Thomas], unseen?" [Leon Morris, quoted in Keller, 93]

No one had to tell Jesus what Thomas had demanded, because, as Tim Keller puts it, Jesus "was always walking, unseen, right next to Thomas. He had heard Thomas's refusal to believe his

friends. He saw the cynicism and fear in Thomas's heart. And yet he came to him as requested.” [Keller, 93]

That tells us something about Jesus's knowledge of us: that because Jesus is a risen Lord, he can truly see us and truly know us.

Because Jesus Is a Risen Lord, He Can Want a Relationship with Us

But then also, along with that, it tells us something about Jesus's heart towards us ... that even as he sees us as we truly are, Jesus still wants us – he wants a relationship with us.

When I was in college, I saw an indie musician in concert who had a song that was titled “When They Really Get to Know You They Will Run.”

It's a good title ... because it articulates a fear that many of us have. People may seem to like us. They may even pursue us. But somewhere in our minds – whether on the surface, or deeper down – part of us often thinks: “If they really knew me, they wouldn't pursue me like this ... they wouldn't like me this much ... if they really knew me they'd run away from me – not towards me.”

One of the startling claims of our text is not only that the risen Jesus knows us – knows us truly, knows us fully, knows us even better than we know ourselves – he not only knows us ... but even knowing us, he still desires a real relationship with us ... he still wants us for himself.

When Jesus heard Thomas's demands, he didn't say “What a brat!” and walk away from him. Still, he pursued him. And that has major implications.

As Keller puts it, in that moment, in verses 26 and 27, “Jesus was saying to Thomas, ‘I know all your doubts, all your fears, all your broken promises, and all your flaws. I've seen you to the bottom, but I still love you and I'm still here for you.’” [Keller, 93-94]

Because Jesus is a risen Lord – because he's not dead, but alive, because he's not a mere man, but he is the Son of God – because Jesus is the risen Lord, he can know us ... he can truly know us – he can know us even better than we know ourselves.

And even after he's seen us at our worst ... even after he knows our worst deeds, our worst words, our worst thoughts ... even then, the Bible tells us, he still desires a real relationship with us, just as he still desired a relationship with Thomas here in this text.

Because Jesus is alive – because he is risen – he can know us, and he can want a relationship with us.

Because Jesus Is a Risen Lord, He Can Chase Us

But then third, because Jesus is a risen Lord, he can also chase us.

A risen Lord isn't just capable of knowing us. He isn't just capable of wanting us. He's also capable of pursuing us.

That was certainly Thomas's experience. Thomas wasn't out looking for Jesus here. He wasn't searching the streets for him. We're not told that he was crying out in prayer for Jesus to appear to him. We're not told that Thomas did anything at all to seek Jesus.

Thomas wasn't seeking Jesus. But Jesus, we see here, was seeking Thomas.

Jesus shows up, uninvited. He speaks to Thomas before Thomas speaks to him. Jesus takes the initiative here. Thomas may be running from Jesus. But because Jesus is a risen Lord, Jesus can chase Thomas.

Anita, in the testimony Katie has shared with us, experienced something similar. For years, Anita turned from Jesus. For years, she ran from him. She denied that she needed a Savior. She denied that she needed him. She denied that he had a right to make the kind of claims he was making on her and on others. Anita ran from Jesus.

But because Jesus is a risen Lord, Jesus could chase Anita. And he did. And in the end, he caught her.

C.S. Lewis had a similar experience himself. Looking back at the period leading up to his conversion, Lewis doesn't describe himself as an Oxford professor wrestling with a philosophical question. He instead describes himself as a fox, running in the open, "bedraggled and weary" from being chased, with "hounds barely a field behind" him. [Lewis, 123]

"Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about 'man's search for God!'" Lewis writes, but he says, "to me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat." [Lewis, *Surprised*, 124-125]

And Lewis, actually dramatized this sense later on in a fantasy story titled *The Horse and His Boy*. The book follows Shasta, a boy who goes through just one trial after another. It seems like Shasta is constantly pushed or chased or pursued in some way. He's trying to escape from a foreign land and get home to Narnia, but along the way everything seems to go wrong. Most distressing of all, "he keeps running into wild lions that threaten him in various ways." His adventures all lead him to a moment when he's walking alone, in a fog ... and then he senses a presence there with him ... walking beside him. The presence has a voice, and the Voice begins a conversation with him. So Shasta describes to the Voice his journey so far, and at one point Shasta says to the Voice – to the Presence – "Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?"

"There was only one lion," said the Voice.

"What on earth do you mean?" ... [Shasta replied]

"I was the lion." [says the Voice] And Shasta gaped ... the Voice continued.

"I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the horses new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it

came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight to receive you.” [Keller, 95; Lewis, *Horse*, 164-165]

Shasta came to see in that moment, that all along, this Voice, this Presence – this Lord – had been pursuing him, chasing him, whether Shasta had realized it in those moments or not. Sometimes this Lord had come to bring comfort. Other times he brought fear. But every step along the way, this Lord had been working for Shasta’s good ... and not just working for his good in some vague and general way, but leading him to this moment, when Shasta would come to know this Lord truly and personally.

And the Bible tells us that this is how Jesus seeks you. You may not get to see him in the same way that Thomas did, that’s true. But like the Presence in Lewis’s story, Jesus has been there. He has been sometimes nudging you, and other times comforting you, and other times frightening you, but all along the way he has pursued you. Because he’s not just a figure in a history book or an interesting teacher or a philosopher or a vague idea, but he is a Risen Lord, who is alive, and who seeks you like a cat chasing a mouse – like a hound chasing a fox.

Only his desire is not to destroy you. His desire is to give you new life – to give you true life ... so that you will know him and love him, and delight in him not just in this life, but also in the life to come, where you can spend eternity rejoicing in his presence, with his people, forever.

Because Jesus is a risen Lord, he is someone who knows you, who wants a relationship with you, and who will chase you, out of love.

Because Jesus Is a Risen Lord, We Will Have to Respond to Him

And because that’s true ... Jesus is someone we’ll all eventually have to respond to.

Jesus is not a historical figure you can ignore. He knows you. He’s with you. He stands right in front of you. In fact, by acknowledging him or ignoring him, you are, in a sense, always responding to him – it can’t be avoided.

And Jesus calls you to respond by acknowledging who he is, and following him in faith.

If you’re not a Christian, it may mean doing that for the very first time. If you’re already a Christian, it may mean realizing that there are ways you’ve slipped into a habit of acting, and thinking, and living as if Jesus isn’t really there – as if he isn’t really with you, as if he doesn’t really know you, as if he won’t really pursue or even chase you.

But Anita’s story, Thomas’s story, Lewis’s story, Shasta’s story – they push us to reconsider our lives.

Where are those moments where you thought you were all alone ... but the truth is that Jesus was there too ... whether he was pushing you, or helping you, or comforting you, or rejoicing with you, or weeping with you, or even frightening you ... where are those moments where you could catch a glimpse of the deeper reality that Jesus – the risen Lord – was pursuing you?

The Bible tells us that he pursues us because he loves us. We have run from him. We have turned from him. But he came to restore us to a relationship with him – to save us from ourselves, to save us from eternal separation from our Maker.

And so, he came to earth and he died for our salvation. And then he rose in order to give us new life. And now, by the Holy Spirit, he pursues us.

How will you respond?

Whether it's for the first time, or for the ten thousandth time, how will you respond to the risen Lord this morning?

Jesus is alive.

He knows you, warts and all.

He loves you.

He wants you for himself.

This very morning he is pursuing you.

And so ... like Thomas – like Anita, like Lewis, like Shasta – let us fall before him this morning, and say to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Keller, Timothy. *Hope in Times of Fear*. Viking, New York, NY: 2021.

Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy* in a collection of four works titled *The Inspirational Works of C. S. Lewis* (New York, NY: Inspirational Press, copyright 1960, collection printed 1994) (Citations in this sermon are from the chapter “Checkmate”)

Lewis, C. S. *The Horse and His Boy*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1954. (Full-Color Collector's Edition, 1998)

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.