

Easter Sunday

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I Have Seen The Lord!

March 31st, 2024

John 20:1-31

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Introduction:

Good morning church! It is good to be together in the House of the Lord today – can you say amen to that? Amen! Well, if you have your Bible with you I’d love for you to open it now to John 20:1-31, that’s on page 906 in the church Bibles. There are certain events that can change the course of an entire generation. In her book *Generations* Jean Twenge talks about how events like the Great Depression in the 1930’s and the Second World War in the 1940’s worked together to FORGE what we call now the Greatest Generation. Those people were unflappable. They had been beaten like heated iron between the hammer and anvil of those two GREAT EVENTS. The Baby Boomers were affected by Vietnam, Watergate and the Sexual Revolution. Those events inclined many people in that generation toward cynicism and self-indulgence and collectively they resulted in a massive expansion in divorce. Baby Boomers get divorced at a higher rate than any generation before them – and any generation AFTER THEM¹. The Millennials grew up in the aftermath of 9/11 and then they had the rug pulled out from underneath them, financially speaking, by the Great Recession in 2006-2008 just as they were entering into the housing market. The experts say that these events inclined many people in that generation toward anxiety and resentment.

¹ <https://www.washingtonian.com/2023/12/04/divorce-rates-are-rising-just-for-this-age-group/>.

Events affect us – that cannot be denied – and the bigger the event, the greater the effect it can have on us. Major events can affect an entire generation and some events can change the entire course of human history. It is to one such event like that that I would like to direct your attention this morning. Hopefully you have your Bible open by now to John 20. I'll be reading from verse 1 through to verse 31. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to

them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

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.”

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:1-31 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

The resurrection of Jesus is an event that changed the world. I don't know how anyone could argue with that. There are 2.4 billion people in the world today celebrating a little thing called EASTER, so something happened nearly 2000 years ago that continues to reverberate across the ages. The resurrection of Jesus is an assertion that refuses to be ignored, so we're going to talk about it today. We're going to ask and hopefully answer two very important questions:

- #1. Did it happen?
- #2. Does it matter?

Let's begin with the first question.

Did It Happen?

Did Jesus ACTUALLY rise from the dead – in a literal, physical, bodily way, or was the resurrection more of a SPIRITUAL EVENT that was experienced by those who loved him?

That's a really important question.

There have been whole books written addressing this question – *The Case For Easter* by Lee Strobel is a very accessible resource; *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence For The Resurrection Of Jesus* by William Lane Craig is a more scholarly treatment. It's a little longer and a little more expensive; it is available on Amazon and ships for free for Prime Members, so there is that. Either of these books would be well worth your money, your time and attention. In William Lane Craig's book he offers TEN LINES of historical evidence for the reality of the resurrection, but for the sake of time this morning, I'm just going to walk you through what I consider the 3 most important.

The first one is this:

1. The empty tomb

If you have your Bible open still to John 20, just flip back perhaps one page to John 19:38-42.

John says that:

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. 39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. 40 So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. 42 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38-42 ESV)

Normally when people were crucified their bodies were left on the cross for days so that the birds would begin to peck away at their flesh – this was done to add further insult to the victim. Then afterwards, what remained of the corpse would be dumped into a common grave – but Pilate was irritated at having been manipulated by the Jewish leaders. You will recall that he didn't want to crucify Jesus, he only did it to pacify the mob that the Sanhedrin had actively stirred up, so in order to make a concession to the followers of Jesus and in order to STICK IT one last time to the

leaders of the Jews, he allowed the body of Jesus to be removed from the cross and to be buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. That was a BIG DEAL – and it was recorded and proclaimed well within the lifetime of everyone who experienced it first-hand.

Flip forward in your Bible now to 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; that's on page 961 in the church Bibles. Paul wrote this letter in 54 AD which is just 21 years after Jesus was crucified. Think about that, while you look up the passage. 21 years means that he was writing this about as long after the events he is describing as we are from the events of 9/11. Meaning that MOST of the people hearing his words LIVED through the events he is describing. So he can't LIE and get away with it just like I couldn't say this morning: "Remember when Godzilla knocked over the twin towers in New York City in 2001?" No. That isn't what happened and everyone in this room KNOWS THAT because most of us were ALIVE when 9/11 went down. I remember where I was EXACTLY when the second airplane flew into the tower – and so do you, I'm guessing. So if I'm going to talk about that event to people who LIVED THROUGH THAT EVENT, I will need to stick to the facts. And that's what the Apostle Paul does here. Listen; he says:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 **that he was buried**, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4 ESV)

The FACT of Jesus' burial was being openly proclaimed in churches well within the lifetime of the people who experienced this event in real time, so this could not have been a made-up detail. If people had seen Jesus' body hanging on the cross for 4 days, being pecked and eaten by birds and then they had seen his remains tossed onto a heap of corpses in a common pit, then you could not get away with adding this detail about burial. It would have been too easily falsified by anyone who knew otherwise and therefore the most likely explanation is that THIS REALLY HAPPENED. Jesus was buried in a tomb.

Ok.

Then where is his body?

If he was buried in a tomb and people started saying that he had risen from the dead, why didn't the Jewish or Roman authorities just open the tomb, pull out his body and put this story to rest once and for all?

And the most reasonable answer is: BECAUSE HE WASN'T THERE.

The empty tomb is a historical FACT that must be reckoned with – particularly when combined with the testimony of the eyewitnesses. That is the second piece of evidence that we must consider.

2. The testimony of the eyewitnesses

Since you already have 1 Corinthians 15 open in front of you, let's just keep on reading from there. Paul says:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8 ESV)

Interestingly, Paul doesn't even mention the eyewitness encounter that we just read in the first half of John 20, with Mary Magdalene. He probably assumed that any non-believers listening to his letter being read in Corinth would not be interested in the eyewitness testimony women – who, at that time were not able to give legal testimony in the court system – so he sticks with LEGAL WITNESSES ONLY – but even still, count them up. Paul refers to more than 500 eyewitnesses in just this one passage. That makes the idea that this was some kind of hallucination, brought on by trauma and psychological distress, extremely unlikely. If only ONE person had claimed to see Jesus alive, then perhaps that would be a reasonable explanation, but to state the obvious, 500 people are not going to have the same STRESS INDUCED hallucination. It would take far more faith to believe IN THAT then it would to believe that Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures – as he said he would do and as

at least 500 other people attested to – many under pain of torture. And that fact – the fact that many of these eyewitnesses were arrested and tortured and not one of them recanted their testimony – that fact argues strongly against the idea that this was some kind of conspiracy. People do not allow themselves to be crucified for made up conspiracies – and multiple of the disciples were killed in this way – and some others were clubbed to death, some others were flayed to death, some others were burned to death – and none of them recanted their testimony.

Which leads us to our third line of evidence:

3. The transformation of the disciples

The fact that all of the disciples suffered torture and brutality for their testimony about Christ and the fact that none of them recanted of their testimony strongly suggests that these men were in fact deeply impacted by their encounter with the resurrected Christ, because, to state the obvious, nothing in the Gospels prior to the resurrection inclines us to expect that kind of strength and resilience from them. Prior to the resurrection Peter was intimidated by a serving girl into denying Jesus. After the resurrection he allows himself to be crucified upside down – what explains that transformation? The most likely explanation is that he SAW the resurrected Jesus with his own eyes. We know that experience made an impression on Thomas; we read about that this morning. Seeing the body of the resurrected Jesus, touching his hands and his sides, he said:

“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28 ESV)

That is the testimony of a man who has been forever changed. That is a man who has had his eyes opened to a bigger reality. That is a man now, who will follow Jesus through the fire – and so he did.

What else could possibly explain how this group of people changed the world? In the Gospel narratives the disciples come off like the three stooges – or the 12 stooges – but then after the resurrection they are organized, energized, and resolved. They have a mission, they have some kind of supernatural fuel and within a generation they have turned the Roman world completely upside down – how did that happen? The most likely explanation is that they had been TOUCHED and CHANGED by the resurrected Christ.

Therefore, I wouldn't characterize believing in the physical resurrection of Jesus as a LEAP OF FAITH, rather I would characterize it as a rational response to historical, documentary, and testimonial evidence. The resurrection happened and the resurrection matters.

Does It Matter?

Of course, not everything that happens matters. Something can be TRUE and not terribly relevant. For example, I believe in the moon landings but I'm not sure that believing in that makes a great deal of difference in my day-to-day life, but believing in the resurrection isn't like that. The resurrection of Jesus is a FACT that ought to ROCK YOUR WORLD – for several reasons, but again for the sake of time, let me give the top three.

The resurrection matters first of all because:

1. It communicates the sufficiency of the cross

On Good Friday we often sing the old hymn: Jesus Paid It All. We sing: *Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain he washed it white as snow.* Ok – so on the cross, Jesus paid it all – but how do we know that his payment was accepted? One theologian puts it this way:

“By raising Jesus from the dead, God the Father was in effect saying that he approved of Christ's work of suffering and dying for our sins, that his work was completed, and that Christ no longer had any need to remain dead. There was no penalty left to pay for sin, no more wrath of God to bear, no more guilt or liability to punishment – all had been completely paid for, and no guilt remained. In the resurrection, God was saying to Christ, “I approve of what you have done, and you find favor in my sight.””²

So Jesus walking out of the tomb on the third day was like that message that you get on the interac machine after you stick your card in and enter your PIN. You wait a minute and then it says: “Payment accepted. Please remove card.” That's what the empty tomb is! It is God saying

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 615.

that Jesus paid it all. Payment accepted. Nothing more for you or me or HIM to do – praise the Lord!

Secondly, the resurrection matters ALSO because:

2. **It guarantees life beyond the grave**

Again, since you already have your Bible open to 1 Corinthians 15, just drop your eyes down now to verses 19-22. He's saying here that if Christianity is just about how to live better in the here and now then we above all people are most to be pitied – but thanks be to God, it's not just about that. It's about LIFE and JOY and GLORY on the other side. He says:

“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, **the firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:19-22 ESV)

In that passage Paul refers to Jesus as the FIRST FRUITS – that's a religious metaphor that would have made a ton of sense to first century Jews. The Jews were in the habit of bringing the firstfruits of their harvest to the Lord as an offering. The firstfruits represented the whole – it was like a pledge of the remainder. It was a way of saying: “Just like this initial bundle belongs to you, so too we understand that everything we have belongs to you.” The one piece stood for the whole – well so it is here! D.A. Carson and G.K. Beale in their “Commentary on the New Testament Use Of The Old Testament” say here that:

“Paul uses the image to underline the link between our fate and the fate of Christ; Christ's resurrection is not an isolated event, but rather guarantees something even more stupendous.”³

Again – the resurrection of Jesus is a FACT that ought to ROCK YOUR WORLD. Paul is saying that the resurrection of Jesus guarantees the resurrection of every other person connected to him. And so the question that everyone in this room ought to be asking right now is: HOW CAN I BE

³ G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, *Commentary On The New Testament Use Of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 744-745.

CONNECTED TO JESUS? How can I share his fate? How can I come up out of the depths and darkness of death into life, glory and beauty on the other side? That's the question any SANE PERSON who is connecting these dots is going to be asking right now. That's the question the crowd on Pentecost was asking Peter when they started connected these dots. Do you remember what Peter told them to do? He said:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38 ESV)

Turn away from whatever it is you are doing and whoever it is you are following and put your faith in Jesus Christ! Declare your allegiance to him today - personally, privately and publicly - and you will be SAVED. You will be FUSED BY COVENANT TO JESUS CHRIST such that wherever he goes, you go. Such that his fate is your fate. Such that his resurrection is your resurrection. The Father raised him up – the Father will raise you up - thanks be to God!

The resurrection of Jesus MATTERS because it communicates the sufficiency of the cross, it guarantees a future for us beyond the grave and then lastly because:

3. It proves that everything Jesus said was true

Jesus said some pretty unbelievable things, didn't he? He said:

“I am the bread that came down from heaven.” (John 6:41 ESV)

“I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12 ESV)

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” (John 10:9 ESV)

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11 ESV)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 ESV)

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25 ESV)

Now what would any rational person say to another human being who said things like that? What would we say? We would say PROVE IT! Because people can't say things like that. If anyone in here said anything like that we would call 911. You'd be having a medical event, because you can't SAY things like that – unless you can back it up. And how would you do that? How would you prove, for example, that you were the resurrection and the life?

Well, you could die and on the third day rise from the dead.

That would be a compelling argument. That would strongly suggest that you were not just some person having a medical event, you were in fact the Son of God, sent from God to save, heal and restore the people of God. It would strongly suggest that you were exactly who you said you were.

That's why the resurrection matters.

Because it proves that he was who he said he was and that everything he said was in fact, the very Word of God to us.

So you should listen to him. You should follow him. You should trust him. Because the Lord is RISEN – he is risen indeed. Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.