

“The Stone Rolled Away,” Luke 24:1-12 (Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019)

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

PRAY

It is Easter Sunday and, rightly or wrongly, if you're a preacher you feel a little extra pressure to preach a compelling sermon on this day more than any other. Easter is, after all, the high point of the year in the Christian church.

Now why is that? Because Easter is when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a real man who lived about two thousand years ago in what we now call Israel. That's a matter of complete historical consensus. Plenty of professional historians who are not Christians themselves, or who are even hostile to Christianity, agree that Jesus lived and that he died on a Roman cross.

But where there is disagreement is that Christians believe three days after his death Jesus also experienced resurrection. In other words, he came back from the dead.

The reason Easter is so important to Christians is that our faith hinges on the resurrection of Jesus. Take away resurrection, and there is no Christianity. At least not any kind of Christianity I'm interested in. In fact, not even St. Paul himself, who had as much to do with establishing Christianity on earth as anyone outside of Jesus, would want anything to do with a Christianity without resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians, written about twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, Paul wrote, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only [in other words, if there is no resurrection], we are of all people most to be pitied.” 1 Corinthians 15:17-19.

Paul says Christianity is a waste of your time if there is no resurrection. But why? Why is Easter and resurrection such a big deal?

My sermon this morning will be an attempt to answer that question. Three points: *first, I'll try and answer the question 'what is resurrection anyway'? Second, why you should believe in resurrection. Third, even if you don't, why you should want to believe in the resurrection.*

One more word of introduction before I begin. My guess is a few of you here this morning aren't Christians, and if so welcome. We are so glad you are here with us. My guess is that there are others of you who might say you're Christians, but can't really explain why, and certainly can't explain why resurrection matters so much to Christianity. Please know on the front end that much of this sermon is written with you in mind, and if you have questions or feedback for me after the service I would be grateful to hear from you.

First, what is resurrection? Resurrection does not mean Jesus experienced life after death in some vague, amorphous sense. The Bible does not teach that Jesus continued to live on metaphorically in the memory of his followers after his death. It does not teach that Jesus became a ghost or a spirit of some kind who would periodically return to haunt his followers.

Instead, resurrection means three days after he died Jesus bodily came back from the dead. He died on Good Friday. His heart stopped beating, his brain activity ceased, his body began to decompose. But then he was bodily, literally, raised from the dead, and his heart started beating again, his brain activity resumed, the decomposition process reversed.

The Bible clearly means to teach this. In Luke 24:3 we read that when the first witnesses of the resurrection reached the tomb of Jesus on resurrection Sunday, where he had been laid the Friday before, "they went in [and] they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." All the writers of the New Testament go to great lengths to demonstrate that Jesus' tomb was empty on Easter Sunday, because they believed Jesus was walking around in the same body they buried on Good Friday.

In fact, Jesus' resurrection body is so physical in nature that he could eat food. Luke 24:41b-43 we read that after his resurrection he asked his disciples: "Have you anything here to eat?"⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate before them."

However, it seems from the Bible that his resurrection body, though physical, wasn't identical to the body he had before he died. As you read the accounts of Jesus appearing to people after his resurrection, you see that they have trouble recognizing him at first, and only after a few minutes or few hours do they realize they'd been with Jesus.

And then there is this in Luke 24:36-37: "As they [the disciples, gathered in an upper room] were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, 'Peace to you!'³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit [or, a ghost]." When the apostle John writes of this event in his gospel he points out the door to the room where the disciples were gathered was locked.

Now, if Jesus had just knocked on the door, and the disciples let him in, I don't think they would have been startled and frightened. Yet somehow Jesus appeared in the room, though he was not a ghost. It seems that Jesus' resurrection body, while completely physical, has the ability to pass

through doors and walls. Perhaps one way to think about it is that Jesus' resurrection body can travel through different dimensions of our universe in a way our bodies cannot.

By the way, why do you think the stone over Jesus' tomb was rolled away? Did you think it was so Jesus could get out? No, it was so we could get in and witness the empty tomb.

You may think, "Alright, that's all very interesting, but what in the world does that have to do with me?" *The Bible makes it clear that what happened to Jesus after his death will also happen to all who trust in Jesus after their deaths.* The New Testament equation goes like this: Jesus was raised from the dead. If you believe in him, then you also will be raised from the dead in precisely the same way.

In the book of 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul says that Jesus is the "firstfruits" of the resurrection. Whenever you harvested a crop back then, the very first part of the crop that matures at the end of the growing season was called the firstfruits. The firstfruits would tell you is how the crop was going to turn out that year. If the firstfruits were bad, then the rest of the crop would be bad. If the firstfruits were good, then the rest of the crop would be good. In calling Jesus' resurrection the "firstfruits," Paul is assuring his readers that what happened to Jesus' body will happen to theirs.

Obviously, and unlike with Jesus, our bodily resurrection will not take place three days after we die. Most Christians believe that at death our bodies, of course, remain on earth but our souls go into some kind of intermediate state where we will be conscious of the presence of Jesus. We commonly call this place "heaven," and sometimes you'll hear it referred to as "Abraham's bosom," after the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. But that's not the focus of the apostles' teaching about what happens to Christians after they die.

The focus, instead, is on the resurrection all believers will experience together at the same time at the end of the age. You might call this "life after life after death." These resurrection bodies will never get sick, will never wear out, and will be impervious to death. Just as Jesus' resurrection body is glorious, transformed, and raised in power, so will yours be. 1 Corinthians 15:42-43: "So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power."

You see, Christianity doesn't teach that when you die you will sit on a cloud for all eternity and strum a harp, nor does it teach that when you die you'll become a guardian angel and get a halo and wings and watch over your loved ones.

That would not be comforting to me at all. I don't want to sit on a cloud for all eternity. I don't like harp music that much. And I don't look good in wings.

Both my grandfathers died before I was born, and I can remember as a kid wondering if they were now angels looking down on me. But the idea of them looking down on me all the time actually bummed me out. What if I was committing some sin and they saw me? I don't think

heaven would all that wonderful for grandparents if they had to watch their grandchildren doing dumb, hurtful, or gross things.

Friends, I don't know where all those ideas of "heaven" came from but they did not come from the Bible, because in the Scripture what we have to look forward to is not some vague, ghost-like existence but resurrection: an embodied, physical life in the new heavens and the new earth.

Second, why you should believe in resurrection. You should believe in the resurrection because it is a historical fact. Just as you believe that George Washington was the first president of the United States, you should believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

Why? First, all the evidence from the time of Jesus points to resurrection, and that evidence is trustworthy. We have all the New Testament documents, written within the lifetime of the people who witnessed the events, saying they saw the empty tomb and saying they saw the risen Jesus. Do you know how many documents, how many affidavits, we have from two thousand years ago saying, "No, his body is still in the grave, we saw it there"? Zero. You had people in the first century saying, "We don't believe a resurrection could happen," but that's not evidence. That's philosophy. All the **evidence** points to Jesus' resurrection.

Plus look at the honesty of the documents themselves. This morning we are studying Luke's gospel, which was written about thirty-five to forty years after the events they record. We read in the first several verses of Luke 24 about what the first witnesses to the resurrection saw: "they" saw an empty tomb with the stone rolled away, "they" saw two men "in dazzling apparel," "they" heard these men, presumably angels, speak, and then "they" left the empty tomb and reported this to the apostles. Who were this "they"?

"Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Luke 24:10-11.

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not happen and if it was all made up, the apostles would have never said the first witnesses were women. Why? Because in the first century women were seen as completely unreliable witnesses. Not even the apostles believed them. No man at the time would have put any stock in what women said, nor would have other women. The early church, frankly, was embarrassed that the first witnesses were women.

In fact, there was a Greek pagan philosopher named Celsus who lived about 80 years after the life of Jesus. He wrote a number of books attacking Christianity. In what he thought was one of his strongest arguments against the resurrection he said, "One of the reasons it can't be true is because the first eyewitnesses were women, and we all know that women are hysterical." We know that's wrong now, but they didn't back then. Even women agreed. Everyone reading Celsus back then said, "Yeah, that's right. It's a big problem."

The only sensible reason to explain why the New Testament names women as the first eyewitnesses is if it actually happened and they actually saw the resurrected Jesus.

The second reason you should believe is no one at the time wanted the resurrection to be true. The way a lot of people skeptical about Christianity explain away all this evidence is by saying the apostles wanted so desperately to believe that Jesus was still alive. They wanted to believe it, so they somehow managed to convince themselves of the resurrection and went around telling everyone about it. This theory sounds plausible at first, because we all know what it's like to want to believe something is true even though it's not. We all know what it's like to talk ourselves into believing that this is the year our team is going to win the SEC when we're know they're not. We think it must have been like that with the apostles and the resurrection.

But the problem with this theory is that when you actually read the Bible you see no apostle wanted to believe that Jesus would be resurrected. They wanted to believe he was **the Messiah**. The Jews believed their Messiah would kill Romans, not that they would kill him. None of the first apostles ever even dreamed the Messiah would die on the cross for their sins, so there's no way they could have wanted him raised from the dead. No one had ever conceived of a "firstfruits" resurrection before the general resurrection of God's people at the end of the age. Therefore, their subconscious desires could not have led them to believe something they knew not to be true.

The third reason to believe in the resurrection is that the apostles went to their death saying the resurrection happened. We know all the apostles died in horrible ways (crucifixion, stoning, being burned alive), but none of them ever denied the resurrection happened, and people just don't die for something they know to be a lie.

Chuck Colson, I think, gave the best argument ever for this. He was known as President Richard Nixon's "hit man." If a dirty political job needing doing, Colson would do it. Yet he, like several others in the Nixon administration, were brought down by conspiring to coverup the 1972 break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C.

Colson, after his downfall, became a Christian, and in 1983 he preached a sermon in Falls Church, Virginia where he said, "Watergate proves the resurrection of Jesus is true." In it he said, "Here were the ten most powerful men in the United States, and with all that power, we couldn't contain a lie for two weeks."

When Colson heard people suggest that accounts of Jesus' resurrection were a conspiracy perpetrated by the apostles, Colson insisted, "No way. Take it from one who was involved in conspiracy ... there is no way the eleven apostles who were with Jesus at the time of the resurrection could ever have gone around for 40 years proclaiming Jesus' resurrection unless it were true." If the apostles' story about the resurrection had begun to unravel, as the Watergate cover-up did, Colson said, "The apostles would have sold out to save their skins." He's right: there aren't five people in the world who can keep a secret. The apostles' steadfast determination to preach the resurrection in the face of torture and death means you should believe it is true.

Now, I realize that if you walked into church this morning unconvinced about the resurrection, there's a good chance you still don't believe. I know that. My goal the rest of the way is just to

show you why, even if you can't yet bring yourself to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, you should at least wish you believed it.

That gets us to the third point: why you should want to believe in the resurrection. A couple of years ago I read an article in *Wired* magazine written by a man who, after his father had been diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer and it metastasized widely throughout his body, sat down with his father and interviewed him for twelve hours. Those interviews produced a transcript containing 91,970 words, and the man took those words and turned them into a computer program that was designed to talk like his dad. He called it the "dadbot." After his father died, the author could call into the dadbot or text it and communicate with the program. Kind of like Siri on your iPhone, except with his dad's personality and memories. The title of the article was "A Son's Race to Give His Dying Father Artificial Immortality."

As I read that article I thought, "If there is no resurrection, that's the best this guy can hope for when it comes to death. He will never see his father again. All he can do is communicate with a computer program that sort of acts like his dad."

But that won't help his dad. His dad has at best been annihilated by death, and one day death will take from the author everyone else he loves, including himself. And that's the best case scenario for this guy. **If you don't believe in the resurrection, that's best case for you too.**

But the Bible says that actually it's worse than that, because we don't face annihilation when we die. We face hell. We face the punishment of God for our sins.

But then in Luke 24 we read where the angels at the empty tomb say, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man [that's a reference to Jesus] must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." Luke 24:5b-7.

Why did Jesus have to be delivered into the hands of sinful men and crucified? Because we are sinners. I don't know what you walked in here this morning and thought was your biggest problem, but in reality your biggest problem is not your marriage, or your money, or your health, or your grades, or your loneliness. Your biggest problem isn't even death. Your biggest problem is that you are a sinner you stand justly under God's wrath.

But because God is good and merciful and loving he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to live the life you should have lived and on the cross die the death you deserved to die to bear the wrath of God in your place. And because of Jesus did that you do not have to fear anything!

Donald Gray Barnhouse was the pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for many years. He and his wife Ruth had four children, and while they were still young Ruth died of cancer. Barnhouse somehow got the task of preaching the sermon at his own wife's funeral, and while he drove there with his children he kept trying to think of how to explain their mother's death to them.

He said they came to stop light on the way when a big eighteen-wheeler truck passed right by them and cast a shadow over the car, then drove away. Barnhouse said, “Kids, did you see the truck? Did you see the shadow? Would you rather be hit by the truck or the shadow of the truck?” His youngest daughter, Dorothy, said, “The shadow of the truck, Daddy.” Barnhouse said, “That’s right, love, and that’s all that has happened to mommy. She’s gone through the shadow of death, because Jesus took the truck of death for her on the cross. And because he did one day we will see her again.”

Friends, even if you don’t believe in the resurrection, you should **want to** because it means that if you trust in Christ you don’t have to be afraid of anything; *not even death*. It means that once the resurrection happens you get your loved ones back. All who trust in Jesus cannot be separated even by death – you get them back! And not as ghosts, not as spirits, not as angels, but real, flesh and blood glorified human beings. You *will* hold them again, you *will* smell them again, you *will* feast with them again. Not artificial immortality like the dadbot, but real immortality. Immortality that matters. *Now, listen: don’t you at least want that to be true?*

But you know that’s not even the main reason you should want the resurrection to be true. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears [when Jesus returns and we are resurrected] we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” 1 John 3:2.

We can’t see God right now. We only see him by faith. But then we will see him face to face. We will experience what the theologians of old called the *visio dei*, the vision of God. Once we see God with our resurrected eyes we will never want to look away, because nothing, nothing is more perfect, more glorious, more beautiful than the God who made us and loves us.

I once read about a man who every week for years went to the Art Institute of Chicago just to sit and stare at George Suerat’s painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Lest you think I’m cultured you need to know I’ve never seen it in person. I only know about it because it’s in the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. It’s the picture Cameron stares at in that one scene. This guy stared and stared and stared at it because its beauty brought him such joy. And maybe you feel that way about something or some place too, but sooner or later you have to look away. Sooner or later you have to eat, and sleep, and go make a living. It can’t sustain you so it can’t really satisfy you.

But beholding your God with your resurrected eyes will, because he made you to be satisfied by him. Beholding your God won’t just bring you joy, *it will nourish you*. It will satisfy you. You will never want to look away from his beauty and its properties are such that you’ll never have to.

Friends, even if you don’t believe in the resurrection, don’t you at least want that to be true? There’s no better news in the universe. I defy you to try and make up something better. As the old hymn puts it: “Made like him, like him we rise, ours the cross, the grave, the skies!” AMEN.