

Resurrection Sunday 2023

Death and Resurrection

Luke 24:36-48; 1 Corinthians 15

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Today is Resurrection Sunday, and all over the world billions of souls will gather in every tribe, tongue, and nation to celebrate the empty tomb. Every bit of our faith, and every bit of our hope for this life and the life to come hinges upon the resurrection of Jesus three days after His horrific death on a Roman cross. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile..."

Last Saturday, April 1st, I was reminded of how critical is this claim of the resurrection. I was performing a funeral service here at the church. It was a service in memory of one of our former staff members...the wife of one of my dear friends here at Colonial. I watched as the family grieved, as her adult children struggled to get through their sharing time. They were overcome with emotion, as were we all. When the service ended, I was heading home when I sensed the Lord prompting me to head north to AdventHealth Hospital. One of our faithful members, a woman in her 80's named Judy, was being taken off the vent. Her fate was almost certain, and I sensed that the Lord wanted me to be there with her family for those final minutes of life. When I arrived, Judy's family was gathered around her. Her husband of 59 years held on to her hand sobbing. Her middle-aged sons were crouched by her side with silent tears streaming down their cheeks. Her daughter-in-law and granddaughters wept quietly as they whispered words of affection and encouragement to their beloved matriarch...a woman of tremendous faith and integrity.

As I silently approached Judy's hospital bed, she took her final breath. Then, within a matter of a minute or so, her heart stopped beating. I was standing beside her, my hands on the shoulders of her broken husband, when she passed. At that very moment, every nerve in my body shivered, and I felt a Presence move into that hospital room. For five or six seconds, the Presence filled my entire being with heat, power, and joy. And then the Presence left.

It was over. Judy was gone. All that remained was a lifeless body, but every person in that room knew this to be true: Judy was no longer with us, but Judy was not dead. The expiration of her failing body was not the end...we all knew it as surely as we know what day it is. Judy's spirit was welcomed by the Presence, and that Presence escorted her out of that room to begin the next part of her journey.

I have stood by the bedside of many souls in their final minutes, and I have performed many, many funerals. In fact, I have performed three funerals in the past two weeks...one for a woman in her 20's; one for a woman in her 60's; and then Judy's service just a few days ago...a woman in her 80's. In every instance, the singular hope for those families who have walked through the shadow of death is exactly what we are celebrating today: the hope of the resurrection.

So, let me ask you: what do you believe when it comes to death and resurrection? Try as we might to avoid the subject, the grave awaits us all. In a matter of seconds our lives on earth can be snuffed out, or our hearts can be crushed by the news that somebody we love has died; in fact, that news is inevitable, it's just a matter of time. So, this question is relevant and necessary for us to consider on this beautiful Easter morning: what do I actually believe about death and resurrection, and why?

This morning I would like to lead you back to 1) the empty tomb on that first Sunday, and then make a quick visit to 2) the upper room later that night, and then reflect a bit with the Apostle Paul on 3) why it matters. Let us begin by returning to the Empty Tomb.

I. The Empty Tomb

All four Gospels bear witness that on the first day of the week, just days after Jesus of Nazareth was publicly crucified on a Roman cross, women desiring to adorn the dead body of Jesus with spices discovered that His tomb was empty. The large stone that had blocked the entrance to the tomb was rolled away; the linen cloth that had wrapped His body remained undisturbed, as though His body had simply evaporated out the shroud; and the cloth that had been wrapped around His head was lying neatly folded where His head once laid.

All four gospel accounts bear witness that angels from heaven were present on the scene, informing the grieving the women that Christ had risen, just as He predicted. Ironically, all four gospels are also in agreement that when the women came to the male disciples to report what they had seen and heard, the male disciples did not immediately believe them.

Both John's gospel and Mark's gospel bear witness that Jesus appeared privately to Mary Magdalene that morning. Mark and Luke bear witness that Jesus later appeared that day to two other disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke and the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15) report that Jesus had a private meeting with Simon Peter, though that meeting is not described in any of the four gospels. All four gospels then agree that Jesus appeared to the whole gathering of disciples later that evening.

Now...given that the grave awaits us all and those whom we love, given the horrible sting of death, is it reasonable to hang our hopes of the resurrection on these ancient stories found in the Bible? Is there sufficient evidence to support our deepest hope that death doesn't win...that our loved ones go on...that resurrection awaits those who have died?

As a guy who has committed my entire life in pursuit of the truth, including degrees from Wake Forest University and Princeton Theological Seminary, I would submit that there is more than sufficient evidence to lead us to believe in the resurrection of Christ...but that is only if you are willing to go where the evidence leads you. On account of time, please allow me to give you a small sampling of why I am convinced the Gospel accounts can be trusted, and why I believe that Jesus arose from the dead on the third day.

First of all, in light of all the documents we have from antiquity regarding any subject, any empire, any king, any historical event of any kind, the documentation that we have regarding the crucifixion of Jesus and the discovery of the empty tomb is unparalleled. Not only do we have multiple accounts from multiple sources that were widely distributed within the lifetime of those who could confirm or deny the events, but these sources have enough variation and distinction to lead any reasonable historian to the same conclusion: these reports fall into the category of historical reportage, not myth and legend.

In fact, the only people who might refer to the four gospel accounts as myth and legend are those people who have little to no understanding of ancient historical documents and the criteria employed to discern their historical integrity; nor could they possibly understand the creation of ancient myth and legend.

If you were to take a class in understanding ancient literature, you would learn that all ancient claims are tested according to a standard criteria including 1) the number of documents attesting to the event; 2) the dates of the documents in terms of proximity to the event; 3) the geographical distribution of the documents; 4) how those documents agree or disagree with other documents from the same period; 5) sufficient variance in details in such a way that dispels any chance of collusion; and 6) sufficient embarrassment: in other words, do we see the honest reporting of human ignorance, bias, failures, and mistakes? ¹In light of all of those tests, here's what you will find: the four gospels and the writings of the New Testament not only satisfy the criteria for historical integrity, but it is a well-known fact that the New Testament provides much of our best and most reliable history from that time and region.

Now, if you were to study ancient myths and legends, you would quickly see why the New Testament can not possibly be qualified as either myth or legend; and it really comes down to one word: *time*. Myths and legends are formed over significant periods of time...as in generations of time. Almost without exception, myths and legends point back to "events" or stories that were said to have taken place generations earlier. Aesop's Fables, Cinderella, Lord of the Rings, even Star Wars...they all take place "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away."

Now, with that mind, consider this fact: historians universally agree that 1 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul in A.D. 57², just 24 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and at least three of the gospel accounts are thought to be dated within 5-10 years of 1 Corinthians. I mention 1 Corinthians because Paul writes these words in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8: ³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

¹ I recommend Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?* as resources for further reading on this subject.

² Smith, *Great Sermons on the Resurrection of Christ*, p 258. Quoted by Dr. John Broadus, pastor and NT professor.

Just 24 years after the public execution of Jesus, Paul writes a letter that will be widely distributed reciting what was already public knowledge: Christ died, he was buried, He was raised on the third day, He appeared to Peter, the Twelve, some 500 people at one time, James, and Paul himself. There is absolutely NO possibility that this claim can be classified as a myth or a legend. There is simply not enough time.

How many of you remember where you were on September 11, 2001? It was a day that many of us will never forget. I was 31 years old, and I remember that day as if it were yesterday. I was out in the yard hitting some golf balls that morning, waiting for some pastors to pick me up. We had planned on golfing a new course in New Bern, NC that day. However, my pastor friend texted me that the World Trade Center was on fire due to a plane that had hit the North Tower. I remember running into the house, turning on the TV, and watching a minute later as a commercial airliner plowed into the South Tower. I was particularly traumatized by that event because I had been at the World Trade center just a few weeks earlier with a group of teenagers on a mission trip.

Consider now that 9/11 happened just shy of 22 years ago, and I suspect hundreds of people in this room could very accurately describe what happened that day, right? So, if someone attempted to write a myth or a legend about 9/11 suggesting that alien spaceships shot lasers into the World Trade Center and killed thousands of people, there would be hundreds of New Yorkers and millions of American citizens who would debunk that myth immediately because we were there, we were alive when it happened, and we can bear witness to the events that took place that day. If someone wanted to create a myth about alien invasions on September 11, 2001...they would have to wait until all of us eyewitnesses were long dead and gone, right?

One last thing to consider: did you know that there is not one single document from ANYBODY in antiquity attempting to challenge the claims of the four gospel accounts and the letters of the New Testament? We have thousands of parchments and manuscripts, copies upon copies of the New Testament letters dating back to the late first century...and those copies have been found all over the ancient Middle East from western modern-day Turkey all the way down through North Africa. However, we do not have one ancient document...not one...that says, "Hey, I was there in Jerusalem when the disciples claimed the tomb was empty, and it's all a bunch of bunk. His body is right over there in the common grave. Everyone from my generation can tell you exactly what happened because we were there, and these gospel stories are a hoax!" Think about it Church—a claim so outrageous as this...a claim that a man came back from the dead three days after His public and gruesome execution—it's just as unbelievable as alien spaceships shooting up the World Trade Center—and yet no one bothered to write a rebuttal? No one thought it worth the effort to set the record straight?

Church, the historical integrity of the empty tomb is well-documented, and I encourage you to do your own research. But can we agree that if, in fact, Jesus of Nazareth predicted his death on a cross and His consequent resurrection from the grave, and then He actually died on a cross and

arose on the third day, can we agree that NOTHING is more important than that fact? Nothing. If Jesus arose from the grave, the empty tomb is the hinge of history. If Jesus arose from the grave, death doesn't win. If Jesus rose again, our faith is NOT in vain, amen? Now, let us quickly visit the upper room and see what we can learn.

II. The Upper Room

In Luke's account of the upper room, here is what we find:

36 As they 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. 38 And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them. 44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you.

I want us to make a few quick observations. First, note that the resurrected Christ has a body, but it's a different kind of a body. His body has "flesh and bone," but it's a body that can appear and disappear and does not seem to be limited by walls, doors, or even time and space. His body can eat food, but we should not think that His new resurrected body has to eat food. I'm pointing these things out to³ you because the scriptures teach that when we are resurrected, we will also have new bodies. We will not live on forever as disembodied spirits, though prior to the great and final resurrection of the dead, our spirits will be with the Lord when we are absent from the body (2 Cor. 5:8).

Notice also how the disciples react to seeing the resurrected Jesus: they are startled and frightened. They think they are seeing a ghost! Jesus is not a ghost, but he's not a mere resuscitated human either. Jesus has power to know what they are thinking...He sees the doubts that are forming in their hearts. And notice that in vs. 45, "He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

Church, if you truly desire to understand the truth regarding death and resurrection...if you long to have peace and confidence in the dark valley of the shadow of death...this is what is needed. Ask Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to open your minds to understand the Scriptures. Here is what Jesus said to the disciples as He was empowering them with understanding: "Thus it is written, that

³ 1 Corinthians 15:42-49: So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. 43It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. 44It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. 45Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. 47The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. 49Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you.

The death and resurrection of Jesus was always the plan. God's plan of salvation was foreseen and predicted through the prophets, and both Jesus' death and His resurrection are to lead to this end: that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in Jesus' name to all nations.

Friends, please take careful note of what I'm about to say: all will rise, not all will be saved. All the dead will be resurrected and receive new, imperishable bodies...but not all of those souls with imperishable bodies will spend eternity in the presence of the Holy. Only those who have repented and received forgiveness in His name will be saved, redeemed, and inherit eternal life with the Father.

The unredeemed will also rise, they will also receive their imperishable bodies, but they will endure a God-less eternity in what Jesus refers to as "the outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth and the worm does not die."⁴ Such is why it is not enough to find solace in the fact that we will be resurrected. Jesus did not command His disciples to spread the news about the hope of being resurrected—He commanded them to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Church, let's say it together: good people don't go to heaven, forgiven people go to heaven, amen? Jesus died in our place and rose again on the third day not only to conquer death, but to also conquer the power of sin. The power of sin condemns our souls...we deserve punishment for all the evil we have done and all the justice we have left undone. Jesus took on our punishment as the Lamb of God so that we might repent and receive His unmerited forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary for redeemed, resurrected souls to spend eternity in God's presence. Those who remain unforgiven will most certainly abhor an imperishable body that can suffer for all eternity. Please take these words to heart: we will all rise—we will all stand before God—we are all accountable. We will all receive an imperishable body, but only those who are forgiven will live in the presence of a just God...the unforgiven will be separated from God and all that belongs to God...and that is the very worst kind of Hell one could possibly imagine.

Rather than deal with the realities of death and resurrection, our unbelieving culture finds comfort in believing that when we die, that's it. No heaven, no hell, no moral accountability, no divine justice...just a black screen without consciousness...as if we had never existed at all. I have to tell you...there is zero evidence to suggest that when we die, our existence ends. To the contrary, there is a ridiculous amount of evidence including thousands of testimonies from believers and unbelievers alike that when our heart stops and we are officially dead...even for a minute or two...our existence goes on. Our spirit leaves our body, we still think, we understand, we are still ourselves. If we are willing to go where the evidence leads us, we would have to conclude that life goes on beyond our last breath.

⁴ Matthew 8:12, 22:13, and 25:30

Again, please consider the claims of the gospel: Jesus came to us as God's only Son; He lived among us and performed unprecedented signs and wonders; over the course of His short life He fulfilled hundreds of prophecies written hundreds of years before His birth; He taught with an unrivaled authority, and His teachings are still the most quoted, most lived by, most studied of any teacher who has ever lived. Jesus then willingly went to the cross on our behalf. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that God made Him to be sin who had no sin that we might become the righteousness of God. On the cross Jesus interceded for our forgiveness, and then, three days later, when He arose with an imperishable body...having defeated death and the power of sin, Jesus stated clearly: *proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sin to all nations*...and that's what I'm doing right now. Friends, take it from a guy who has watched many people die...who has walked through the valley of death with so, so many people: what we believe about death and resurrection truly matters...and there is only one name under heaven that can save us when we breathe our last. His name is Jesus, amen? Repent of your sin and call upon His name to be saved.

Let me conclude now with just a thought or two from the Apostle Paul regarding why this all matters.

III. Why It Matters

I hope you will take some time this week and read 1 Corinthians 15. Paul devotes an entire chapter to unpacking the significance of the resurrection. Paul argues that the resurrection is at the heart of our faith. He writes in vs. 14, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." Paul is writing to a few outliers in Corinth who, like so many in our country, don't believe in the resurrection of the dead. You might be interested to know that it was the Apostle Paul who wrote in vs. 32, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

Listen, Paul gets it, and so do I. If we truly believe that there is no life to come; no God who will hold us accountable; no heaven and no hell—then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. That's how a lot of people think; that's how a lot of people live. But I would beg you...and I would beg them...examine the evidence. Read the Gospels for yourself. Consider also the weight of historical observation...that since the beginning of human civilizations, literally every tribe, tongue and culture has assumed that life goes on after our last breath. It's only within the past 150 years or so...thanks to Marxism and Darwinism...that many in Western countries have begun to espouse the absence of an afterlife. However, generally speaking, it would seem that human beings are wired with eternity in mind. Most of the world's greatest thinkers, poets, musicians, sculptors, and artists have pondered the life to come. Most have observed that there is something eternal in all human beings, and the Bible gives an account for that—we were created in God's image (Genesis 1-2), and God breathed eternity into all of us. Our souls are eternal...we will go on. Listen to Paul's description of the life to come in 1 Corinthians 15:50 ff:

⁵⁰I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and

we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

For the Apostle Paul, the hope of the resurrection is not just a historical fact based on the empty tomb outside Jerusalem; it’s not just a hope for those who are dying or grieving the loss of a loved one...the hope of the resurrection is exactly the motivation and conviction Paul draws upon to pour out his life as a servant of Jesus.

Paul writes, “Therefore”...due to the hope and certainty of the resurrection and our victory over death---due to the promise of immortality and our new, imperishable body—therefore, *be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

The great Baptist preacher and scholar, John Broadus, writes: Only fixed convictions will produce permanent Christian activity; and only those who are actively at work will maintain fixed convictions. The two may stand together: either attempted alone will fail.⁵

What we believe about death and resurrection matters. It informs our entire worldview, motivates our work, justifies our sacrifices, and ultimately shapes our character. What we believe about death and resurrection also informs how we grieve. Do we grieve as those without hope, or do we grieve as those who have hope for the life to come? Such is why I hope each and every one of you will give careful attention to what you believe and why...and do so now, before you are gathered around that bed of a dying loved one or find yourself at the end of your life.

My testimony is consistent with the Apostle Paul and many who are here today, as well as millions around the world in every tribe, tongue and culture. I will not fear death; I will not despair; I will remain steadfast, immovable, always seeking to abound in the work of the Lord...and why? I’ll tell you why: Christ has risen! He is risen indeed!

Let us pray.

⁵ Quoted from his sermon entitled, “Resurrection of the Body.” Found in *Great Sermons on the Resurrection of Christ* by Wilbur M. Smith.