

March 27, 2016

## *My Lord and My God*

### **John 20:1 – 18; 24 – 31**

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! This morning we gather to celebrate a real event in history that happened 2,000 years ago during one Passover week in the old city of Jerusalem. Along with Christmas, it is one of the high holy days of Christianity. Easter. Resurrection day! Jesus of Nazareth, crucified in apparent defeat on a Friday and buried in a borrowed tomb, rises again in triumph from that tomb on Sunday morning. This is **the** watershed moment of all of history. This event is one of the bedrock foundation truths of our faith. And yet, increasingly in Christian circles, the fact of the resurrection of Jesus is being questioned, or spiritualized or marginalized by people who call themselves Christians. A few years ago, N.T. Wright, a highly respected Anglican theologian told an interviewer with the Australian "I have friends who I am quite sure are Christians who do not believe in the bodily resurrection,"<sup>1</sup> Although he himself believes in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he sees no reason why you must believe in Jesus' actual bodily resurrection to be a Christian.

In defending his position, Wright surprisingly points, not to the Bible but to his relationship with his friend Marcus Borg, who finds himself in that position: "*Marcus Borg really does not believe Jesus Christ was bodily raised from the dead. But I know Marcus well: he loves Jesus and believes in him passionately. The philosophical and cultural world he has lived in has made it very, very difficult for him to believe in the bodily resurrection.*"<sup>2</sup> In doing this, Wright aligns himself with an increasing number of people who call themselves Christians and believe something happened on Easter, even something beautiful, but certainly not a physical resurrection of a dead body. Rather, they see the resurrection as a story meant to convey a metaphorical way of expressing the ongoing experience of Christ in the life of His followers. And in many ways, to many people, Easter has become simply a symbol of something. Not a reality, not fact, but a symbol. A symbol of rebirth or renewal. A symbol of the return of spring after a long, cold tomb-like winter. A symbol of hope in the face of despair.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ is first of all good news of real events that actually happened. We are not peddling metaphors this morning. The heart of the gospel is that **Christ is risen!** If He had not risen – we would be fools to be here. The real, actual resurrection of Christ from the dead is the central fact of the gospel. The Bible teaches and believing Christians agree that the resurrection of Jesus is the key element of our faith. Popular apologist Josh McDowell wrote, "***The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together***"<sup>3</sup> George Eldon Ladd, Baptist minister and seminary professor said "*If Christ is not risen from the dead, the long course of God's redemptive acts to save his people ends in a dead-end street, in a tomb. If the resurrection of Christ is not reality, then we have no assurance that God is the living God, for death has the last word. Faith is futile because the object of that faith has not vindicated himself as the Lord of life. Christian faith is then incarcerated in the tomb along with the final and highest self-revelation of God in Christ--if Christ is indeed dead.*"<sup>4</sup>

Everything in our Christian faith centers on the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And this morning I want to do three things: first, I want to give you good, solid evidence of His resurrection; second, I want to give you reasons why the resurrection of Jesus is so vital to believers and non-believers alike; and finally, to spell out some of the implications of the resurrection for you. I am anticipating and expecting at least two things to happen this morning: one is that for those who already believe in Christ, your faith would be strengthened; and the second is that for those who do not yet believe in Christ, faith would be awakened in your hearts to believe.

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1 <http://www.albertmohler.com/2006/04/16/not-all-christians-believe-in-the-resurrection-of-christ/>

2 <http://www.albertmohler.com/2006/04/16/not-all-christians-believe-in-the-resurrection-of-christ/>

3 Josh McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, (Regal Publishers, 1982) 179.

4 George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1993), 354.

You need to understand that Christianity is not a kind of mindless faith that has no basis in fact. Faith is not wishful thinking, faith is not a kind of blind hope, or a surrender of reason. Biblical faith is a decision to believe something about God and His Son Jesus based on evidence, the kind of evidence that would stand up in a court of law. Look at Thomas. *"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."* What does Jesus do? Does He rebuke Thomas? Does He say, 'Just believe, Thomas – just close your eyes and have faith'? No. He says, *"Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."* 'Thomas, believe in the evidence before you'. John reminds us in this passage that he wrote his gospel, detailing people, places and events, *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.* In other words, 'Here's the evidence. Now believe'. John is telling us about real people, real events that happened in real places so that faith would rise in our hearts.

Ever since Jesus rose from the dead, men have tried to suppress the truth, cover the truth, pervert the truth, and otherwise discredit the resurrection. But no matter how hard they have tried to relegate it to myth, legend or lie, the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ remains the central incontrovertible, unchangeable, and life-transforming fact of the Christian faith. So first of all this morning let's look at the evidence for the resurrection. You see, our faith is not founded on what we merely wish to be true; it is founded on historical evidence, historical facts. In this world of pluralism and relativism, where people like to pick and choose their own reality when it comes to matters of faith, only Christianity can offer solid proofs of its authenticity. It is strange that it is only in matters of faith that people choose to be practicing relativists. We are not relativists when it comes to things like how much money I have in my bank account. Nobody thinks it is okay to have different truths about your bank balance. We wouldn't tolerate banks that used creative accounting methods because that was the truth as they saw it. Why would we tolerate a relative pluralism when it comes to the most important questions of life?

No, our faith is based in fact and there are many proofs of the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. However this morning we'll just look at three of them. These are my top three rock-solid proofs that I pray will work to strengthen the faith of you who already believe, and awaken faith in you who do not – the evidence of the empty tomb; the evidence of the eyewitnesses; the evidence of changed lives. First of all, let's look at the evidence for the empty tomb. John tells us: *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. 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."*

Both Jewish and Roman historic sources testify to an empty tomb, as does the Bible. Matthew 28:12-13 specifically states that the **chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body.** In other words, if the tomb had not been empty, they wouldn't have had to come up with a story. Furthermore, if the tomb had not been empty, the preaching of His followers wouldn't have lasted twenty-four hours. All anyone needed to do was produce the body of Jesus. That the tomb was empty, has never been in serious dispute from any scholar, secular or Biblical. But from the moment the tomb was discovered to be empty – attempts to cover it up by those who opposed Christ began to be invented. Let's look at some of the most popular inventions.

First of all we have the wrong tomb theory. Proponents of this theory claim that the women who visited the grave early in the morning were distraught and emotionally unstable and in their confusion, went to the wrong tomb. However, you would have to accuse the men of the same emotional instability because they ran to the same tomb after hearing what the women said. And if none of his followers got it right, the Jewish and Roman authorities certainly knew where it was, after all, they were guarding the thing. The Gospels make it clear the body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. If the body was still in the tomb while the His followers were telling everyone He had risen, the authorities simply would have to go to the right tomb, produce the body, and march it down the streets. This would have ended the Christian faith once and for all. Remember, the preaching of the Resurrection began in Jerusalem, just a few minutes away from the crucifixion site and the tomb.

Some people prefer the sleeping soldier theory. But you have to ask yourself, if the soldiers were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body? Furthermore, it seems physically impossible for the disciples to sneak past the soldiers and then move a two-ton stone up an incline in absolute silence. Certainly the guards would have heard something. Also, the tomb was secured with a Roman seal. Anyone who moved the stone would break the seal, an offense punishable by death. The depression and cowardice of the disciples during this whole time, makes it difficult to believe that they would suddenly find the courage to risk certain death by breaking the seal. Furthermore, Roman guards were not likely to fall asleep with such an important duty. There were penalties for doing so – like death! Finally, John tells us the grave clothes were found *"lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself separate from the linen"* [John 20:6-7] It is highly unlikely the disciples were able to sneak past the guards, roll away the stone, unwrap the body, neatly fold the burial cloths and take off with the body without raising the alarm.

Another theory began immediately after the resurrection and Matthew thought it was so good he included it in his account. *And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'* [Matthew 28:12-13] You honestly have to wonder if Matthew was having a little fun with skeptics of the resurrection. I think also that he was making a point. There will always be those who will refuse to believe and invent stories to avoid the truth. To steal the body, His disciples would have had to take care of the Roman soldiers, who were most certainly not sleeping, and then get rid of it. And because the resurrection of Jesus was the central pillar of their message, how are these guys going to convince anyone of the resurrection if they knew it was a lie? And why would they perpetuate a lie that only got them hunted down and tortured, maimed and killed? There was very little money in it, and a very short future.

My favorite theory though is the swoon theory. This one says that Jesus never died on the cross but merely passed out and was mistakenly considered dead. After three days He revived, exited the tomb, and appeared to His disciples who believed He had risen from the dead. *One lady wrote in to a Bible question and answer forum with this very question. 'Our pastor said on Easter, that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think? Her pastor replied: 'Beat your preacher bloody, with a whip tipped with flesh-tearing metal, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear through his side and put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.'* All of these theories only point out the lengths people will go to avoid the staggering implications of the resurrected Christ. And then there is the evidence of the eyewitnesses.

The risen Christ appeared to many people over a period of 40 days – at one point to over 500 at one time. That's a lot of witnesses to the resurrection. Paul lays it out in 1 Corinthians: *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.* 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Lee Strobel, prominent Christian speaker and author, put it like this... *"If we were holding a trial to determine the facts concerning the resurrection, and if we were to call to the witness stand every witness who personally encountered the resurrected Jesus and we cross-examined them for only 15 minutes, and if we went around the clock without a break...we would be listening to first-hand testimony for more than 128 hours...that's over 5 days worth of testimony...who could possibly walk away unconvinced?"* The fact is, too many people, in too many places saw and interacted with the risen Christ for this to be covered up successfully. Paul himself was almost begging his readers to verify his story. 'Listen', he says, 'most of the people to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection are still alive, go ask them about it!'

And then you have the women in the story. If you were attempting to provide proof to your audience that Jesus was risen from the dead, one thing you would not do is appeal to women as witnesses. In the first century, women were not even eligible to testify in a Jewish court of law. Josephus said that even the witness of multiple women was not acceptable "*because of the levity and boldness of their sex.*" Celsus, the second-century critic of Christianity, mocked the idea of Mary Magdalene as an alleged resurrection witness, referring to her as a "*hysterical female ... deluded by ... sorcery.*"<sup>5</sup> If these were as some claimed even at the time, "cleverly devised myths" [2 Pet. 1:16], women would never have been presented as the first eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. You don't invent a story and then back it up with unreliable witnesses.

I think, however, that the strongest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, is the evidence of changed lives. That is, the fact of His resurrection will change the way you think, the way you act the way you live. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, the gospel of Mark records that all the disciples left Him and fled – in fact one young man we presume is Mark the writer, was in such a hurry to leave the scene that he left the sheet he was wearing behind and ran naked out of the garden. During Jesus' trials, none of the disciples stood up for Him, and Peter, who was sneaking around, trying to get a fix on what was happening, was confronted by a little serving girl and denied with swearing, that he even knew the guy. Only one of the disciples made it to the crucifixion, and two of them only went to the tomb because the women had been there first. Otherwise they stayed locked inside the house, for fear of their lives.

But something happened. Something happened to that small band of frightened and humiliated men. Because less than two months later — they were in Jerusalem, the city that killed Jesus, boldly preaching, even under the threat of death, that Jesus was alive. Listen to Peter in Acts 2: "*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men... This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.*" [Acts 2:22-32] What transformed these fearful and confused men into fierce, bold lions was the indisputable evidence of the resurrection? They saw Jesus! They talked to Him! They walked with Him! They ate with Him! And eventually most of them died for Him. While men will often give their lives for something they believe to be true, they will never give their lives for something they know is a lie. So all the evidence points to the real, actual bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ – so why is that important?

First of all, the resurrection of Jesus was the seal of authenticity on everything He did and everything He said. "*God did not make Himself known through a system of teaching nor a theology nor a book, but through a series of events recorded in the Bible. The coming of Jesus of Nazareth was the climax of this series of redemptive events; and His resurrection is the event that validates all that came before.*"<sup>6</sup> It means that Jesus' claim that He was **the** way, not **a** way, to the Father, is true.<sup>7</sup> It means that His claim to be eternal is true.<sup>8</sup> It means that His claim to be the very 'I Am', God Himself, is true.<sup>9</sup> It means that His claims to having authority to forgive sins is true.<sup>10</sup> The resurrection proves that He is indeed the Son of God who was sent to earth by His heavenly Father to redeem the world.

And it is His resurrection that proves that His sacrifice for our sins was acceptable to God. This is what the apostles preached as we read in the book of the Acts of the Apostles where Paul is speaking in the synagogue: "*When they had carried out all that was written about Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead... Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.*" [Acts 13:29,30, 38] Sin is the issue that separates us from God. And at the heart of sin is our self-will, insisting on our own way, doing things like we want to do them, without regard for God. You see, our sin against God demands a penalty, and the Bible says that penalty is death. We should die. And unless something happens to short-circuit that penalty, we will. And it was Jesus who came and lived the perfect, obedient life we should have lived and died the awful death we should have died. He paid the penalty of death we all owe, and in vindication of this perfect sacrifice, God raised Him up on the third day. And in doing that, God proclaims that the death of His Son pays the penalty for all our sins.

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5 Andreas Kostenburger and Justin Taylor, Five Errors to Drop From Your Easter Sermon, *Christianity Today*, April 2014

6 George Eldon Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1993), 254.

7 John 14:6, ESV

8 John 17:5, ESV

9 John 8:58, ESV

10 Luke 5:20-21; Luke 7:48-49, ESV

And not only that, His resurrection opens the door to eternal life. Our physical bodies will one day die and be turned back into the dust from which we were made. But the resurrection of Jesus means that His claim that those who believe in Him will have eternal life is true: *'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die...'*<sup>11</sup> This is the firm assurance that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, never to taste death again, so we too will one day rise again. *And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by His power.* [1 Corinthians 6:14]

This is very important because being raised from the dead also implies that there is some kind of future judgement. Paul refers to this when he is talking to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17: *'Because [God] has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man who He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.'* [Acts 17:31] In other words, God will one day call to judgment the bodies of all who are in the grave, and bring back every person drowned at sea, cremated, or destroyed in some other way, to a final accounting. This is no problem to the One who made something out of nothing when He spoke the universe into existence. The Bible affirms this truth: *'It is appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment.'*<sup>12</sup> That means we all face a final accounting. It means there are no do-overs. There is no karma, no recycled souls or reincarnation. One life is all we have and our eternal future hangs on what we do with the resurrected Jesus.

So what are the practical implications for us? Frankly, there are so many it is difficult to know where to stop. First of all, if you believe in Christ, if you believe that God raised Him from the dead and your sins are forgiven in Him, then you have a great and living hope. We've been going through the book of 1 Peter here this year and right in the beginning Peter tells us: *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.'* [1 Peter 1:3] You won't get this in any other religion or philosophy or world view. Buddhists and Hindus have no hope. Life is an endless series of reincarnations until you get it right. Muslims have no hope. Nobody knows if Allah will be merciful. Nobody knows if you've done enough to make him happy. All of the other religions in the world depend on your efforts. Only Christianity says that salvation is based on what Christ has done, not what you can do. The best anyone without Christ has is wishful thinking, not hope.

If the resurrection is true, then it is all true. It doesn't matter what you believe to be true. And if you refuse to believe in this Jesus whom God raised from the dead, then you will one day stand before Him with no defense and no excuse. You see, the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus means that if you believe in Him, you will not be judged on what you have done, but on what Christ has done. And if this is true, then nothing is more important in our lives, nothing is more crucial or more urgent or more needful than believing it and becoming a follower of Jesus. If He is who He says He is, and final judgment is sure, then you need to make a decision. Will I accept the risen Savior as Lord of my life – or will I continue to live life on my own terms?

It doesn't matter if you believe in heaven or hell. The resurrection of Jesus says they're real. Heaven is eternal life with God, where all your pleasures are righteous, all your thoughts are pure, all your desires are God-borne and God-blessed – a place where the reality of full joy and perfect peace is not a myth or mere wish. Hell on the other hand, by all accounts, is very hot and very long – it is the absence of all the things that make heaven, heaven, and it lasts forever. Charles Spurgeon was emphasizing to his class the difference between heaven and hell and he said: *'When you speak of Heaven, let your face light up, let it be irradiated with a heavenly gleam, let your eyes shine with reflected glory. But when you speak of Hell, well, then your ordinary face will do.'*

But you need to settle the question of heaven or hell in your own heart today. Today is the day of salvation – don't harden your heart against Him. The Bible says, *'...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord; and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.'* [Romans 10:9] My prayer this morning is that you would respond to the Holy Spirit's call and the word of God and confess Jesus as Lord.

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11 John 11:25, ESV

12 Hebrews 9:27, NASB

That's what happened to Thomas. John tells us what happened. *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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"* [John 20:28] Doubting Thomas, who would not believe without some evidence. Doubting Thomas who had to see the nail prints and put his hand in the wound the spear had made. Doubting Thomas, who was lovingly rebuked for his doubt, and graciously invited to believe the evidence of the resurrection of the risen Christ. How about you this morning? Have you seen the evidence of the risen Christ? Do you understand the implications if this is true? It is not enough to mentally assent to the fact of His resurrection. We must confess, as Thomas did, 'My Lord and my God!'.

Notice that Thomas does not merely say 'Lord and God'. He says, 'My Lord and my God'. In other words Thomas recognizes the absolute power and authority of this risen Christ in his own life. A lot of people see Jesus as this great moral teacher who had a lot of great things to say, and lived a kind of life we should all try to emulate. But the resurrection won't let you get away with that. The fact of the resurrection forces you to either crown Him as Lord of your life or dismiss Him entirely. There is nothing in between. You either bow before Jesus as your Lord and your God, or you shake your fist in His face. He is Lord, your Savior. And He is God, your maker. This is what it means to be a Christian. It means you look at the risen Christ and confess, 'My Lord and my God'. Until you see Him as this, not just a good moral teacher, not just a good example, not even as someone who will help you out in tight spots or carry you over the rough patches in life, but as the one who is the center of your life, as someone to whom you bow down in everything, you haven't really believed. This is the great confession of faith and expression of belief – 'My Lord and my God!'

If you have never made that confession of faith, I want to invite you to do that this morning. Maybe you're saying, 'Well that's all and good for Thomas, he actually saw the risen Lord. But I haven't'. Jesus has something to tell you this morning, the same thing He told Thomas, *"Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

*Our gracious and loving Father,*

*We thank You this morning for sending Your Son to die for our sins on the cross. We rejoice that You accepted His sacrifice on our behalf by raising Him from the dead. We confess that we are sinners and we deserve Your righteous judgment. We have not loved You as we ought; we have chosen to go our own way; and in a thousand other ways we have sinned against heaven and against You. Forgive us O Lord, for our hard-hearted pride and deliberate sin. Forgive us for not loving You and counting You more precious than life. By the sacrifice of Jesus and by the power of His resurrection, forgive our sin and give us a new heart and cause us to walk in Your will. Grant Oh Lord, that we would serve you with the passion that we once served ourselves and that our highest joy would be to do what You want. Thank You for the promise of mercy and grace for those who repent. Show us the infinite and all satisfying glory of the risen Christ and give us hearts that love You supremely. Fill us, Holy Spirit, with new life and a fresh desire to glorify God in our lives, we pray in the precious and powerful name of our resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.*

