



2021 Weekly Devotions

Week of: April 5th - April 11th

Sermon: April 4th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
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April 5

Luke 1:1-4

We began yesterday's sermon by discussing Luke's intent in writing his gospel. The book was not written as a stage for Luke's own private, personal opinions on Christ. Instead, the gospel of Luke was composed in order to provide a thorough and credible narrative of the works and identity of Christ.

The book is addressed to "Theophilus". The name literally means "loved by God". We are not sure who this person was but, by virtue of Luke's addressing him as "most excellent" (v. 3), it seems likely that he was some sort of Roman dignitary who had come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The larger, and more important, truth is that Luke is writing with the purpose of affirming a person in what he has been taught about Jesus. This was not a theoretical, or academic, work. The gospel of Luke is immensely practical and purposeful in unveiling the true Messiah.

The purpose of the devotion is to examine Luke's claims regarding the nature and veracity of his gospel. This goal is manifest in two distinct ways, first when Luke describes Jesus' resurrection, he does so as the culmination of a book that was written in order to provide "certainty" to Theophilus regarding the things this man had been taught about the nature of Christ. The term "certainty" means absolute conviction, a thorough knowledge of what has taken place that is not subject to doubt. Luke wants this man (and all of his readers) to KNOW that Jesus was the Son of God.

So, Luke sets out in writing this account by providing a narrative that is both "orderly" and predicated on the testimony of eyewitnesses. Luke's gospel is not a disorganized mess, instead it follows a logical theme as it proceeds through various instances in the life of Christ. It is quite clear that Luke's desire is for us to read his book and walk away with an accurate and easy to follow account of the identity and work of Christ.

Second, notice that Luke is clear that this book is comprised of testimonies of eyewitnesses who delivered their stories to Luke. An eyewitness account is incredibly invaluable. In fact, in a court of law, a witness to the crime is a key piece of evidence for a prosecution. If you have a credible, and knowledgeable eyewitness, their testimony is hard to refute! This is the backbone of Luke's writing. What this book gives us are multiple credible testimonies of what actually took place. The foundation of Luke's writing is historic attestation of events and words that were observed and confirmed by multiple witnesses. To deny this book is to call them into question. To refuse to accept Luke's writing is to, essentially, claim their testimony is invalid.

Why does this matter? The answer is that Luke is making truth claims based on what he has deemed to be reliable, historic fact. He is not telling us what he thinks might have happened or what he would have liked to have happened, he is telling us what HAS happened and, as such, he requires us to decide.

Folks, the simple truth is that Jesus was laid to rest in a tomb as a dead man. He was crucified and buried but He did not stay dead! In fact, multiple pieces of evidence corroborate the otherwise unbelievable account that our great God and Savior triumphed over the grave. As such, we can have certainty that Jesus was in fact Divine and that He did rise from the grave. Luke's gospel demands that we pay attention to it precisely because of the orderly and overwhelming evidence he provides. We must decide regarding Christ, and the evidence tells us that He was dead, but now He's alive again!

April 6

Matthew 27:62-68

On Sunday, we discussed three key pieces of evidence that serve to substantiate Luke's belief that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. The first proof of the resurrection is the empty tomb. We stated that Jesus' burial place was named and identified as belonging to Joseph of Arimathea and, therefore, it could have been easily visited and verified by First Century readers.

One historically popular objection to this line of evidence is the theory that perhaps the disciples, or someone else, stole the body of Christ thereby producing an empty tomb without a resurrection. Many skeptics have attempted to go down this road over the years, but the simple truth is that the testimony of the Scriptures makes that idea extremely unlikely... in fact it is practically impossible.

Matthew's account of the resurrection takes this potential objection and runs with it. In our text today, Matthew teaches us that the Pharisees remembered Jesus' prophecy regarding His resurrection and so they sought extra protection for the tomb as they considered the threat of someone stealing the body to attempt to prove Christ's resuscitation.

Pilate agrees to their request for guards for the tomb and assigns Roman soldiers to the task. These men who were accountable for keeping watch over the tomb were highly trained and also keenly aware of their responsibility. In fact, we learn from secular historians, that the penalty of failing to keep a prisoner (or in this case, a body) secure was death for the guard! This means that Rome ensured that those offering security were extremely motivated to be on watch.

The point of this text for the day is simply to buttress Luke's account and eliminate any possible loose ends. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead and evaded the detection of the Roman guards is supernatural in nature. After all, the opening of the tomb was the only physical entrance (something His resurrected body did not have to utilize) and the men who were assigned to watch over Him had no other responsibility. How could Jesus have been stolen? How could He have escaped in anyway unless there be supernatural realities at play?

What is more likely, that Jesus' disciples, who were scared to death of the Romans and unskilled in counter attacks, somehow deceived the guards, rolled the stone away and took the body OR that our supernatural Messiah rose from the dead and avoided their detection? This would be an absolute about face from everything we have read regarding the ability and resolve of the disciples to that point. Would Peter, who just a few hours prior, had denied Christ before the crowds have found the courage to risk his life for a dead body? What would be the end game? Would he really want to perpetuate this narrative now that his master still lay in the ground? Would these unskilled, common men have the ability to pull off such a heist? It is absolutely absurd to think so! Nevertheless, the tomb was empty... how?

While it might seem strange to say, the simple truth is that the biblical testimony of the resurrection makes the most sense! The world did absolutely everything it could to prevent this from happening but, in the end, our great God and Savior overcomes every attempt to thwart His plan.

April 7

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

There is a popular phrase that is often employed to describe situations that are hopelessly difficult. They often arise in my house, when we have a dispute amongst the children and the result is two different stories, two different motivations and two different parties that are to blame. We call that situation a “he said, she said” argument. The only way out of a “he said, she said” dispute is for others to arise with their own testimony. The logic is simple, and it goes like this, the more witnesses, the more credibility an account acquires. This is true in the day-to-day situations of life and it is also true in the most important judgments as well.

Was Jesus’ resurrection a case of “he said, she said” or was it more concrete? There was a small fraction of people who denied the resurrection and there were, initially, a small group of women who testified that it occurred. What are we to do with the conflicting stories? Well, the Bible teaches us that while the women were the first to discover the empty tomb, many more encountered the risen Lord.

In our text for today, the Apostle Paul recounts five different subsets of people whom the risen Christ interacted with at various times after the resurrection. The Lord spoke with Cephas (Peter), the twelve, a crowd of 500, James and then, lastly, the Apostle Paul. Each of these groups of people testify that Jesus is alive and well and each of them serve to further strengthen our conviction that the Lord really did rise from the grave.

There are three truths that I would like to point out briefly as it relates to the witnesses. First, notice that Paul mentions that many of these witnesses are still alive. This is crucially important! The Apostle is not writing several centuries later about something that reportedly happened, instead he harkens back to a relatively short time before and he mentions the reality that his first readers could, in fact, validate these claims with living witnesses. Unlike many other religious texts that speak about supposed events that took place centuries before or in other localities or planets, the Christian worldview is supported by testimony of living, common people.

Second, notice the diversity of their backgrounds and encounters. Peter saw Jesus alone (presumably), the Apostles encountered him together, the 500 interacted with Christ in a group, the women at the tomb saw Him immediately after His resurrection and the Apostle Paul encountered Christ months after the fact! This is not a case of “groupthink” whereby a localized crowd works to convince one another that something happened in their midst. In fact, this is a varied and distinct collaboration of voices from diverse backgrounds and experiences all saying the same thing!

Third, notice the manner in which this experience shaped several of the witnesses. Paul, James, and Peter were all martyred for their faith in the resurrection. Paul transformed from an ardent opponent of Christ to, arguably, His most vocal supporter and believer. The apostles dedicated their lives to writing about and proclaiming the marvelous truths of the Gospel, hundreds of people encountered the various witnesses and were converted. Does this seem like a sham to you? No, the simplest explanation is that something took place that radically altered the course of these people’s lives... and that something was seeing the resurrected Lord.

April 8

2 Peter 1:21

“The Bible was written by men!” Have you heard that statement before? My guess is that you answered that question in the affirmative. This idea that the Bible is unreliable because it was written by mere mortals is pretty commonplace and it would be a very credible line of argument... if it were not for God’s superintending presence.

You see, we do believe that men physically put pen to paper, but we also understand that the Bible was inspired by the Spirit of God and that God supernaturally and actively guided (our text uses an even more assertive term “carried”) these men along as they wrote the Scriptures. The result of this process then is not the concoction of man but the inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of God which is totally perfect precisely because it originated not in the minds of men but in the mind of God who then led men to author their various books of the canon.

What does this have to do with the resurrection? The answer is that the same process of interpretation and revelation is in play in the gospel of Luke. When the women first discover the tomb of Jesus, they are confused and actually incorrect in their assumptions. In fact, John tells us that Mary began to weep when she saw the empty tomb. When the angels asked her why she was crying, she explained she was upset because someone had taken Christ! In her fallen, finite mind, she never dreamt of the resurrection.

Now, this is a bit of an implication, but we would guess that Mary would not have altered her opinion if left to her own devices. There is nothing that suggests that she is searching for other explanations, instead it is quite obvious that she thinks she knows what has happened. Imagine, if you will, if there was no supernatural intervention. Picture Mary continuing to search for Jesus and telling her friends, family and even acquaintances that Jesus’ body was stolen! This is a fairly easy situation to picture and yet that is not at all what happened. Mary’s belief about the location of Jesus’ body changes, but why?

The answer is supernatural revelation. While Mary is bewildered, the angels (who were sent by God) correct her in her thinking and provide her with supernatural insight into the truth of the resurrection. If it were not for the angels, mankind may have been hopelessly led astray by Mary’s genuine but misinformed opinion. However, God in His grace sent these heavenly beings to make sure that Mary had the right information and only then did God’s plan include the women at the tomb going forth and proclaiming the truth to the disciples.

The point of the devotion is simple... God is Sovereign, and He intervenes amongst men in order to make sure we have accurate information regarding the identity and work of His Son. Just as the angels were Sovereignly placed to safeguard against falsehood so the Spirit supernaturally worked to protect God’s Word from falsehood, even carrying men to the right, Divine instructions! This means we can trust His Word and it means that the Bible originated not in men, but in God.

April 9

Acts 4:20 & 1 John 1:1-4

The final piece of evidence mentioned on Sunday was the effect of the resurrection on those who witnessed it. An event of this magnitude is not the kind of thing that people experience and then simply move on from, instead if a resurrection did really happen and if people did in fact converse with a risen Lord, their lives must necessarily change.

The obvious question is did it? Did the resurrected Lord produce an obvious effect in the lives of the people who saw Him? Our two texts today explicitly state that it did. Notice how Peter and John root their witness to Christ in what they have observed. Peter says I cannot stop speaking about what I've "seen and heard". John states something similar saying "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also".

Both of these statements are phrased as witnesses. Notice neither Apostle states they are simply talking about what they "believe" or "think". Instead, they both say their lives and their testimonies are predicated on the very things they have observed. Their seeing Jesus' life, His death, and His resurrection are the very foundation and motivation of their ministry.

The Apostles ministry was not based on philosophy, or their best reasoning skills. They weren't debating various truths that they thought made the most sense, instead they were simply telling others what they had experienced and observed.

This ministry of Peter and John's was characterized by boldness and conviction. We would expect nothing less from men who really did see the miraculous, but we would anticipate far less from those who either were not telling the truth or who were speaking speculatively. If they really saw Christ, if they really believed in resurrection, doesn't it stand to reason that these men would be willing to boldly proclaim the hope of resurrection and willingly risk their temporal lives for the sake of the Gospel?

You see if resurrection is real. If it is true that Christ rose from the grave and that those who believe in Him will follow Him in kind, then it becomes much easier to understand a willingness to risk a man's current life and reputation for the joy and hope of what is to come.

Only resurrection and the victory that it promises to provide the explanation for the ministry of the Apostles, and this is exactly what John and Peter are telling us. They want people to come into contact with the One they came to know and observe. They want people to hear stories of what they had seen. They desire others to come to know the power of God that is available only in the Gospel of Christ. They believe that they know One who overcame the grave.

April 10

1 Corinthians 15:21-23

Today's text is one of my all-time favorites. It provides great hope and joy as we reflect on the reason for our Christian hope. Christianity's message is founded upon resurrection. If Christ did not resurrect from the grave, we are still dead in our sins. Conversely, if Jesus did rise from the grave then we have hope of overcoming our greatest, and universal, enemy which is death.

There is one word in our passage that I would like to focus on as it relates to our hope of eternal life and that is the term "firstfruits". The word denotes the very first in an oncoming harvest. To say that Christ is the "firstfruits" is to proclaim that He is the first of many. This reality, that Jesus' resurrection, is the prototype is the very reason why we have hope.

You see, if Jesus rose from the grave but did not promise resurrection for anyone else, we would be rightly amazed at His power but no more hopeful in our own lives. It is only as we come to grasp the reality that what He has accomplished is transferred to those who believe that we rejoice in the hope of the Gospel.

So, why do we believe that we will enjoy eternal life? Because Jesus is the firstfruits! He is the One who has displayed God's power over the grave and He has demonstrated for us the reality that those who are in Christ have the opportunity to follow Him as He ascends into the Father's presence for all eternity. This separates our faith from every other worldview on the planet. Muhammed and Buddha and many others taught various things to their followers but none of them displayed power to overcome the certain death that faces each and every person.

Some folks thought these men were enlightened but, in the end, they proved impotent to conquer the great foe that all mankind faces. Jesus, on the other hand, was a wise and masterful teacher (far greater than any other man) but He was far more than that. He was the conquering King. He slayed the enemy of Satan and death and He demonstrated His victory and power when He got up from the grave two thousand years ago, an accomplishment that cannot be replicated by any mere mortal.

The Christian faith is predicated on the reality that Jesus conquered death and, therefore, those who are found in Him will experience His victory as well. We believe that what happened on the first Easter Sunday morning is not isolated, instead because of Christ's power and the sufficiency of His work on the cross, we can all experience resurrection as well!

The final question we need to answer today is how? How does a man enjoy this resurrection? The answer is found in verse 17 (and many other places in the Scripture), as the Apostle tells us that it is our faith is futile if Jesus is not raised. However, the insinuation is that if He was in fact raised, our faith leads to victory! You cannot add to Jesus' resurrection power, but you can embrace it and enjoy it. This comes only by faith. Christ has won the victory over death; He calls us only to believe upon Him and trust that He is powerful to overcome death in our lives as well.

April 11

Philippians 1:21

There is an old phrase that many of you have heard before that goes like this, “two things in life are certain, death and taxes!” Typically, the phrase is utilized in a manner that communicates discouragement (or even fear!) but this does not have to be the case for believers. While I bemoan the certainty of taxes, the Christian faith gives us great reason to no longer fear death. In fact, as we read the stories of the Apostles and first believers as recorded in the Scripture, one thing becomes remarkably clear, death no longer concerned them in the slightest!

The narrative of the early church is full of heroic and courageous public speeches, perilous missionary journeys, and accounts of the church’s growth in uncertain and even antagonistic times. What was it that sustained the church in the face of such opposition? The answer is found in Paul’s words to the Philippians.

Our text for today is simple, and well known. The Apostle is reminding the church that he desperately desires to “depart and be with Christ” (v. 23) which means he wants to pass from this life to the next all the while he knows his calling to be a blessing to the church. This is an odd statement from a secular worldview. It is not uncommon to meet people who want to die but, without Christ, these folks desire death because of severe depression and/or miserable circumstances. However, Paul is not desiring death for such reasons, instead he states that he longs for death because it represents “gain” for him.

How could the Apostle say such a thing? What is it about death that is so attractive to a believer? The answer is that death is not final for a Christian. In fact, death is just a doorway to eternal life, and we know this to be the case because of God’s promise and demonstration of resurrection. It would be foolish to long to give up this life if there were not another, better one, on the horizon. However, if there is a promise of life after death and if there is demonstration that God can bring us from the apparent end of physical death to eternal life, then it makes all the sense in the world to long for that existence.

This is the reason why Christ’s death and resurrection are so integral to the Christian faith. In the resurrection we see that there is far more waiting for us! In the resurrection we are given the motivation to lay down this life so that we can store up treasure for ourselves in the next. In the resurrection we come to understand that it is very logical, and right, to give up our lives in order to find another life that surpasses this existence in every shape.

This worldview is what made the apostles so fearless. It’s what sustained them in dark days, and it promises the same benefit to us today. Folks, I realize that life is tough, the world seems colder and darker than it did in years prior and there doesn’t seem to be any hope of temporal reform, but this ought not get us down because this life isn’t ultimate! The moment that we fixate on what God has actually promised us, the moment we quit thinking this existence is the ultimate of what we have coming is the moment we live with real boldness and hope for a future. May you have such hope in light of the resurrection. He is risen indeed!