

Easter 2023

He is risen! ...*He is risen indeed!*

But what if he wasn't? What would be different if Jesus were still in the tomb? I think it's safe to say that *everything* would be.

I mean, first of all, we wouldn't be doing any of this, right? If Jesus is still dead, there would be no Easter, no dressing up, no Sunday dinner after church. Everything we're doing right now is just a giant waste of time. We could be out enjoying this beautiful Spring morning on a trail somewhere, hiking in the woods, going on a bike ride. Planting flowers or cleaning up our yards. If you wanted to ruin a perfectly good morning, you could be golfing right now.

If Jesus hasn't risen from the grave, it doesn't really matter what you did, it would be better than what we're doing right now, because none of this would matter.

But, I think it's even bigger than that. The Apostle Paul plays out this scenario in 1 Corinthians 15. He says in verse 17...(READ 1 Cor. 15:17)

That word *futile* describes something that is useless or empty. Something that is devoid of significance. That's our faith apart from the resurrection. It doesn't mean anything, which means it certainly doesn't have the power to save us from our sin. Without the resurrection, we're still hopelessly cut off from God. We don't have a risen Savior to come to our defense.

Paul goes on and says...(READ 1 Cor. 15:18)

"Fallen asleep" is code in Scripture for died. Without the resurrection, death, our greatest enemy, wins. When we die, we're done. There's no hope for a life to come. Which leads Paul to conclude in verse 19...(READ 1 Cor. 15:19)

Meaning, if this life is all there is, then the lifestyle of self-denial that Jesus calls us to is actually quite cruel. And people should feel sorry for us because we were duped by all of it. If this is it, then why would we deny ourselves anything? Why would we go against the grain of culture and face criticism, persecution, or even death? If this life is all there is, why sacrifice for others or practice generosity? Why deny ourselves any comfort or pleasure this world provides?

If Jesus hasn't risen, then we're all pretty foolish for believing what we believe and living how we live. All that to say, there's a lot riding on the resurrection. In fact, I believe **The resurrection changes everything.** Our entire faith and practice is built upon the truth that Jesus lived and died and lives again.

You see, the resurrection is not like the last piece of a puzzle that completes the picture, but if it's missing, you still get the point. In reality, the resurrection is more like this foundational piece of a Jenga game. You pull it out and the entire thing comes crashing down.

So, with so much riding on the resurrection, can we be sure that it even happened? It's a valid question. **Anything worth believing has to be worth doubting.** If a belief can't stand up to doubts and questions, then it might not be worth believing. Certainly, it's not worth building your life upon. But, I believe there is compelling evidence for an actual, historical, physical resurrection.

So, if you're here today and you're a little skeptical of all of this...or, maybe you've been a follower of Jesus for years, but you're afraid to question the resurrection because you're not sure what you'll find...I want to share with you a few reasons why I believe that it's true. Why I don't feel like I had to check my brain at the door when I walked in here this morning to celebrate Easter.

And, I probably won't answer all of your questions or objections today, but I hope you'll hear me out. I'd love to continue the conversation over coffee sometime if you'd like and we'll have these little Case for Easter books available on your way out if you'd like to pick one up for yourself or someone else. But, here are some reasons why I believe he is risen...*he is risen indeed!*

It starts with this...**Jesus actually lived and was executed by crucifixion.** If you're going to believe in his resurrection, you have to believe that he lived. That Jesus wasn't some made-up, mythological figure. And you have to believe that he actually died. Like, heart stopped beating, can't find a pulse, turning cold, dead. And, aside from a few outliers, no respected historian, regardless of faith, denies that either one of these things happened.

Pretty much across the board, scholars agree that Jesus was a real life person and that he was executed by crucifixion. One historian notes that there are 39 references, outside of the New Testament, that mention Jesus' life and death. The evidence is so strong that even atheist and historian Gerd Lüdemann said that Jesus' death by crucifixion is, quote, "indisputable."

So, to me, this one's pretty cut and dry. You might find some push back on blogs or comment boards, but people who actually know what they're talking about pretty much all agree that Jesus lived and was executed by crucifixion.

However, a dead man does not a resurrection make! Plenty of people have lived and died, so how do we know that Jesus lived again? The second reason I believe in the resurrection is because **There were eye witness accounts of the resurrected Jesus.**

1 Corinthians is one of the earliest letters we have written to the Church. The Apostle Paul wrote it sometime around 53-54 A.D. Roughly 20 years after the resurrection. In chapter 15, he references a creed of the early church that dates back to just one or two years after the time of Jesus. The creed claims that **"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), and then to the Twelve."** (1 Cor. 15:3b-5)

And then look what it says in that very next verse...(READ 1 Cor. 15:6)

I think Paul's saying, "Listen, if this seems far-fetched to you, I get it! But there are close to 500 people still living in and around Jerusalem who can vouch for this. Go find one of them and ask them for yourself!" Paul is inviting people to verify his story. I don't think he would have put that out there if it were all made up.

Another reason I think the eye witness accounts prove the resurrection of Jesus is not just because of WHAT they said, but WHO said it. Now, hang with me here because I'm about to offend some of our 21st Century sensibilities. But I think this is one of my favorite arguments for believing all of this.

All four Gospels say that the first people to see the resurrected Jesus and tell others about it were women. That's not a big deal to us today, and it shouldn't be. But in 1st Century culture, this is HUGE! You see, a women's low social status during that time meant that their testimony was not highly thought of. In fact, it wasn't even admissible in court.

So, there is no possible advantage for these writers to say the first eye witnesses were women. In fact, it would have only hurt their testimony, not helped it. The only possible explanation for why we're told women saw the resurrected Jesus first and then told everyone else, is if they really had. No one would have said that women were the first eye witnesses of the resurrection unless they actually were.

I love that. I think it speaks volumes to the important part women play in the Church that, in a culture that considered women to be second-class citizens, God revealed to them first the most glorious thing He'd ever done and then He sends them out to be the first ones to share that good news with others.

Finally, I believe in the resurrection because of The changed lives of those who encountered the risen Jesus.

The same disciples who scattered when the Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus, the disciples who were found hiding in fear behind locked doors, these same disciples suddenly find courage and they begin preaching with boldness and conviction about the resurrection of Jesus. They had encountered the risen Christ, and they would never be the same.

James, the half-brother of Jesus went from being an open skeptic of his, wondering at one point if he'd actually lost his mind, to becoming a leader in the first Church and was eventually stoned for his faith. Why? Because he encountered the risen Jesus.

Thomas went from doubting the words of his friends to making one of the boldest statements of faith anyone in Scripture makes. Why? Because he encountered the risen Jesus.

Peter went from denying Jesus and cussing out a teenage girl for even accusing him of knowing the man to preaching the very first Gospel sermon, and history tells us, being crucified upside down for his faith. Why? Because he encountered the risen Jesus.

In the end, nearly all of the apostles and early Christian leaders died for their faith. It's hard to believe that this kind of self-sacrifice would have been done to support a hoax that they all came up with. If it were all a lie, at some point, someone would have said as the sword was being drawn, "Hey! Just kidding!" If it were all a farse, someone would have fessed up as his own cross was being constructed.

But, they didn't. And the only explanation for why they were willing to die is because they knew it was true. They'd seen too much. They had encountered the risen Jesus and they couldn't deny it.

There's so much more I could say about this. Entire books have been written on this subject, so we're only able to scratch the surface. But, let me close with this...if Jesus is alive, what does that mean for you?

If you're a follower of Jesus, it gives assurance to your faith. The resurrection is confirmation of everything we believe and put our hope in. At the end of 1 Corinthians 15, after Paul has made his case for the resurrection, he closes with these words...(READ 1 Cor. 15:58)

Jesus' resurrection gives us hope of our own resurrection one day. We have hope that this life is not all there is, which gives us the perseverance and strength we need as we walk through suffering and pain. It gives us the assurance that anything we lose in this life will be considered gain in the next. And it gives us a promise to hold onto that, as we say goodbye to loved ones who knew the Lord when they passed away, that we will see them again one day.

The resurrection gives us hope that something greater awaits those who believe. A place where death has been defeated. A place where there's no more pain, no more suffering, and no more tears.

And, if you're here and you have not yet put your faith in Jesus. If you haven't identified with his death, burial, and resurrection through baptism, what's stopping you? If Jesus is alive, then that changes everything and it can change everything in your life, too.

All of the pain and brokenness that you've experienced in your life, and that you've caused in this world, Jesus took the punishment for all of it so you can be forgiven. God has made a way for you to find new life through the resurrected life of His Son. And like a loving Father, he is waiting for you to come home to Him. If you're ready to do that, we're ready to help you take that step. Don't leave today without making the best decision you'll ever make.

Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. And God has made a way for you to find new life in Him.