Matthew Parris writes as a political columnist for the London Times. He describes himself as an ardent liberal and an avowed atheist. The headline for an article he wrote for a British magazine called The Spectator caught my eye: “If Jesus did not exist the church would not invent him.” He contends there is no other way the church could have cooked up Jesus’ memorable one-liners and counterintuitive parables. They could never have imagined someone with so little interest in politics or administration who preached an uncompromising message of forgiveness. He writes, “If Jesus had been a hoax, the church would have invented somebody so much more convenient.”

Matthew and I don’t likely align on many issues, but we’re in agreement here. If Jesus never existed, the church could not have invented him. One reason why I believe the gospels is precisely that they are so upside down and paradoxical. It starts right at the outset with Jesus’ virgin birth and carries straight through to his empty tomb. Who could have ever conceived of a crucified Messiah?

The acronym YCMTSU is a cryptic title for a sermon. There are several versions of this acronym out there in cyberspace. The polite form is “You can’t make this stuff up.” Allow me to tweak it somewhat for my purposes. You can’t make this story up. If Jesus had never existed no one could have invented him.

Take the story read earlier from Luke’s gospel. Nobody in his right mind could have made this story up. There are at least four components to this story that qualify for the designation, “You can’t make this story up.”

First, if Jesus had never existed, the gospel writers could never have conceived of Jesus’ resurrection. The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul. The idea that someone who has become free from the body would ever want it back again was unimaginable. The Jews believed in a general resurrection at the end of time. The idea of a single resurrection of someone ahead of everyone else would have been inconceivable.

Second, if Jesus had never existed, the gospel writers would never portray Jesus’ followers in such unflattering terms. The 12 disciples are a case in point. Thomas doubts, Peter denies and Judas betrays. James and John argue over greatness. Time and again, these disciples come off as thick-skulled, dim-witted and hard-hearted. They are forever confusing Jesus’ mission and getting in his way.

Third, if Jesus had never existed, the gospel writers would have edited their accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. Let’s be
Jesus is nobody’s hero.

honest, there are discrepancies in the four gospels. This disparity, mind you, has primarily to do with details rather than anything substantive in the story. There is discrepancy over the names and number of the women present at the tomb. There is discrepancy over whether these women are greeted by a single angel or multiple angelic beings.

If this story had been invented, we would have expected the early church to harmonize this story. We would anticipate them arriving at some mutually agreed upon talking points. The lack of collusion on the part of the early church argues for their authenticity. There is a typical amount of agreement, much as you would find in any eyewitness account just as there is a reasonable amount of distinctiveness regarding the details.

Fourth, if Jesus had never existed, the gospel writers would have never put women forward as the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. If this story is fable, the early church would have identified male disciples as eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. The testimony of women would have undermined their credibility. Women were considered second class citizens in Jesus’ day. Josephus, a first century historian, writes that a woman’s testimony was not admissible in a first century court of law. Every day that men gathered in the temple, they would pray, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has not made me a heathen. Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe who has not made me a slave. Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of

the universe, who has not made me a woman.”

Yet, women feature prominently in Luke’s gospel. They play a critical role at the cradle and the grave. They are conspicuous at Jesus’ crucifixion (23:49), burial (23:55) and resurrection (24:1-12). The men have all but vaporized.

Jesus doesn’t fit anyone’s conception of a hero. The Jews expected the Messiah to trounce their enemies, not die as a condemned criminal. The Romans had little use for a Messiah who claimed his kingdom was out of this world. Jesus is nobody’s hero. No one could have invented him.

During the years that followed the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, there was a revolt against Christianity. There were those in French society who attempted to invent a new religion to replace Christianity. One such man, Louie Marie Larevelliere Lepaux, made up his own religion, which he called “Man is God.” After reading a long paper to Parliament explaining his new belief system, he complained that few welcomed his ideas. He asked the gathering what he should do to recruit more people to accept his new faith. A former French prime minister, Charles Talleyrand, rose from his seat and said with a wry smile, “My dear sir, I refer you to a historical fact which may shed some light as to the best way to establish a new religion in the world. When Jesus undertook to establish a new religion, he was crucified, he lay in the grave three days, he rose again and ascended into heaven. At least you could do that much.”
Messy people are precisely the ones Jesus comes to save. His tongue-in-cheek comment finds its mark. No one would ever think of starting a religion this way. You can’t make this story up!

So what does this sermon have to do with my life?

We believe in a risen Jesus. He is alive, he’s on the move and there’s no telling where he might show up next. He will show himself to be real if, in your life, you will open yourself to this possibility.

We believe this risen Jesus redeems our messy lives. We’ve been preaching for this past year on the theme Life is Messy. I haven’t met a person yet who doesn’t affirm this honest portrayal of human life. Family dynamics are messy. Office politics are messy. Interpersonal relationships are messy, also. Facebook provides a status update on relationships called “It’s complicated.” Human relationships are messy and complicated.

Some of you try your hardest to make life as neat and tidy as possible. You want to control everything that happens in your life. Well, how’s that going? Try as you might, you cannot arrange every puzzle piece to fit neatly into place and orchestrate every crisis to turn out happily ever after.

It’s messy for God to redeem people. It’s messy for Jesus to put up with flawed disciples. It’s messy for Jesus to challenge a powerful religious establishment. It’s messy for Jesus to break through heavily fortified hearts.

But here’s the good news. Your messy life (and mine) doesn’t disqualify us from the life God intends for us. Messy people are precisely the ones Jesus comes to save. People who act like they have their stuff together seem to have the hardest time with Jesus. We believe this risen Jesus has real work for us to do. The fact that Jesus is raised in a body is no small matter. Christianity, you might say, is the most material religion in the world. Jesus was born in a body, lived in a body, was crucified in a body and was resurrected in a body. Jesus was not raised as a disembodied spirit. He was raised in a material body.

Jesus’ resurrection in a body is one concrete way God says that the whole material world matters to God. God cares about our concrete, everyday world. Stop Hunger Now matters to God. The investment we make in raising children matters to God. The care we give to the environment matters to God.

People tell me, I don’t believe in organized religion. Really? Do you think religion shouldn’t be organized? Do you believe in disorganized religion?

When we leave here today, we’ll get in our highly-efficient, well-organized cars and travel home on well-organized highways. We like our highways to be organized. There is enormous benefit when drivers obey posted speed limits and traffic signals. We might decide to pick up something at our well-organized grocery stores. We like our grocery stores to be organized. When we go to aisle 18 we expect the chips and salsa there. We’ll pay with a credit card from our well-organized banking systems and drive home on our organized highways to our homes to watch March Madness. We like our games to
be organized. We appreciate conveniences like scoreboards, shot clocks and referees to make our viewing pleasure more enjoyable.

Religion, like anything else, must be organized. But it must be organized in the right way. Jesus had the hardest time with organized religion. If religion is organized as impersonal, dogmatic, bureaucratic and hypocritical, I share your disgust. That’s why we attempt to measure everything we do by the teachings of Jesus. This is a daunting task, especially since the church is made up of sinners like us. We possess a limitless capacity to mess things up.

John Updike challenges us in the poem, *The Seven Stanzas of Easter*, not to sidestep the transcendent reality of Easter. “Make no mistake,” he writes at the outset, “if he rose at all it was as His body…Otherwise the church will fall.” He advises us against cutting this monstrous event down to size for our convenience. Instead, he summons us to walk through the door. Open the door of your heart to the risen Jesus. He’s been knocking on the door to your heart for some time now. The prayer in your bulletin is intended to help you open the door. Jesus wants to redeem your messy life. If this prayer expresses the desires of your heart, I urge you to pray silently as I pray aloud.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor, from this moment forward, to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.