

“THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RESURRECTION” **(Matthew 27:62-28:15)**

Today I want to talk to you about the truth of Jesus’ resurrection, and I want to start with a simple little quiz...

Question number one: two plus two equals? Four.

Question two: the color of the sky is? That’s a trick question, since in Gold Beach the sky changes colors every few minutes, but on a clear day the sky is blue.

Question number three: The first president of the United States was? George Washington.

Question number four: The United States won its independence from what country? England.

What these questions all have in common, of course, is that there is only one right answer. You didn’t have to think long and hard about the answers because they have been mathematically, scientifically, and historically proven to be true. Some of you may remember Muammar Qaddafi, the dictator of Libya. When England closed its Libyan Embassy, Qaddafi became so angry that he ordered England to be removed from all maps in Libya. To him, England no longer existed.

This illustrates a current trend taking place today that makes truth subjective and personal. Perhaps you’ve heard someone say, “This is my truth.” But just because Qaddafi said that there was no England does not mean that England does not exist. Truth is truth, whether you embrace it or not.

When it comes to questions about God and Jesus and eternity, it’s common to hear people say, “All religions are basically the same – choose whatever works best for you.” And along the way the question of what is true is completely avoided. But without truth, belief is empty and irresponsible. People say, “Well, truth is subjective – it’s a matter of preference – what might be true for you is not true for me.” But no one really believes this. Nobody says, “Gravity may be true for you, but not for me,” and then jumps off a tall building. Gravity is true whether you believe it or not.

Some things, of course, are a matter of opinion. If I say, “Ford mustangs are the coolest cars ever made,” I can say that is true for me but not necessarily true for you because there is no absolute standard by which to measure “coolness.” But if I were to say, “There is a red Ford Mustang in the church parking lot,” there is an objective standard to test whether that statement is true or false. It’s either there or it is not.

If you look out in the parking lot say, “I don’t see a red Mustang,” and I say, “Well, I believe there is,” my belief doesn’t make it true. There are thousands of examples like this to show that when something is true, it is true regardless of what we think or feel. So why, when it comes to the most important questions in life – questions that deal with the grand, eternal realities – why would we not want to investigate and validate whether they are true or not?

This brings us to the ultimate question today: Did Jesus rise from the dead? This is a question of truth and not of preference. Either He did or He didn’t, and the ramifications of the answer to that question are huge. Christianity rises or falls on this one, single event. If Jesus did not rise from the grave, then the whole celebration of Easter is a waste of time. The Bible itself says that in 1 Corinthians 15... if Christ is not risen from the dead, then we who believe it are to be pitied, because we’re building our whole life on a lie. But if Jesus is risen from the dead, it has mammoth implications for every one of us.

We've been going verse by verse through the gospel of Matthew, and I planned and hoped that the story of the resurrection would land on Easter, and lo and behold it did. Matthew's account of the resurrection focuses on the historical facts of what actually happened – both from the viewpoint of Jesus' enemies as well as His followers. And in his account, he makes three claims that are either true or not.

The first claim is that **Jesus really died**. In order for there to be a resurrection, Jesus had to have really died and His body had to actually be laid in a tomb. For example, Muhammed taught in the Koran that someone who looked like Jesus died on the cross. This all gets back to truth: either Jesus died on the cross or He didn't. Either the Koran is right or the Bible is right.

When we think about Jesus' death and resurrection we tend to skip over His burial, yet all four gospels emphasize the fact that Jesus' body was placed in a tomb and that He was actually dead. Matthew says that even Jesus' enemies knew this. In 27:62-66 he writes... The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

The religious leaders don't actually believe that Jesus will rise from the dead, but they don't want anyone else thinking that He did. They want to make absolutely sure that some lie or some conspiracy story is not spread that Jesus' rose from the dead. They don't want the movement Jesus started to go any further than it has.

Friday was called the Day of Preparation in which people made all their preparations for Sabbath on Saturday. The Jewish day began and ended at sundown, so immediately after Jesus is buried late Friday afternoon, the Jewish leaders go to Pilate and say, "Jesus made all these claims about rising again on the third day, and we're concerned that His disciples might come and take the body out of the tomb and tell everyone that He's been raised from the dead. We want you, Pilate, to make the tomb secure – to seal it up tight and to post guards around the tomb. That way no far-fetched story about a resurrection will get circulated." Pilate says, "Sure, what do I care. Make the tomb as secure as you know how."

So Roman soldiers are assigned to guard the tomb around the clock – 24/7. These soldiers are highly trained and know that if anyone gets by them, if there's one slip up, they're dead. Not only do they guard the tomb, but they roll a large, heavy stone in front of the tomb, and seal it with soft, moldable clay that was imprinted with a Roman insignia, meaning that if anyone breaks it, it is punishable by death – including the soldiers if they let it happen. The point is: No one is getting past these guards, and if they should somehow do so, they'd have to break the seal of the stone and roll it back.

All this tells us to the truth that Jesus really did die and His body was really in the tomb. No one – including the vast majority of secular scholars – disputes this fact. Jesus' enemies know He is dead and buried, and so do His followers. This sets the stage for the next claim Matthew makes: **The tomb is empty.**

In 28:1 we read... After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. It's now been about 36 hours since Jesus was buried, and the two Mary's we talked about last week, come to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices and perfume. We know from the other gospels that altogether there are about five women who come to the tomb.

Verses 2-7, There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

The angels roll back the stone not so Jesus could *get out*, but that others could *get in* and see that Jesus is not there. They invite the Mary's to come and see the place where He lay. When they enter the tomb, they see only one thing: the linens used to wrap Jesus' body are lying there. John's gospel says that they're not crumpled up in a heap, but lying as though Jesus' body has passed right through it. The body is not there. The question becomes: What happened to it?

Throughout history, skeptics of Jesus' resurrection have postulated several alternative explanations. The first is what's known as the **swoon theory**. The swoon theory claims that Jesus didn't really die, but He swooned or fainted from the shock, loss of blood, and exhaustion, and went into a comma. Those who placed His body in the tomb believed that He was dead, but He was still alive. Somehow, in the cool air of the tomb He revived, escaped from the tomb and appeared to His disciples. He then lived out the rest of His life in obscurity.

Even skeptics admit that this theory is far-fetched. First of all, the Romans were experts in killing people and would not be incompetent enough to let someone come down off the cross alive. It was the judgment of everyone at the cross that Jesus was dead. The swoon theory also does not pass the plausibility test. It assumes that Jesus went through six trials, no sleep, a brutal scourging, nails driven into His hands and feet, and after hours on a cross – a sword thrust into His side – then He was wrapped in grave clothes, put in a tomb with a stone rolled over the entrance, and guarded by soldiers... and we are to believe that He somehow revived, rolled the stone out of the way, walked past the guards standing nearby, and coolly went about his way. I'm going to say that's not too plausible.

Another theory is the **wrong tomb theory**. According to this view the two Mary's, in their shock and grief, went to the wrong tomb and mistakenly thought Jesus was risen. There are two huge problems with this theory. First, it assumes that the women and all the rest of the disciples had a really poor sense of direction and all of them had forgotten where Jesus' body was buried just hours earlier. What's more, if they did go to the wrong tomb, Jesus' enemies would have quickly discounted their story. The last thing they wanted is for Jesus' followers to claim He had risen from the dead – which is why they posted guards at the tomb in the first place. All they had to do was to say, "He's buried in this tomb over here," and it would have shut down the whole idea from the start.

The third theory is the **stolen body theory**. According to this theory the disciples stole the body of Jesus and claimed that He was alive. This explanation is far-fetched for many reasons. First, having Jesus' body stolen is the very thing the Jewish authorities went to great lengths to make sure didn't happen.

Second, it seems highly implausible that anyone would get past the highly-trained Roman guards who would likely be executed if they slept on their watch. How could the large stone be rolled away without waking them? And if the disciples did take the body, why did they take the time to unwrap the grave clothes?

Also, this would mean that these same scared disciples – who had run for their lives when Jesus was arrested – all of a sudden get the courage to outmaneuver a large group of trained Roman guards to do what all the Jewish authorities were making sure would not happen. If you're on a jury, you would easily dismiss the whole notion that Jesus' body was somehow stolen.

Further discounting the stolen body theory is that even Jesus' greatest enemies knew that His body was not stolen, but come up with a lie to say that it was. We find this in 28:11-15... While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Both the Roman soldiers and the Jewish religious leaders have huge motivation to coverup the resurrection. When the Roman soldiers realize, that right underneath their noses, the stone is rolled back and the tomb is empty, they panic. They run to the Jewish religious leaders, who assigned them to watch the grave and say, "We have a problem."

The religious leaders' worst fears are being realized. "Okay," they say, "Here's what we'll do..." and they bribe the guards to spread the very lie they had worked so hard to prevent! They paid Judas off, and now they pay the guards off to say that Jesus' disciples came during the night – while they were asleep – and stole the body. Matthew says that this story – as crazy and illogical as it was – continued to be circulated up until the time Matthew wrote his gospel some 25-30 years later.

Let's imagine, for a moment, that Jesus' disciples did manage – against all odds – to steal Jesus body. If so, then they know that Jesus did not rise from the dead. If they know this, why would they spend the rest of their lives suffering and dying for something they knew was a lie? The biggest proof for the resurrection, in my opinion, is the extraordinary transformation of His disciples. In a court of law, you might call this circumstantial evidence, but the effect the resurrection had on these men points to no other conclusion but that something profound happened on Easter morning.

What can explain the change in Peter from one who, the night before the crucifixion was so afraid of saving his own skin that he denied the Lord three times – what turned him into a bold preacher who stood before thousands of people 50 days later? Peter was eventually crucified upside down. What can explain the willingness of early Christians to face arrest, torture, and even death? Who in their right mind would suffer and die for a lie?

Even skeptics of Christianity admit that a remarkable transformation took place in the lives of Jesus' disciples as a result of the resurrection. The books of the New Testament refer over and over to the resurrection as the driving force for the power of the early church. Historians estimate that by the end of the first century the church – that became with 120 people on the Day of Pentecost – grew to over 100 million. None of this would have happened if Jesus was still in the grave.

So far Matthew has claimed – number one – that Jesus really was dead and was buried; number two, that Jesus rose again and the tomb is empty; and he goes on to make a third claim that is very important. The tomb may be empty, but where is Jesus? Without this third claim, the resurrection of Jesus would always be clouded in mystery. Matthew claims that **Jesus appeared numerous times to numerous people**.

In 28:8-10 we read... So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Jesus not only rises from the dead, but He makes numerous appearances to people, beginning with the women who first discovered the empty tomb. On their way to tell the disciples the good news – imagine how thrilling that would be to tell – Jesus suddenly appears to them. It’s not every day that you meet someone who saw die a few days earlier alive and well. They are overwhelmed and a little frightened. But Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid, but go and tell the rest of the disciples to go to Galilee and there they will see me.”

Jesus makes several appearances to people...

- He appears to the woman at the tomb.
- He appears to the two men walking on the road to Emmaus, and has a lengthy conversation with them about His death and resurrection and has dinner with them.
- He appears to all the disciples except Thomas, and then appeared again when Thomas was present.
- He appears to His disciples eight days after His resurrection as they are fishing in Galilee and has breakfast with them.
- In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul says that Jesus appeared to His half-brother James, who would go on to the leader of the first church in Jerusalem.
- Paul also says that He appeared to more than 500 people at one time, probably in Galilee. Paul adds that many of these same people were still alive when he wrote. In other words, if you don’t believe me – go ask them.

If 500 witnesses showed up at the Curry County Courthouse to testify that they saw something, the jury would not say, “Well, I’m not sure. I think I need a little more proof.” The evidence would be overwhelming. Numerous eyewitnesses saw the literal, physical body of Jesus.

Some have said that that these so-called eyewitnesses were delusional when that they claimed to see Jesus. The story goes that people in that day did not have the scientific knowledge that we have today, and were more prone to believe the supernatural than we are. So, in their grief and pain over Jesus’ death, they somehow believed that Jesus was leading and guiding them. They even had visions in their minds of Jesus talking to them. Maybe they didn’t think He was physically alive, but they believed He was spiritually alive, and over the years that just developed into a myth.

The problem with this theory is that hundreds of people saw Jesus – they touched Him and ate with Him – one or two people might be delusional, but you can’t explain away the eyewitness testimony of so many individuals might be delusional or have hallucinations, not groups of people. And like the twelve disciples, these witnesses put their lives on the line to testify of the risen Christ. It was not in their best interests to fabricate this kind of story.

All this leads us to one conclusion – that Jesus died and rose again. Gary Habermas is one of the most renowned scholars on the resurrection, who has read just about everything there is to read about it, and debated several skeptics of the resurrection, came to this conclusion: “In general, the more thoroughly one option fails the more effective the others become, and the more strongly an option is established, the more the others diminish. In particular, when the early eyewitness testimonies are considered and with their corresponding transformation, the historical resurrection of Jesus becomes the only plausible explanation for the facts.”

Starting on the very day that Jesus rose from the dead, people have worked to try to cover up Jesus’ resurrection, but every explanation has fallen short. Just as the angel invited the women to come into the tomb and see for themselves that Jesus was not there, so He invited you and me to do the same – to check out the evidence and see that it is true. And if it is true – if Jesus really did die and rise again from the dead – the implications of that are staggering.

It means that Jesus is who He claimed to be – the Son of God who has come from heaven – and everything He said and did is validated. It means that He is alive today and we can have a personally relationship with Him. It means that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that He is the answer to every question in life.

Later in chapter 28 Jesus, in speaking to His disciples, says, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” He’s in control and all things and we are accountable to Him. The Bible says that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day the risen Christ is coming back to earth to judge and hold everyone accountable. The only question is whether you will confess Him as Lord and Savior of your life now while you have the opportunity, or will you acknowledge Him as Lord when it’s too late.

The resurrection of Jesus also reminds us that this world is not all that there is. We evaluate everything in the material world by science, but the empty tomb reminds us that there is something beyond this material world. If this world is all there is, what a bummer! Life has great moments of fun and joy, but it also has incredible heartache and sorrow. If the resurrection is true, it gives us immense hope and purpose and meaning.

It tells us that this world is not the whole picture. The Bible says that those who believe in Christ will one day be resurrected just as He is. As a believer, you don’t have to fear death because for the believer death is a mere transition to a much better life in heaven where there is no more pain or sorrow or suffering. Not only do you have eternal life to look forward to in the next world, but you can have abundant, fulfilling life in this world. You get the best of both worlds.

So I end with two questions: First, do you believe that the resurrection of Jesus is true? If so, the second question is: How will you respond to this truth? The resurrection is much more than an historical fact, it compels you and me to make a life-altering decision about Christ. The Bible refers to this as being born again. Just as you are born physically, in order to go to heaven Jesus says you must be born again spiritually. What does that mean?

It means that you are born into your earthly family, you are born again into God's family. The Bible says that our sins have separated us from a holy, perfect God and the consequence of our sin is death and eternal separation from God. But in love, Jesus came from heaven to take the punishment that we deserve so that through faith we can be forgiven. He invites you to trust Him as your Savior from sin, and follow Him as Lord.