

The Reality of the Resurrection (27:55-66, 28:11-15)

Good morning everyone, my name is Eric and I'm one of the pastors here. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn to **Matthew 27**, we'll be there in a little bit. Who was here last week to celebrate Easter with us? We got to see 7 different people share about some of the ways their lives have been transformed by Jesus and celebrate with them through baptism. We love getting to participate in that with people because it's such a cool, tangible reminder of the resurrection of Jesus. Going down into the water represents dying to ourselves and our sinful nature, then, when we come out of the water, it communicates that we've also been *resurrected* with Jesus. And we all scream and cheer and act a fool when it happens, because that's an incredible thing that is absolutely worth celebrating.

Here's the thing though: while baptism is a beautiful representation of what Jesus accomplished in conquering death and sin, it also serves as a *reminder* of an *actual, real, tangible, historical* event. The primary reason we celebrate what Jesus accomplished through his resurrection is that he *actually resurrected*. And that's exactly what I plan to spend our time talking about this morning. I think in our current American hyper-secular context, it's really common to dismiss or downplay the historicity of Jesus' resurrection because to a lot of people, it just seems implausible. It feels totally incompatible with how we know things in our world to work. *People don't rise from the dead*. And I think because it seems so outlandish at face value to our society, it's actually really easy for followers of Jesus to de-emphasize or even *degrade* the idea of Jesus' bodily resurrection.

It's so easy in fact that, whether we realize it or not, a lot of us actually do this all the time. Increasingly, more and more of us tend to talk about and think about the resurrection as something that's really no more than an inspiring metaphor. We say things like, "if God raised Jesus from the dead, he can resurrect your career, your marriage, your dating life, your self-confidence."

More and more people in the Church are taking the miraculous bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh who was crucified, killed, and buried in a tomb only to walk out three days later, and they're reducing it to an inspirational tidbit that fits neatly within your allotted character limit on social media. Many of us prefer to view it that way because viewing the resurrection as an inspiring metaphor is, for many people, far easier to grasp than thinking of it as an actual, historical event. And while God can

certainly do those things and he can demonstrate his power in your career, and marriage, and dating life, and self-confidence, and any number of other things, the resurrection is so much *more* than an inspiring metaphor. The resurrection of Jesus is a very real, very tangible historical event from which we can derive very *real*, very *tangible* hope.

So I want to spend our time today a little bit differently than we often do. I want to try to spend some time reinforcing and strengthening our certainty in the *reality* of the resurrection. I want to help us see that there are some very solid, historical, logical reasons to believe the resurrection of Jesus *did* happen, even if it can seem like a somewhat fanciful idea. Which means today will have some portions that will likely feel a little more like a lecture, but then we'll shift to talking a little more personally in light of the things we're going to unpack.

And I'll also say if you don't personally struggle to believe in the reality of the resurrection, there's nearly a 100% chance you'll interact with a friend or family member or coworker who absolutely does. And hopefully, some of what we're talking through today can help you see their perspective a bit more and also help give you some confidence in talking with them through some of these things. I'm really excited about this and I think it's going to be helpful for us. I'd love to **pray** for us and we'll dive right in.

In our increasingly secular and increasingly skeptical society, it can feel more and more challenging for some people to believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus. But pushback to the idea of someone being raised from the dead is not a modern invention. It's not as if at the turn of the century during the industrial revolution someone had an epiphany and said, "while we're making all these technological advances, I think we should also stop thinking dead people can stop being dead." Throughout all of history, there have been many push backs to the idea of Jesus coming back from the dead.

Because of the pushbacks to Jesus' resurrection, people have actually formed a number of different alternative theories to try to explain the events after Jesus' death. And while there are quite a few of those theories out there, there are three main ones that tend to be the most prevalent. They are known as the **Stolen Body Theory**, the **Swoon Theory**, and the **Legend Theory**. As we go through, I'll unpack the specifics of each one. Our passage from Matthew today actually helps address many aspects of these push backs. So we'll let those Scriptures speak for themselves, and we'll look to a couple other places for a little more clarification on a few things. So let's hop in.

Stolen Body Theory

Many people have claimed that the tale of Jesus' resurrection is not a historical account, but rather a fabrication that was perpetuated by a few of Jesus' closest followers. Essentially, the argument goes, Jesus' disciples broke into the tomb and stole Jesus' body, and then were able to tell everyone that he rose from the dead like he said he would since there was no *body* in the tomb. This is one of the most common push backs out there, which makes sense seeing as it is explicitly laid out in Matthew's account. Look at Matthew 27:62-64:

62 *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 63* "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver [meaning Jesus] said, 'After three days I will rise again.' **64** 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.**"

So the chief priests go *back* to Pilate the next day after Jesus is crucified and buried and they say, "hey Pilate, the guy you just had killed told us he knew he was going to be killed *and* that he was planning on coming back from the dead in a few days. We don't think that'll happen, in fact we *really hope* it doesn't, but his boys will probably try to steal his body at the very least." If you remember from a couple weeks back, we talked about how Pilate was a governor for this region as a representative of Rome whose only job was to make sure there wasn't an uprising of any kind. He narrowly escaped rioting in the streets by allowing Jesus to be killed in the first place, and he's just now finding out this guy **said** this would all happen ahead of time *and* that he was coming back afterwards. And the chief priests very much feel the vibe of the city. They tell Pilate, "hey, if this happens, it's going to end up being way worse than it was the other day." Pilate is likely a little *stressed* at this possibility So look at how he responds, pick it up in verse 65:

65 "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "**Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.**" **66** So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Pilate essentially says, "no one is stealing that body on my watch." It gets locked down with around the clock guards and a seal on the stone. Scholars differ on the exact meaning of "take a guard" and the number it would include, but most agree it would have been at least as many as there were disciples who might try to steal the body, so it's safe to say there were at least a dozen armed and trained soldiers. It's worth noting the nature of the stone used to cover tombs around this period. Different archaeologists have differing opinions on the exact specifics of the size of the stone and style of tomb, but pretty much every single archaeologist and historian agrees that the stone in front of

the entrance of a tomb like this during this period would have been somewhere in the range of 3,000-6,000 pounds. Or in terms that are easier to grasp, somewhere between the weight of a VW Bug and a Ford F150. I drive an F150, if you were to come tell me that I needed to hire security to make sure a couple guys didn't come literally pick up and move my truck to get something behind it, I'd tell you I think the truck itself is plenty of security. But not Pilate. Despite all the effort though, we know the F150 stone got moved, Jesus' body disappeared, and the guards at the tomb, according to Matthew 28:4, **"were so afraid of him [the angel who moved the stone] that they shook and became like dead men."**

The result of all of this happening is where we find the origin of the stolen body theory. Look a little further down picking up in 28:11:

11 While the women [this is Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, who were two of the women who were part of Jesus' followers outside of the twelve disciples] **were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 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.**

At the end of the day, I think there are quite a few issues with this theory that Jesus' body could've been stolen. First, we have the obvious predicament of the F150 stone *and* posted guards. I'm not saying that I know for a fact that Jesus' disciples were weak and bad at sneaking, but I am saying I *don't* think they were "pick up a truck" strong all while sneaking past or overpowering a full detail of trained soldiers. Not to mention we're talking about the same guys who literally scattered and ran at the mere sight of a lightly armed mob just a couple chapters ago. They're not exactly the "let's face off against trained, armed guards" type of crew.

But second, we know the chief priests had it out for Jesus and his followers, so they *obviously* would do whatever they could to try to discredit any claims the disciples and Jesus made. Matthew explicitly tells us that the guards who were at Jesus' tomb, the same ones who were just so afraid of what happened that they "became like dead men," were *paid* to tell anyone they talked to that Jesus' disciples had come while they were sleeping, rolled the stone away, and took the body.

I can't make an accurate guess how much they would have to have been paid to put themselves so aggressively on blast, but it had to have been a lot. These guards were tasked with going around telling people how terrible they were as guards. No one in their right mind is owning up to that freely, so it makes far more sense that they were lying about it because they were paid to do so.

It's also worth noting that almost all of Jesus' disciples died as martyrs for their faith. After Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers, the ones who according to this theory fabricated the whole thing, went out preaching about his resurrection and they were killed for it. And not one of them backed off at any point on their claim that he rose from the dead. Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French philosopher, said this when talking about the disciples: "I believe those witnesses who get their throats cut." If the disciples were lying about Jesus' resurrection, it seems likely that at least one of them would've backed down on this claim if it wasn't true, especially considering *all* of them abandoned Jesus while he was being crucified.

Swoon Theory

Another pretty common push back to the resurrection is known as the swoon theory. The premise is that some people claim Jesus wasn't actually dead when he was placed in the tomb. The argument essentially is rooted in the physical trauma Jesus endured on the cross causing him to go into a coma. He was then taken off the cross and placed in the tomb, and after resting and recovering for a couple days, he awoke and was able to come out of the tomb. There's also some slightly different arguments in the same arena that claim one of Jesus' followers gave him some kind of drug to make him *appear* dead as part of a plan to stage a death and resurrection, but the main premise of the argument is the same: Jesus didn't actually die on the cross and therefore was able to escape the tomb several days later.

This push back has a ton of issues. Kent talked about this a little bit a couple weeks ago, but the Romans were *excellent* at crucifixion. As morbid as it is, they had perfected it as a means of simultaneous torture and execution. The job of the soldiers overseeing his crucifixion was to make sure he was dead. They were not allowed to leave until it was complete and the person being crucified was confirmed dead. If Jesus wasn't dead, he would've been the only recorded person to *ever* survive a Roman crucifixion. Which would have been an entirely different miracle. The Romans didn't make mistakes when it came to crucifixion.

We also see another super interesting detail about Jesus' crucifixion in John's gospel account. Since the Roman soldiers were responsible for ensuring the death of those

being crucified, they would often come through towards the end of the process and either break the legs of the person on the cross to speed up the person suffocating, or they would stab them through the lung and heart with a spear. In [John 19](#), we see this:

33 But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

This is an incredibly odd detail to provide if someone didn't see it happen. "A sudden flow of blood and water." This is particularly interesting to me because modern medical knowledge actually helps explain it really clearly. Many medical professionals agree this would have been possible due to Jesus likely experiencing what's now known as a haemothorax, which is essentially when your chest cavity fills with blood. This can occur in response to significant physical trauma to the chest or back, such as a savage beating like what Jesus endured. If someone experiences a haemothorax and dies, and if their body remains still for a while after, the blood in the chest cavity could pool and start to separate into its different parts. Red blood cells would separate from the clear plasma. And if you were to pierce a hole in someone's side who experienced this, it would all come out, and it would give the distinct impression of blood (the red cells) and water (the clear plasma) flowing out. All of which would only happen if someone was very dead.

Also, if Jesus had in fact gone into a state of comatose as a result of his physical trauma and was not dead, I don't think any logical person would conclude that he would then be physically able to get out of a tomb with an F150 stone in front after lying inside with no food or water or medical treatment for several days. Jesus wasn't even physically able to *make it to the cross unaided before* his crucifixion because he was in such bad shape after his merciless beating, so it seems pretty implausible to imagine he would have the strength to get himself out of the tomb *after* being crucified, going into a coma, and lying in there with no food or water for multiple days. And he certainly would not have been in any condition to inspire confidence and awe in anyone who may have seen him in that state. I just don't see any convincing evidence or argument that Jesus wasn't dead when he was taken off his cross.

The Legend Theory

The third common push back I've heard is the legend theory. This is the idea that, over time, the story of Jesus' death was romanticized with retellings and legend, and eventually people ended up with this story that he actually came back from the dead. Essentially the story of Jesus' resurrection was like one big game of telephone that really got out of hand over the years. One person said something like, "we could still feel his

presence so strongly, it was like he was still there or like he resurrected,” and a while later someone said, “they felt Jesus’ presence, so he might have resurrected.” Then someone else went, “they felt Jesus’ presence because he resurrected!” Eventually leading to people saying, “I know people who were there and saw Jesus resurrected.” This one, while I think it is one of the most common and most widely believed of the push backs we’ve talked through, is actually one of the most unbelievable in my opinion. The verifiable, historical phenomenon of the early Church directly challenges this idea on multiple fronts.

It’s important to know that historically speaking, the first written accounts we have of Jesus’ empty tomb and the claims that he appeared to people in a resurrected body actually come from Paul’s letters. Historians agree they were written 15-20 years after Jesus’ death. 1 Corinthians 15 has some of the most compelling details in regards to Jesus’ resurrection in my opinion. Look with me on screen at 1 Corinthians 15:3-6:

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

There’s a lot happening here, so let’s unpack it really quickly. Paul is rattling off some details here, and they are super important. Paul says that he is passing on something he himself received, as in he heard it directly from some of the people he’s about to mention. He then gives specific details that immediately challenge the theory that people came up with the idea of a resurrection many generations later. He specifically says Jesus “was raised on the third day,” which shows us people *already* thought he resurrected in the current generation. Then he gives a list of people who gave eyewitness accounts of encountering a resurrected Jesus: Cephas, the twelve, and *more than five hundred other people at the same time*. Then he says most of them are still alive, so you’re welcome to go fact check him.

One of several things is happening here: either this is the boldest and dumbest bluff in the history of bluffing because that’s an easy bluff to call, or many hundreds of people had a collective and identical hallucination where they thought they saw Jesus, or Jesus was there in bodily form in front of hundreds of different eyewitnesses. To me, listening to direct reports from that many different people is really the only thing that makes any sense at all.

Even if you choose to ignore all these reported eyewitness accounts, if you don't believe that Jesus *actually* rose from the dead, you have to come up with some other historically feasible explanation for the growth of the early Church. There are multiple historical accounts about the explosive growth of Christianity following Jesus' death, and there *has* to be a reason for it other than the fact that Jesus just died. Historians agree early Christ followers grew from fewer than 1,000 people to somewhere between 20,000-50,000 within the first 100 years¹. And these people *all* believed that Jesus rose from the dead.

I said this at the beginning, but the worldview at that point in history was largely the same as it is today in regards to dead people, and it's that they had an incredibly reliable propensity to stay dead. Resurrection didn't generally happen. But here we see evidence of *thousands* of people essentially deciding overnight that it did. Either they were all suddenly and equally insane, or they were convinced with proof that it happened. Tim Keller describes it like this in his book *The Reason for God*:

"After the death of Jesus the entire Christian community suddenly adopted a set of beliefs that were brand new and until that point had been unthinkable...The Christian view of resurrection, absolutely unprecedented in history, sprang up full-blown immediately after the death of Jesus. There was no process or development...Every effort to account for the birth of the church apart from Jesus' resurrection flies in the face of what we know about first-century history and culture."

There has to be some kind of logical explanation for this explosive growth in an entirely new belief system. People *had* to be convinced this was true.

The last thing I find incredibly interesting and compelling as an argument for the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection is actually referenced in the very beginning of the passage we have today. You may have wondered why I skipped it earlier, or you might not have even noticed, but let's read 27:55-61:

55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. **56** Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. **57** As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. **58** Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. **59** Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, **60** and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of

¹ Hopkins, Keith (1998). "Christian Number and Its Implications". *Journal of Early Christian Studies*.

the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away.
61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Kent mentioned it last week, but at the beginning of chapter 28, we see these same women come back to Jesus' tomb only to find it empty. Then, they are the very first witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. And in all four of the gospel accounts, we see these women listed as the first witnesses. There are differing details in the different accounts, but they all make sure to mention this point. Here's why I find this detail so important: the Jewish culture at the time was highly patriarchal. It was a mostly male dominated society. As terrible as it can seem through our modern lens, part of that meant that a woman's witness testimony was all but inadmissible in this context. There would have been *no* historical benefit to claiming women witnesses, so the only logical reason women are consistently said to be the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection is if they actually were.

The vehemence of those who died preaching Jesus' resurrection, the exponential growth of the Church and the belief in Jesus' resurrection, and the logical evidence that I can see all point to the *reality* of Jesus' resurrection. In fact, I would argue the resurrection is the *most* plausible explanation. I'm not saying it's *easy* to believe that the resurrection happened. But I am saying that ironically, given the other options, I think the idea that Jesus rose from the dead is actually the one that has the *fewest* logical hurdles to overcome. And I think all this begs the question, "why exactly does this matter?" Is looking for convincing evidence of the resurrection just to help us feel like we can win an argument or push back against criticism? Why do these questions about historical details matter?

I think it's so incredibly important for us to wrestle through the questions that surround Jesus' resurrection for two main reasons. The first is because everything about our faith is riding on the resurrection being true. *Everything* about the bible and Christianity and Jesus' claims about himself are all contingent on the resurrection. If the resurrection is true, if Jesus *did* rise from the dead, then we have every reason to believe everything he said. But if he didn't, why would we believe any of it? I mentioned part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians earlier, but if you look a little further down in 1 Corinthians 15, he puts it this way:

14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

The reality of the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the reality of our faith. Christianity is the only major religion that says, "before anything else, you must believe these historical events happened." **Yes, Christianity can be a life-changing experience,**

but it can only be truly transformative if it's based on true historical facts. The entire premise of Christianity, the fact that Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life no one else could live, was killed to pay for sin he did not commit, and *rose* from the grave defeating sin and death, is built on the fact that Jesus *really* did something for you. The cost was paid *for you*. Jesus died *for you*. And if he didn't actually rise from the dead, the crushing weight of salvation is put back onto us, and we can't carry it. But Jesus can, and he did.

That gives us the second reason it's so important for us to ask and be able to answer questions about the reality of Jesus' resurrection, and it's because of the hope we have as a result of it being true. In order for us to have *confidence* in the hope we are offered in Jesus, we also need to have *confidence* in the reality of who he was and what he accomplished. Jesus' resurrection gives us hope in our future resurrection with him. It gives us hope of eternity spent with him where all things are restored and made new. And that hope, the certainty, for the future gives us hope right now. The resurrection didn't just set *our* restoration into motion, but the restoration of all things. It set into motion the process of restoration and reconciliation that we get to participate in right now. N.T. Wright said it beautifully, he said this:

“If the resurrection of Jesus happened, that means there's infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the needs of the world. Easter [or the resurrection] means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all.”

Jesus' resurrection gives us both our *reason* to work to push back against brokenness in the world, and the *power* to do those things. Without Jesus' resurrection, none of those things ultimately matter. I am fully aware that people can work for good things and push against evil in the world if they don't believe in Jesus and his resurrection, but I would also argue that any motivation for those efforts ultimately falls flat in the face of any questioning. There has to be a defining reason behind those efforts and behind the desire to do those things. Without looking at a bigger picture where there is a whole story being told where we can see how things are *supposed* to function, we can see how it was broken and distorted, we can see the damage it caused, and we can see the events that took place that set into motion the *restoration* of those things, it doesn't make sense to push back against evil and injustice. In fact, it ultimately doesn't make sense to work for anything other than personal gain regardless of the cost. I am aware that people who don't know Jesus *do* work towards great goals, but what I'm saying is that those efforts fall flat without the hope that those things are fully accomplished once and for all. That's exactly what Jesus' resurrection is. It shows us that God is fully committed to the

restoration of all things, and he's inviting us to participate in it. He's inviting us to receive restoration ourselves as we join him in his goals.

And if all this is true, we have every reason to tell people about it. If we have a hope as great as this, we can't keep it to ourselves. And here's one last incredibly beautiful thing I want to point out that happens over and over again in Scripture as we wrap up today: **the people who are most equipped to tell others about Jesus are not the ones who are most educated about Scripture, or the smartest, or the boldest, or the most extroverted; the people who are *most* equipped to tell others about Jesus are the ones who have encountered him for themselves.**

At the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, the people who *should* have been there, his closest disciples, were nowhere to be found. The people who *should* have known and seen every sign about him and his true identity from the Old Testament Scriptures, the religious leaders and teachers of the law, rejected and despised him. But the people who had no apparent reason to believe in him and preach the truth about him with boldness and conviction did exactly that. The Roman soldiers guarding Jesus as he died on the cross who cried out, "surely he was the Son of God²," and the seemingly culturally insignificant women that faithfully stayed with him and returned to his tomb and saw him resurrected who ran to boldly tell everyone they could what they saw.

And when we truly encounter Jesus and we are faced with that reality and we allow the truth about him to fill our hearts and minds, we are fully equipped to share that hope with others. If God is committed to the restoration of his creation and those who choose to accept the work of Jesus on their behalf, then we as his followers can be committed to pursuing the same goal. I love how [Rich Villodas](#), a pastor and author from Brooklyn, puts this. He said:

"The resurrection is the good news that God in Christ is committed to the renewal, reconciliation, and resurrection of all things-and so should the Church be."

Jesus' resurrection gives us hope, it gives us purpose, and it gives us power to pursue the same goals as our Heavenly Father. We can join together in pursuing that reality.

² Matthew 27:54