

# The Easter Challenge

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We've declared already this morning, in any number of ways, that Jesus is risen.

We've declared our conviction that He is risen indeed. But is He? Is He really risen? The conviction is the stark, but many would argue, irrefutable objection to that testimony, stirring though it may seem that the dead stay dead.

Let's get real. Is that not the way it is? The dead stay dead. It's somber, but is it not the cold reality?

The central thesis of the Christian faith is that Jesus died and that He rose again. If this foundation stone is removed, and of course if it's not true, then it ought to be removed, then the whole edifice collapses, and nothing of any lasting value remains.

You might be left with a few nice songs to sing, some nice architecture perhaps, some of the vestiges of Christian culture that we might think of some merit.

[ 1 : 3 4 ] But in any meaningful sense, remove the resurrection, and everything crumbles around that removal. The most prolific early Christian preacher and writer was the Apostle Paul, who wrote many of the letters that we find in the New Testament.

And Paul expressed the matter powerfully and clearly in a letter that he wrote to Christians in the city of Corinth. And in his first letter to the Christians there, and in chapter 15, we find these words of the Apostle Paul.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. And then a little further on he goes on, If Christ has not been raised, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Pretty stark in the conclusion he comes to, but he's right. If Christ has not been raised, then his preaching, the preaching this morning, is useless.

Your faith, Christian friend, it's useless. It is of no meaningful value if Christ has not been raised. And indeed Paul goes further and speaks of how we, as those who claim that this is so, we are to be pitied above all men.

[ 3 : 0 2 ] Building our lives, building our hope on something that simply isn't true. A more modern preacher and author, Tim Keller, who is a preacher in Presbyterian Church in New York, and has written a number of books, particularly directed to those who are maybe searching or exploring these matters, he draws out the logical and practical implications of the view that we hold on the truth or otherwise of the resurrection.

And this is what he says, I think that's a helpful insight.

Maybe not a particularly novel one, but it's a helpful insight. We sometimes judge the Christian faith on the basis of, well, do I like that or not? Do I like what it teaches and the idea of sexual ethics?

Or do I like what it says about this or that? And what Keller is acknowledging is, it's not a matter of whether you like it or not. That's not what really is important. But everything hinges on whether Jesus rose from the dead or not.

If he didn't, then don't waste your time even thinking about what he said. You know, you've got better things to do with your time. But if he did rise from the dead, then what he says has to be dealt with, whether you like it or not.

[ 4 : 46 ] His very resurrection gives it the moral authority that demands attention. And those words that I quoted is from one of the books that he's written, The Reason for God.

And just as a little aside, there is a course that has been constructed around that book. And we'll be actually running that course here in Bon Accord after the Easter holidays, beginning on the, I think it's the 26th of April.

If you're interested in more details about that, just ask. So it's important to be sure on this matter of the resurrection, to be certain on this point.

Did Jesus rise from the dead or not? What I want to do this morning is just to explore that theme of certainty, of being sure with the help of one of the gospel accounts of the resurrection provided by a man called Luke.

We've read the passage that we want to think about. And in his account, we find a number of characters who are sure about matters relating to Jesus' death and resurrection.

[ 5 : 54 ] And I want us to meet these characters as we go through the passage. And we'll just go through the passage in the order that we find it there in Luke chapter 24. And the first characters that we meet are the women who went to the tomb on Easter morning.

We read there at the beginning of chapter 24, And then it goes on and tells us what they discovered.

What can we say about the women in terms of their certainty concerning these matters? Well, as we meet them here at the beginning of the chapter, we can say this, that the women are sure that Jesus is dead.

They're sure that he is dead. And that becomes clear when we're told what it is that they were going to do. We're told that they had prepared these spices and were taking them to the tomb.

And the spices were intended to be used to participate in or to conclude the process of embalming the corpse of Jesus. Now, there's some interesting debate as to what is going on here, because presumably Jesus had been embalmed before, being placed in the tomb.

[ 7 : 15 ] And so, is this not a little bit late in the day? And so, it's not clear if this was them wishing to conclude a process that had begun, or if this was simply a demonstration of the affection that they held for Jesus and the honor that they wished to render to Jesus.

And so, they were bringing additional spices for this embalming. But whatever we understand about those details, what is abundantly clear is that they were sure that he was dead.

You don't embalm a live person. That we can say with certainty. And so, these women, they make their sad and weedy way to the tomb, convinced that the one they saw die on the cross is still dead.

Because that's the way it is. The dead stay dead. I wonder if that is where you are. Jesus died. Jesus stayed dead.

Because that's what the dead do. And Jesus is still dead. Well, that's where the women were as they headed to the tomb. They were sure that Jesus was dead.

[ 8 : 26 ] But then we meet other characters in this account. We meet mysterious characters who make an appearance and they're the angels. And we can pick up the account in verse 4 there of chapter 24.

While they were wondering about this, the empty tomb. The women find the empty tomb and they don't know what's going on. They're wondering. They don't immediately say, oh, obviously he's risen from the dead.

No, that wasn't on their radar. So, they're wondering what's going on. And while they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

In their fright, the women bowed down with their faces to the ground. But the men said to them, Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen. Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee.

The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again. Then they remembered his words. So, these two men, as they're described by Luke, that gleamed like lightning.

[ 9 : 33 ] In the parallel accounts of the other evangelists, they're identified as angels. Luke gives us a clue that that's who they are by describing them as gleaming like lightning.

That's who they were. And these angels are characters we meet. And what can we say about the angels regarding this matter of Jesus' resurrection? Well, if the women are sure that Jesus is dead, the angels are sure that Jesus is alive.

On what does their certainty rest? Well, it rests, in the first place, on the fact that they themselves were involved in some way in his resurrection.

They didn't do the resurrecting, but they were involved in a manner. Mark doesn't tell us about that in any detail or at all, but Matthew does give us one indication of their involvement.

In Matthew chapter 28, and in verse 2, we read, 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.

[ 10 : 41 ] So, this was the nature of their involvement, or part of it at any rate, of rolling back the stone that was guarding the tomb where Jesus had been placed.

So, on that level, they are sure of what has happened. And then, of course, in the account that we have in Luke, we see how they state their conviction with great certainty.

He is not here. He has risen. Not only do they state their own conviction with great certainty, they display, I don't know if we'd call it surprise or some impatience at the unbelief of the women.

Notice what they say, the question that they pose to the women in verse 5. Why do you look for the living among the dead? It's almost as if they're saying, well, what are you doing here? How could you possibly imagine that you would find Jesus in a tomb?

Because a tomb is a place for dead people, and Jesus isn't dead. This is the wrong place to look. They are certain that Jesus is alive.

[ 11 : 50 ] They also ground what they say concerning Jesus' resurrection on the testimony of Jesus. They remind the women of what Jesus himself had declared before his death.

There in verse 7, they remind them of this. Remember what he told you when he was still in Galilee. The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.

Their certainty then grounded also in the very testimony of Jesus that he had declared even before the events of his death and resurrection. And how Jesus, in so doing, had spoken of what we might call the divine necessity of these events.

The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men. He must be crucified. He must die. There is this necessity for this to happen. But also, he must rise again on the third day.

And of course, that is what has taken place. So, the angels are sure that Jesus is alive. Now, for those of us who, for whatever reason and by whatever means, have come to a conviction concerning the truth of this account, we maybe read that and say, well, that's fine.

[ 13 : 09 ] We agree with that. That's true. But any self-respecting skeptic would be seriously underwhelmed by the testimony of the angels. And if that's where you are, you might reasonably retort to me highlighting the fact that the angels are sure that Jesus is alive.

Your response might be, well, you know, you'll have to do better than that. How can you possibly think that you will persuade me of the truth of one implausible event by reference to another implausible event?

That's not a particularly sound argument. I'm not sure if Jesus is alive. I'm not persuaded that he rose from the dead. And you want to persuade me by telling me, but will the angels believe it?

Yeah, come on. That's as implausible as the first one. That isn't very convincing. But isn't that the point that we need to recognize or grapple with?

That the resurrection of Jesus is, by its very nature, supernatural. It is implausible. Indeed, we could go beyond that. We could say that it's impossible if we are to insist on it conforming to natural criteria.

[ 14 : 21 ] You know, one very common objection to the resurrection is the claim that science proves that miracles don't happen, or worse, to that effect.

You know, the resurrection can't have happened because science demonstrates that miracles don't happen. Resurrections don't happen. Therefore, it cannot be true.

And that is something that is often stated, no doubt, with great sincerity by many. But the problem with that statement, the problem of recurring to science to come to a conclusion whether the resurrection happened or not, is that that statement is logically untenable as science, by its very nature, deals with natural phenomena.

And it can do it very efficiently and very effectively and very productively. And we thank God for all the advances that we enjoy as a result of scientific investigation.

But that is what science does. It deals with natural phenomena. The resurrection, an angel descending from heaven and moving the stone, these are supernatural phenomena.

[ 15 : 34 ] They fall out with the scope or capacity of science to prove or disprove. And so to go to science and say, well, it can't be true because science says so, is a category error.

That is not science's job to determine or to prove for or against, for that matter, the reality of the resurrection. But the angels are sure that Jesus is alive.

But let's continue through the account. And we meet the women again. And the women now, as the account proceeds, they are now sure that Jesus is alive. In verse 9 we read, even from verse 8, Then they remembered His word, the words that Jesus had spoken.

And then the passage goes on. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the others. And it's clear, especially as we draw and bring to bear the other parallel accounts, that they recounted not only what they had seen and heard, but their conviction that Jesus was alive.

Of course, that change in their conviction from being sure that He was dead to being sure that He was alive, was grounded in the empty tomb that they found.

[ 16 : 54 ] It was grounded in the testimony of the angels. But also, and this is something that Luke doesn't record for us in his account, it's also grounded in perhaps the most, not perhaps, undoubtedly the most powerful piece of evidence that they had.

And that was their own encounter with the risen Jesus. And Matthew tells of that encounter. In Matthew chapter 28, verses 8 to 10, we read, So they're on their way to do that which they had been told to do.

And then we read, So they have this encounter with the risen Jesus.

And so their mind is changed. And without dwelling on this, I simply draw out a very simple point. That you can change your mind. That's allowed. Many people do.

You can be persuaded. You can be sure of something at a given point in your life. And then you can change your mind. And you can come to a different conviction on the basis of what is presented to you.

[ 18 : 14 ] But then we come to other characters in this account. And I'm referring to the eleven. That is the disciples. They're spoken of there in Luke's account as the eleven.

And the eleven are sure that Jesus is dead. Verse 11, we're given this description of what happens when the women arrive and bring the message that they've been given to bring.

We're told how the eleven responded. They're sure that Jesus is dead.

What the women say concerning His resurrection is deemed by the eleven to be nonsense. Because the dead stay dead.

It can't be true. And so they dismiss the testimony. And let me, at this point, as we think about the disciples, convince that it can't be true.

[ 19 : 25 ] And so they dismiss as nonsense what the women say. Let me introduce a quote. It's a rather predictable source. I should be a bit more adventurous or research more into more interesting people to quote from.

But allow me to quote from Richard Dawkins on this matter. He says the following. Presumably what happened to Jesus is what happens to all of us when we die.

We decompose. Accounts of Jesus' resurrection and ascension are about as well documented as Jack and the beanstalk. Now when I read that particular claim by Richard Dawkins, my first response was dismay at the implication that Jack and the beanstalk isn't true.

Like that's very disappointing to discover that that's the case. But leaving aside that deception that it turns out that Jack and the beanstalk isn't a true story and it's just made up.

But leaving that aside, what about the basic point that he's making? That there's no evidence for the resurrection. There's simply no evidence to back up this claim that is made by Christians.

[ 20 : 39 ] Well, in actual fact, there is considerable evidence for the resurrection. Now I'm not going to, this morning, lay out what that evidence is for you.

Time doesn't allow us to do that. But what I would say is this, that the evidence rests on three historical facts that are largely undisputed by folk on different sides of the debate.

And the point is you need to establish what is the best explanation for these facts that are largely undisputed. The first fact that is largely undisputed is that the tomb was empty.

So even those who don't believe in the resurrection, who have spent time considering the matter, would concede that the tomb was empty. So that's something we have to deal with.

So what's the explanation for that? Now obviously different explanations are given, but the fact remains that the tomb was empty. The other fact that is indisputable is that the disciples were transformed and were able to then, on the basis of their conviction that Jesus was alive, turn the world upside down.

[ 21 : 48 ] And go all over the ancient world proclaiming this message on the conviction that Jesus was alive. That's simply historical reality. Reality, that is what happened.

That's indisputable. And then of course the subsequent growth of the Christian church through the centuries and the millennia and across continents. Again, these are indisputable facts.

You have to decide, well, what best explains those facts? Now I would contend that the most plausible explanation for these facts is the resurrection.

Any other explanation makes it much more difficult to explain these facts. But of course it would be necessary to explore that further.

And if that is something that you're interested in doing, what I have done is on the intimation sheet there's links to one or two resources that could serve as a starting point if that's something you would like to do.

[ 22 : 45 ] And explore in greater depth and detail the evidence that is put forward for the resurrection. But on this matter of exploring further, let's go back to our passage and meet our final character.

And our final character that we want to think about is Peter. And Peter is sure that he needs to explore further. Peter is not sure if Jesus is still dead or if Jesus has risen again at this point.

But he is sure that he needs to explore further. We read there in verse 12. Now let's not forget that Peter is one of the eleven.

We've already been told that the eleven considered that what the women had said was nonsense. Peter's among them. Peter can't disassociate himself from that conclusion that the eleven had come to, that this was nonsense.

He agreed with that. And yet he is sufficiently intrigued to explore this nonsense. Maybe he didn't consider it nonsense with the same vigor that the others did.

[ 24 : 04 ] We don't know. We're not given that level of detail. But Peter wants to be sure that what he imagines to be nonsense is actually nonsense.

And that requires exploration. He needs to go and see for himself. And this exploration made sense for a couple of reasons. It made sense because the claim that the women made was worthy of exploration.

The stakes were so high. You know, there are times when people can say something to us that seems to us highly improbable or implausible. And we might say, well, I don't know if that's true or not.

But the matter is so trivial that it doesn't merit exploration. You know, we can happily live our lives never deciding whether what has been said to us is true or not.

You know, life goes on. But this matter, this claim is of such an importance that it merits and demands exploration. The stakes are so high.

[ 25 : 04 ] For that reason, Peter will explore further. But, of course, the other reason why he explores further is that the claim of the women could be tested by exploration. It wouldn't be that difficult to establish if what they said was true or not.

And Peter says, well, I'm going to find out. I'm going to go to the very place that they've come from to establish whether what they say is or is not true. And so that's what he does.

Peter runs to the tomb to explore further. But as we think about this matter of exploration, and I'm encouraging exploration, but is it the case that it's his exploration that secures his subsequent conviction concerning the resurrection that it really did happen?

Well, seemingly not. That isn't the principal explanation for Peter coming to a conviction that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.

Because what are we told in the passage? What we're told in the passage is that he arrives at the tomb, he sees what the women saw, he saw the empty tomb, but then we're told that he went away wondering to himself what had happened.

[ 26 : 14 ] Certainly at this point, he's not persuaded. He's confused. He still hasn't come to a definitive conclusion. There's an empty tomb, but what does that mean?

He's wondering to himself what had happened. What persuaded Peter ultimately wasn't his exploration, important though it was, and a part of the picture though it is.

But what persuaded Peter is his encounter with the risen Jesus. It's interesting that Luke doesn't tell us about that encounter, certainly not in this part of his record.

But he does mention it by implication further on in the chapter in verse 34, when we have the disciples who had been on the road to Emmaus, and they meet with the risen Jesus, and they go to tell the other disciples of their experience.

And what do we read there in verse 33? They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven, and those with them assembled together, and saying, It is true, the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon, another name for Peter.

[ 27 : 28 ] So, we're told very clearly that this happened. Before meeting with the other disciples, Peter had had an encounter with the risen Jesus, and this is what persuades him.

Yes, it's true. Had he not embarked on his exploration, then you could say, Well, this would not have happened. But what clinches it for Peter is this encounter with Jesus.

And there's something very touching also, just on a very human level, about this encounter that Peter has with Jesus.

Jesus makes a point of coming to the encounter of the very disciple who had denied him three times. And the very one who had denied him is granted this privilege, if you wish, of the encounter before the other disciples with the risen Jesus.

And that is an encouragement to us as well. We may deny Jesus in many ways. Deny the truth concerning his life and death and resurrection. Deny him even as believers in the lives that we live.

[ 28 : 41 ] But we're reminded that he doesn't bear grudges towards us. There is still that willingness on the part of Jesus to come to the encounter of those who, at some point in their life, may have been deniers of his person and of what he did.

Jesus comes to the encounter of the explorer. And I think that is a pretty common pattern. The risen Jesus comes to the encounter of those who seek after him.

Jesus himself had given that promise as he taught in his earthly ministry. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Jesus responds to.

He comes to the encounter of those who seek him. Maybe you're not convinced that these things are true. Maybe what you need to do is to start exploring, to discover if this is true.

Of course, the other alternative would be to rest in your thinking or unthinking assumption that all this is just nonsense. That's what the eleven thought.

[ 29 : 49 ] It's just nonsense. The dead stay dead. That's maybe what you think. Well, all I would encourage you to do is explore. Explore a little further and see what you discover.

The stakes are high. They couldn't be higher. If Jesus is alive, that changes everything. It impacts on life. It impacts on death. It impacts on the present. It impacts on the future.

Everything must be seen in a new light through this filter of the resurrection, if it's true. So some exploration may be in order. But we can close by just reminding ourselves of the words of Paul that we mentioned at the beginning.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. We are to be pitied more than all men. But if Christ has been raised, well, that changes everything.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the records that we have in the Gospels concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[ 30 : 54 ] We thank you for the fact that we are in the Gospels concerning the death and the death and the death. We thank you for the encounter of those who seek him. We acknowledge that we, by our seeking alone and by our exploring alone, will not discover or find what we need to find.

But we thank you that as we seek, so you come and answer and respond and come to our encounter. We pray that that would be our experience.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.