

**It All Comes Down To This**  
**Mark 16:1-8**  
**March 31, 2024**  
**Easter Sunday**

Earlier this year I stumbled across an online debate about the resurrection of Jesus. That is nothing unusual. People have debated the resurrection for as long as the church has proclaimed it, but this debate came at the issue from a slightly different angle. The question being argued was not only “did it really happen?” but also “does it really matter?” What difference does it make that some guy named Jesus might or might not have walked out of a tomb 2000 years ago?

The participants were John Lennox and Michael Ruse. Lennox is a professor at mathematics at the University of Oxford in England. He is also a devout Christian who has written and spoken extensively in defense of the historical truth of Christianity. Michael Ruse is professor of philosophy at Florida State University. He is also an atheist. He is not an angry atheist who attacks and condemns those who believe. He is quite respectful of those of us who have faith. He just thinks we are wrong.

Dr. Ruse opened the debate in the following way:

“As a conservative non-believer, I think the physical resurrection is totally unimportant. I think that what is important is that those disciples on the third day who were downcast, who had

seen this man put to death in the most horrible way suddenly said “our creator lives.” [I think all that matters] is that this belief was within them. Whether or not [it really happened] is irrelevant. I take my religion much more at a spiritual level.”

Let’s translate that. He is arguing that it doesn’t really matter whether Jesus was actually raised from the dead. All that matters is that some people believe that he was, because this belief is sufficient to give them hope and purpose. For him, the resurrection is not a literal, historical event; it is simply an internal, spiritual experience. And if having that experience is helpful, then fine go ahead and believe it. Just don’t waste your time trying to convince me that it really happened, because it probably didn’t, and it doesn’t really matter anyway.

At one level, that might sound like a reasonable argument. We don’t need to waste our time worrying about whether the whole thing is true. We can set aside all our religious superstitions. We can free our minds from ancient dogma. We can be modern, scientifically-minded, technologically advanced people – in other words, we can be people who understand how the world really works – and yet still receive the story of resurrection as only a symbol or a metaphor for new beginnings.

There are a number of problems with that view, but Dr. Lennox responded much more eloquently than I can. (Plus, he said it with a British accent.) So, let me give you his words. He said,

“To say that the resurrection is irrelevant I find utterly astonishing. The word anastasis in Greek means ‘standing up again.’ It is a physical resurrection, and its significance is vast. Here all of us are faced with physical death. If the problem of physical death has actually been solved historically, I want to know about it. To say it is irrelevant I just don’t understand.”

Let’s translate that. You may think there are reasons to not believe the resurrection happened, but it is abundantly clear that the authors of Scripture were convinced that it did. They did not believe for one second that they were only giving us a symbol or a metaphor for some vague, spiritual hope. They were telling us about something that happened, something utterly unexpected and unexplainable by any human power. They believed that God had broken into the ordered affairs of our world and brought a dead man back to life, and that in so doing, he changed everything. And the reason they told us about it is because they want us to believe it as well.

But why should we? What reason do we have to think this miraculous story from 2000 years ago is actually true? And just as importantly, why should we think it even matters? What difference

does it really make? This morning we want to take the bold step of addressing both of those questions. Is there reason to believe the resurrection is true? And when it is all said and done, what difference does it really make?

As for the first question, I don't promise to be able to prove the resurrection to you beyond any shadow of a doubt. That is not possible – a fact which even the Bible acknowledges. 1

Corinthians 12:3 tells us “*no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.*” True faith in a crucified and risen Christ can only happen by the convicting power of God's Holy Spirit. But that doesn't mean it has to be a blind leap of faith. It can, instead, be a step of faith based on good evidence. Based on the way the story is told, let's briefly look at a few pieces of that evidence.

First, consider who the first witnesses to the resurrection were. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all vary slightly in the precise details they report from that Sunday morning, but there is one detail that is consistent across all of them. In every case, the first witness to the resurrection was a woman. That is a remarkable thing considering the world in which the resurrection happened. In the ancient world, women were generally considered to be unreliable witnesses to anything. The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that among Jewish people, a woman's testimony in a court of law was not considered valid. And with

some exceptions, the Romans didn't have a much higher opinion. The late Tim Keller quoted a second-century Roman philosopher named Celsus, who strongly opposed Christianity. He said, "Christianity can't be true, because the written accounts of the resurrection are based on the testimony of women – and we all know that women are hysterical." For the record, I am not endorsing that view! I am merely pointing out this was a commonly held belief at the time.

Which raises an important question. If the gospel writers were inventing a story that wasn't true, why did they make their primary witness a person whose testimony would so easily be written off and ignored? Why not put a man at that place in the story to make it slightly more believable? Maybe it was written that way, because it really happened that way. Maybe the gospel writers weren't trying to make the story believable. They were simply telling us about something that happened, as unlikely and inexplicable as it may sound.

That leads to a second piece of evidence which Mark's account brings to the center of our focus. Notice how the women react. The last words of our reading tell how they ran off from the tomb in fear. That's a strange way to end the story of what is supposedly the most important thing to happen in the history of the world. A little background information might be helpful for putting

that in context. According to the earliest known copies we have of Mark's gospel, this is exactly where Mark ended the story. The earliest versions of Mark's gospel that are in existence today do not include verses 9-20. Scholars – even conservative, evangelical scholars – are almost universally in agreement that those verses were added some time later.

There are different theories as to why this is so. Some argue that the original ending to Mark's gospel broke loose from the scroll on which it was written and is lost to us. In other words, it is possible that there is more to the story that we simply don't have. Other scholars argue that no, this is exactly where Mark intended to end his gospel. Given the short and hurried way in which he wrote the rest of it, that makes some sense. But either way, by God's providence, this is the way the story has come to us. One way or the other, we are left with a story in which some women learn of a resurrected Jesus and then run away in fear.

Why does that matter? Because it tells us the people who experienced the resurrection first-hand did not expect it any more than we would. Sometimes the argument is made that it might have been possible for people in the ancient world to believe in some crazy story about a dead man coming back to life because they didn't know what we know about how the world really works. They had never peered into an electron microscope to see tiny

particles whirling around inside an atom. They'd never read about Isaac Newton's laws of physics or Einstein's theory of relativity. They didn't know anything about microbes or air travel or even electricity. But we have, so we know some things simply are not possible.

But if you read the story in the way that it is told, it is clear the people of the first century were not any more inclined to think it was possible than we are. The women went to the tomb that morning expecting to find nothing more than a dead body. So, when they found Jesus to be very much alive, they ran away in fear, because everything they thought about the world had just been turned upside down.

Of course, the good news is that while this is the last thing our reading for the morning tells us, we know it is not the end of the story. We know these women did eventually report what they saw and heard, and that the disciples did eventually believe them. We know this because of how the disciples responded. This is third piece of evidence. Whatever it was that happened in that cemetery on that first Easter Sunday morning, it created an otherwise unexplainable change in their lives. When Jesus died on Friday, the disciples were terrified for their own lives. Peter even denied knowing him – not once, but three times – to save his own skin. And yet, when we get into the book of Acts, we see these men

behaving in bold ways, preaching unapologetic sermons, challenging the authorities, and often putting themselves at great risk. And history tells us that of the original twelve disciples, ten died as martyrs for the faith. How do we explain that kind of radical transformation? Could it be that what Mark tells us really did happen, and that the first followers of Jesus came to recognize exactly how this changed everything? Why would they willingly die for something they did not know to be true? The only way I know how to make sense out of that kind of transformation is that what they claimed happened really did happen. A man who was dead on a Friday was alive on a Sunday. And once you've seen first-hand that physical death is not the end, your entire approach to living changes. The greatest testimony to the reality of the resurrection is the living witness of those who experienced it.

With that, we transition from the first question to the second. Yes, there is reason to believe that it happened, but so what? Why does it matter? What difference does it make that 2000 years ago, some people claim to have met a resurrected Jesus? Well, in answer to that question we have two choices, and only two choices – and everything else we do in this life will be driven by which one of these choices we think is true. Choice number one: Jesus was not raised physically from the dead. If he wasn't, then death truly is the end. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then it



means this world and this life is all there is. There is no ultimate hope, there is no ultimate joy, there is no ultimate justice. If Jesus was not physically, literally raised from the dead, then the best we can hope for is whatever little sliver of pleasure and comfort we can carve out of the despair life throws at us. Because if we think that believing in something that isn't true will overcome the grave, then we are sorely mistaken.

The Apostle Paul speaks to this in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19, when he writes, "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*" That is choice number one.

Choice number two: Christ has been physically raised from the dead. The man who was dead on a Friday was alive on a Sunday in a physical, all be it, glorified body – a body that was recognizable to the people who knew him. They could touch him and eat with him and talk to him, just like they always had. If that is true, then it means physical death has been defeated. It means that a new reality has broken into the midst of our dying world. It means that there is a hope and a promise that things are going to be made right, not just in some partial, temporary way, but ultimately and finally and completely. It means that evil will be overcome. It

means that loved ones who die in the faith will be restored to one another. Most importantly, it means there is reason to live as faithful disciples in the midst of a fallen world, because the fallenness of this world is not the end of the story. That is what is at stake.

Now, I don't suppose for a moment that I have conclusively proven to anyone that the resurrection is real. Those who are inclined not to believe will find ways to explain away everything I have said. If one chooses not to believe, then that is your choice. But let's all at least agree that we need to set aside any nonsense about the resurrection only being some kind internal, private, religious experience. That is not what Jesus told us to expect when, on three different occasions he told us he would die and then rise again three days later. That is not what those who were present on that first Easter Sunday believed was happening to them. It is not what the disciples thought was going on when they laid down their lives as testimony to their faith in a risen Lord. And that is not what the gospel writers believed they were telling us about. For everyone involved in the story, this was a literal, actual event, something that really happened. In a way that no one expected, God inserted himself into the disordered affairs of this world and did what no one imagined possible. And everything is different now because of it.

Friends, hear the good news. We have good reason to believe that resurrection has broken into our dying world. Because of what happened on that first Easter Sunday morning, there is now hope in a place where there should be only despair. There is now light in a place where there should be only darkness. There is now justice in a place where there should be only evil. There is now joy in a place where there should be only sorrow. There is now the prospect of new life and new beginnings where there should be only final endings. Most of all, there is now life in a place where there should be only death. Whatever burdens we bring to this place this morning, there is an empty hole in the ground to tell us that our God has triumphed over death itself. If we place our trust in him, then we will too!