

“Reasons to Believe”

Matthew 28:11-15

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Well, it's Easter morning, the most important celebration of the Church. Easter represents our hope as Christians, and it is the foundation of our faith. Christianity itself stands or falls on the claim of Easter, that Jesus did not stay in the tomb, because as the Apostle Paul said, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” (1 Corinthians 15:17). But we believe he *has* been raised, the first among many who believe in him. Because he lives, we can live, too. Because he conquered the great enemy, death itself, we will conquer death, too. Jesus went to the grave so that we can be free, and he is the resurrection and the life,” and whoever believes in him will have life abundantly. That is the hope we celebrate today.

I'd like to simply walk us through the sequence of the first Easter morning, and then share some reasons I think we can confidence that Jesus did indeed rise from the grave. And so let's look at the story as Matthew tells it.

Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the grave. The other gospels tell us that others went, too. Matthew said earlier that that the other Mary was the mother of James. Mark's gospel says that a woman named Joanna was with them, too, the wife of one of Herod's officials. These Galilean women had stayed with Jesus at his death when the disciples fled. Now, according to Mark's gospel, they have come back to anoint the body with spices, an expression of love and respect. They would have needed to ask for help in rolling the stone away. They had no inkling of what had really taken place earlier that morning.

But things were not as they expected. Matthew calls attention to this strange event by saying, “And look!” He writes, “And look, there was a violent earthquake, for an angle of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it” (verse 2).

Maybe the women felt the earthquake as they rushed to the place of the tomb. There had been another earthquake at the moment of Jesus' death on Friday. When Jesus cried “It is finished!” with his last breath, the earth trembled, the rocks split, and graves opened up. It's as if the earth itself was bearing witness to the enormity of what had taken place in these events on the cross and at the tomb.

This was not the natural order of things. It wasn't simply shifting tectonic plates in the earth. It was the power of God moving through an angel, moving the stone and sitting on it.

Now Jesus was already raised from the dead. The earthquake didn't free him from the tomb. The angel didn't move the stone to let Jesus out, but to let his followers in. The angel moved the stone so the women would be able to witness to that fact that Jesus wasn't there any more. He was alive! And he was already gone.

The angel shone with the brilliance of God, shining with the glory of God. Whenever an angel appears in the Bible, the natural human response is terror. The unaided human eye can scarcely stand in the presence of pure holiness. And Matthew tells us that the guards “were so afraid of him that that they shook and became like dead men” (verse 4). Later, the guards reported what had happened, but the chief priests bribed them to say the body was stolen. These leaders were desperate to bring the story of Jesus to an end. And to some people, that seemed like an effective way to cover an inconvenient truth.

But to the women, the angel brought words of comfort: “Do not be afraid...He is not here; he is risen, just as he said” (28:5-6). Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God. He is alive, just as he said. How could Jesus’ followers have fathomed what had happened? The angel pointed to the empty tomb as evidence for their faith. And John’s gospel adds that the linen wrappings from the body were laying there as well, as confirmation of the miracle of Jesus’ rising. The angel invited them to see the evidence. Go in. Look at the tomb.

When I first went to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, a man that looked like Fred Rogers greeted us in a cardigan sweater and a tie, holding a pipe, with an English accent. He said, “We believe there is good evidence for the case that this is where Jesus historically died for our sins and was laid in the tomb. Maybe it took place somewhere else nearby. But in the end, it doesn’t matter if this is the actual place. Because he is not here. He is risen.”

He was right. And Matthew’s account underscores that. Because beyond the physical evidence was an encounter with Jesus himself. The angel told the women, “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” (verse 7). You see, as spectacular as the evidence and the angelic report, that’s circumstantial, isn’t it? The empty tomb only begins to lead to faith. Real proof happens when we have an encounter with Jesus. That’s why the angel tells the women they will see him in Galilee.

Matthew says the women’s fear turns to joy as they run from the place, and they’re starting to believe what they hardly dare to hope: he’s alive! He’s alive! They run to give the word to the disciples, the very first preachers of the resurrection, and preaching to the apostles at that! How would you like *that* responsibility?

And “suddenly Jesus met them” (verse 9). When the women fall before him and worship, they are the first to fulfill what will one day include the whole earth as it recognizes the authority and glory of the risen Savior. They fall at his feet, worshipping him, overcome with love, offering him what is due to God alone—and due to Jesus, God in the flesh.

What a flood of emotion--from grief, to terror, to joy, and finally to worship. Worship is the right response as we encounter Jesus. Now I recognize that on a day like today, there are probably some here who haven’t yet encountered Jesus, haven’t yet put their trust in him. I know for some, you aren’t yet convinced that he rose from the dead. And I’d like to share what I see as solid evidence, credible reasons to believe. Let me share some reasons why I believe Jesus is alive.

1. Jesus said he would rise from the dead.

He repeatedly said,

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31)

He also pointed to his own death and resurrection by the use of analogy, with what he called the “sign of Jonah,” the guy who lived in the belly of a great fish for three days. Jonah was a sign, Jesus said, that he would be three days in the earth. He said,

“He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’” (Matthew 12:39)

In another analogy, Jesus said that if his enemies destroyed the temple of his body, he would build it up again in three days (Matthew 26:61). So symbolically as well as openly, Jesus said he would come back. His enemies knew this well. After his death,

...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.’” (Matthew 27:63-64)

They were afraid Jesus’ disciples would come and steal the body, so they took precautions and set a guard at the tomb.

So Jesus himself said he would rise. The sayings have the ring of reality, not something invented by the church. And you really only have three options when it comes to Jesus and the things he said. He was lying, or he was deluded, or he was who he said he was. His character speaks for itself: it’s preposterous to say he spoke anything but truth.

2. The Tomb Was Empty.

The earliest eyewitness accounts make this clear. Jesus’ enemies confirmed it. There was no body found. Let’s think about the possible reasons for that.

Some claim that Jesus didn’t die, but only fainted on the cross, and was later revived. But it’s outlandish to think that Roman soldiers responsible for execution would not know how to carry one out. It’s absurd to suggest a man flogged with a cat-of-nine tails, hung on a cross for six hours, and stabbed in his side with a spear could survive. Even Jesus’ enemies didn’t offer this explanation.

Some claim that Jesus’ disciples stole the body. But it doesn’t make sense that they could have overcome the guards posted at the tomb. And even if they could, why would they? They would go on to suffer beatings, imprisonment, and death for telling the good news that Jesus rose from the dead. It doesn’t make sense they would base their lives on and pay with their lives for what they knew was a lie?

Some claim that Jesus' enemies stole the body. But that doesn't make sense either. If they could have produced the body, that would have effectively killed the Christian movement. But they couldn't.

The best explanation is the most staggering. God raised Jesus from the dead, like the first witnesses said.

3. The Disciples Were Changed.

Before the crucifixion, most of Jesus' followers had scattered. The twelve disciples were in despair; Judas had betrayed Jesus to the authorities, and Peter had denied him. The Twelve had scattered in fear and were hiding.

Within days, they were boldly proclaiming the resurrection and standing up to authorities. These were not wild-eyed fanatics or naïve dreamers, but clear-eyed realists who had encountered the living Jesus.

4. The Witnesses Were Unexpected.

In first-century Judea, it was astonishing that women were the first ones entrusted with the gospel. You could say they were the first ones ordained—by the angel and by Jesus himself—to preach. They were told to announce the good news that Jesus was alive. The disciples weren't present, and had to rely on the testimony of women.

Women in that time and place were considered unreliable witnesses. No one in that culture would have invented a story like this if they wanted to establish its credibility.

5. The Claim Was Irrefutable.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church that he had met the risen Jesus, and said that 500 other people had seen him, too, many of them still alive when Paul made that claim (1 Corinthians 15:6). Paul was writing to Greeks who were skeptical of the resurrection. His statement could have been refuted by many persons if it had not been true.

In fact, Paul's own conversion to Jesus is tough to explain if he had not seen him. Paul was violently persecuting the church for the Jewish religious authorities, when Jesus appeared to him. From that point on, Paul risked his life in the service of Jesus. That only makes sense if Paul was absolutely convinced that Jesus rose from the dead and that the good news about him was true.

6. The Church Was Explosive.

It's tough to explain how a struggling, despised, persecuted and miniscule movement grew to turn upside down the greatest empire the world had ever known. It did so by spreading the news that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead. All the good the church has ever done and all the impact it has ever made is based on the fact of Jesus' victory over death. This is the message brought to the nations, the message with the power to change the world. That's a powerful indication of its truth.

So the evidence is there. Intellectual integrity demands that you weigh that evidence heavily. I think the very best explanation of the empty tomb is that Jesus was who he said he was, and that he did what he said he would, and that he reigns in heaven for you today.

So to be saved, to have new life and the hope of heaven one day, that's not just about reason and arguments and history. You're saved when the Spirit gives you eyes to see the facts as more than dusty pieces of data from the past, but a revelation of the truth and splendor of God in the face of the crucified and risen and glorified Jesus Christ. When you put your trust in him, not just consider the evidence, but when you enter into a relationship with him. At the end of the day, it's not enough to believe intellectually. You need to encounter the Living Jesus Christ. Like the old song goes,

“He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.”

The resurrection tells us that Jesus is waiting for us and that we have a home in heaven. All our hope is built on that foundation. That's why we're here today.