

Reasons to Believe

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They come in many different shapes and sizes. There are 911 deniers and holocaust deniers. *Deniers* are people who aren't convinced by the evidence that the majority of people accept. I'm not big on conspiracy theories so I kind of get that "What you talkin' about, Willis?" kind of look on my face when I read about, say, moon landing deniers. There is a small subculture in America that denies the moon landings. These deniers can explain away just about any piece of evidence. The flag shouldn't have been waving on the moon since there was no air (which neglects to take into account the law of inertia) or that there were no stars on the American flag (not considering the exposure time of the camera played a factor in that). Denying the moon landings is so popular that Newsweek wrote an article about this phenomenon back in 2009.

Having a healthy skepticism is a good thing. We shouldn't believe everything we hear without first learning about the reasons or evidence. In fact, the scientific method is predicated on a good dose of skepticism; prove to me that this right. I'm an engineer by training; I love science and I have a built in cynicism; it's part of my DNA. And there is no doubt times when it's really hard to discern what is true and what is false. There is oftentimes competing evidence that makes it hard to know what to believe. But denying what's obviously true is not a positive character quality, either.

A study out of the University of Kent in England revealed some interesting conclusions about conspiracy theories. The three researchers found that the unwillingness or inability to accept certain truth claims had almost nothing to do with the presentation of evidence, but everything to do with a prior commitment to already-held beliefs along with a few other things. So, think about that conclusion; I'll rephrase this a little. The researchers discovered that people were reluctant or unwilling to accept certain evidence because they were already committed to believing something different - they didn't want to learn anything new because their minds were already made up. I wonder if I'm one of those people? I wonder if you are? The kind of person who is unwilling to consider some evidence because I've already made up my mind?

Why am I bringing this up? It's because Jesus Christ has his deniers, too. Not many. Even many committed atheists and opponents of Christianity will admit that the evidence supports that a man named Jesus lived in the area of Palestine the first century AD. But there's a lot more to deny than just Jesus' existence. Some might deny his death; others deny his miracles or teachings. Certainly, many deny that he is God.

Maybe some of you here this morning have your doubts, too. Maybe your doubts aren't quite as strong as some of the examples I'm giving this morning. But you have these nagging doubts. You have these unanswered questions that always seem to make you scratch your head a little bit. And these unanswered questions, these doubts, keep you from making

progress in your own spiritual journey. I want to help you out this morning. I can't possibly answer every objection you might have, but we celebrate Easter because we believe - we followers of Jesus - that something happened 2000 years ago. Something in real time and in real space happened. It was out of the ordinary, no doubt. But what we believe happened changed the course of history and should change the way you and I live our lives. I want to show you this morning how Easter begins a discussion about the truthfulness of Jesus and everything he said.

I don't mean for this to be an exercise of merely debating the evidence; there are implications to events. Do you know what I mean by that? There's a danger in denying that which is demonstrably true; meaning is embedded in events so deny true events means you won't apply what they mean. 9/11 *meant* that the enemies of America are more determined and more resourceful than most gave them credit for. It *meant* to be safe, increased Homeland Security is required. The moon landing *meant* we could do more with technology than we ever thought. It *meant* children could dream beyond their imaginations and innovate for the good of humanity. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means something, too. But, we'll get to that in a minute.

The Christian faith and belief system primarily hinges on one historical event: the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. When I say "primarily hinges," what I mean by that is that it seems God has primarily proved himself, primarily demonstrated his reliability, staked the credibility of the Christian faith on Jesus resurrecting from the grave. What does that mean though, resurrection? The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ was executed by the Roman government and was confirmed dead by being pierced through by a spear and laid in a grave for 3 days (Friday night, all day Saturday and Sunday morning). But on that third day, that Sunday morning, he was given new life again. He wasn't merely resuscitated back to life, but was given Resurrection Life, if we could call it that way. Resurrection Life means a new kind of life after death. A life that will never taste the death, the disease and the frustrations of this life again. If that resurrection of Jesus didn't happen then the Bible itself says Christianity isn't true.

We see that in 1 Cor. 15. In that chapter, the Apostle Paul was trying to explain the resurrection to the church members in Corinth trying to help them understand the significance of the resurrection. And in vs. 17 Paul makes this startling admission: *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins*. Really? The resurrection is that important? If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, our faith in Jesus is pointless and our biggest need, that we are sinners, has not been fixed. We'll touch on why this is the case in a few minutes, but note for now just how important it is that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead.

So, where might we get information about this resurrection? And what might we learn about it? Let's study a few things from the book of Matthew starting in chapter 27 (READ 27:62-28:15). Let me draw your attention to a few important factors.

The first obvious consideration is the evidence for resurrection of Jesus. There are three pieces of evidence that are important in establishing the fact that Jesus really did rise from the dead. First of all, there was an angelic witness. An angel of the Lord appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to tell them what happened. According to the Bible, God seems to do this; he seems to send supernatural messengers to verify important events. When Jesus was born, when Abraham was waiting for God, when Jacob was struggling, when Moses received instruction, an angel was sent to give some news. God had an important message so he sent an important messenger. Now, if you're chuckling to yourself a tad thinking, "An angel? Did the Superman role the stone away?" I understand your skepticism. But let me challenge you, too: Do only believe of things that *you* understand what *you* see? The longer I have lived on this earth the I've been humbled to admit that there is so much more to this world than what I can see and what I can understand. And it's been good for me to learn that lesson.

Secondly, the tomb was empty. Jesus' body wasn't there. Even his enemies knew the body of Jesus wasn't there. They knew they had to come up with an explanation for why Jesus' tomb was empty. Where did Jesus' body go? And how did that happen? We all must come up with an explanation: why was the tomb empty? In light of all the evidence (and do you know the evidence?), what's your best best explanation?

Finally, Jesus made his own appearance. Vs. 9 says, "And behold, Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!'" The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John all give us various accounts of Jesus revealing himself to people as proof of his resurrection. Different people at different times. He encouraged people to touch him. He ate meals with people to prove he was real flesh and blood. So, that's the first thing I want you to notice from our Matthew reading: look at the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. All three of these pieces of information invite you and I to say, "There's good reason to think Jesus was raised from the dead."

Secondly, let's spend a little bit more time on the eyewitness testimony, that people saw Jesus alive and well after his death with their own two eyes. Eyewitness testimony has been around as long as civilization itself. Ancient cultures in their writing reference the need for eyewitness testimony in legal matters. How do we know something happened? How do we know if someone committed a crime? Well, did anybody see it? Even today, eyewitness evidence is a powerful factor in criminal justice; juries are much more persuaded about the guilt or innocence of a person if someone gets up on that stand and says, "I saw it myself."

In recent years, though, eyewitness testimony has fallen on hard times. Studies show that it's not as reliable as we'd all like it to be. There are plenty of cases and studies that show how easy it is to pick the wrong man or woman out of a lineup. And when we can get certainty with DNA evidence, the reliability of eyewitness doesn't feel so... reliable.

This is one of things I love about the Bible; I love how modern science verifies the wisdom of God's word. Do you know what God's word says? It says you ought not to indict a man or a woman just on one person's eyewitness testimony; that's not enough. You need more

than that. You need at least two or better yet, three eyewitnesses. God knew that while eyewitness testimony is important, we humans are prone to mistakes and poor memories. So God mandated in his law that more than one person needed to see something in legal matters.

Well, how many eyewitnesses saw Jesus alive and well after his death? Mary Magdalene saw Jesus; so did the other Mary (Mary the mother of James). All of Jesus' disciples saw him (Peter, Thomas, James, Andrew - 11 not counting Judah). He appeared to Cleopas and another unnamed disciple. He appeared to Paul, too, as well as Mattheus, two apostles who were not apart of the original 12. He appeared to his brother, James, a brother, I might add, who did not believe in him at first. And in 1 Cor. 15:6 Paul wrote, "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep," or died. When Paul says, "most of whom are still alive," do you know what he's saying? He's saying, "Go ask them! If you're wondering if this is true, there are people you can ask. You don't have to take my word for it. There are more people saying this than just me." That's one of the most important things about the eyewitness testimony of Jesus' resurrection. It wasn't just one person who saw him, or even two or three. Hundreds of people saw him at different times and places.

There is one more piece of evidence that is very important when we consider the resurrection of Jesus: he said this would happen. He made it known; he spread the word. He wasn't trying to hide this from anyone. We read in chapter 27 the authorities were concerned about this kind of monkey business so they went to Pilate and asked, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'" Pilate told them to take some troops and have them stand guard by the tomb so nobody could steal the body where some might think he was resurrected. When the angel appeared he told the women (vs. 6), "He is not here, for he has risen, as he said." He said this was going to happen. He predicted this.

Do you know what that means? It removes the flukiness from the resurrection. It wasn't a coincidence or an accident. Sometimes those things happen. I'm guessing some of you know about *Dude Perfect* (PIC) (If you under 40 you know exactly what I'm talking about and if you're over 40, you might be clueless). *Dude Perfect* is an entertainment group who perform all kinds of sports fetes and trick shots; they have a ton of videos on YouTube. They started as a group of buddies recording each other doing crazy tricks in their backyard, but it's blown up in a really good way for them. Now, they make videos all the time trying to break world records and having fun doing amazing things. Full court shots between their legs; Ping Pong trick shots; amazing trap shooting shots. If you don't know what I'm talking about, here's a taste (VID). Do you know what makes what they're doing amazing and worth watching? They're trying to do this stuff. Do you know what I mean? Fluky things happen. Every once in awhile, someone can make a full court basketball shot. But what about when you're trying to do it? What about when you say, "Hey, watch this!" and you pull it off. That's amazing. It's one thing for it to happen almost by accident; it's another to see someone plan to do something amazing and actually do it.

When Jesus said, “I’m going to die, be buried in the ground 3 days and then I’m going to rise” he was putting his reputation on the line. Jesus was saying, “Hey, watch this!” Jesus was giving the whole world a reason NOT to believe in him. “Hey, don’t believe in me if I die and stay dead. Don’t believe in me if I’m not resurrected from the dead. But if I am... then what will you do?” Jesus pulled it off. His enemies and opponents may have thought he was crazy, but he wasn’t. He was totally and perfectly in his right mind.

And this moves us straight into the significance of Jesus’ resurrection. It’s not just true according to the Bible (God’s Word), to me and followers of Jesus around the world. It means something. And it means that Jesus’ words are true. It means you can believe what he says. Maybe I should say it more forcefully than that: It means you *should* believe what he says. It means that if there is anyone in this world that you *should* listen to, it would be him. He predicted the impossible, the supernatural, and he pulled it off.

Do you know some things that Jesus has said that you should believe? Jesus said...

- I am the way and the truth and the life, no one can come to the Father except by me. (John 14:6)
- Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36)
- I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12).
- I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35).

Do you want those things, friend? Do you want a relationship with God; a relationship marked by life and joy and truth? Do you want to be rescued from walking in darkness? Do you want your spiritual hunger, your spiritual thirst to be satisfied? Do you want to be set free from the consequences of your sins? Those things are found in Jesus. These universal human pursuits and desires are found only in one man: Jesus Christ. And if you’re wondering, “But can I trust him?” Just think to our message this morning; he promised he’d be resurrected from the dead and he kept that promise. If he kept that one, he’ll keep everyone.

Key verse: Matthew 28:5-6

Questions for the week

- What you consider yourself an open-minded person? Is that how other people would describe you? What evidence is there that you are open-minded?
- What might be some of your nagging questions about God and faith? Who could you call to get help with them? What’s keeping you from making that call?
- What evidence is most persuasive for you in believing in the resurrection of Jesus? Or, what’s keeping you from believing in the resurrection of Jesus?