

I. Intro

A. I hold in my hand a copy of *The Jerusalem Post*. I read it from time to time, more often since I heard one of the editors give a lecture a few months back. He grew up in the area, graduating from Northwestern's journalism program and then moved to Israel and has been working for *The Jerusalem Post* ever since.

1. He was in Chicago visiting family. He gave a lecture trying to help explain the politics of the Middle East. It was fascinating. And knowing someone who works there makes reading the paper a bit more interesting.

B. But that is not why I am holding it now. I simply want to note that, *The Jerusalem Post* did not start publishing until the 1930s. However:

1. Even though it was not around in the first century;

2. And even though writing was a pain – you couldn't just go to Office Depot to get paper and pens, you had to make your own.

3. And even though what you made generally didn't last very long.

4. And even though those who were writing back then tended to write about kings and wars – and not on uneducated rabbis from Nazareth.

C. We have enough evidence from first century, non-biblical sources to establish a fairly comprehensive picture of Jesus. We can verify that:

1. There was a man named Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in Palestine during the first century, who appeared to have some sort of exceptional powers.

2. He claimed to be the Messiah prophesied about in the Hebrew scriptures. And He claimed to be more than just that. He claimed to be God.

3. This caused headaches for the Jewish religious leaders of his day, because claiming to be God is blasphemy – which was a capital offense. But the Jews were living under Roman rule, and the Romans were not interested in having someone put to death for what they considered to be a minor religious squabble.

4. However, after one of Jesus's own followers betrayed him, the religious leaders brought Jesus before the Romans leaders on political charges – namely, insurrection. They said he was a threat to Caesar because of his claim to be the King of the Jews.

5. Jesus was eventually found guilty by Pilate – the Roman governor – and was turned over to be whipped and crucified. Our sources tell us that he was buried according to Jewish religious customs, His body was placed in a rock tomb, a large stone was rolled in front of the entrance. And, because the Jewish

religious leaders feared that his disciples might try to steal the body, a guard was placed at the entrance.

6. In spite of these precautions, three days later, two women approached the tomb and found it empty. From this empty tomb – and from the claims of 500 people who said they saw him alive - spread the belief that he had risen from the dead. This led to the formation of the church, which was initially comprised exclusively of Jews, but which quickly grew to include anyone who believed that Jesus was the Son of God and savior of the world.

7. This church spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire.

D. Of course, we know what happened from there:

1. The Church continued spreading around the world. Today it is the largest, oldest, most ethnically diverse and geographically disbursed movement of any type in the world. And outside of the West, it continues to grow quickly. And you are here right now.

E. The question is, what happened? Specifically, what happened to Jesus's body? Everyone agrees that the tomb was empty. How did it get empty?

1. Some say the disciples stole the body. Some say that Jesus didn't really die – just passed out. Some say the women went to the wrong tomb. And of course, others – like me - say he rose from the dead, that Jesus was who he claimed to be and that it is through a relationship with Him that we can be reconciled to God and gain eternal life.

F. The fact that I believe this is probably no surprise. But for the record, I do not believe because I am a pastor. I am a pastor because I believe. And I believe that my belief is based on the evidence.

G. I find the alternate theories – that the women went to the wrong tomb or that the disciples stole the body - collapse as soon as you push on them. And also note that there are lots of other reasons to think Jesus rose from the dead.

1. For starters, this is what he said he would do. He said he was God and he said he was going to Jerusalem to lay down his life and he said he would rise again. For example: He made this point while standing on the steps of the Temple. John 2:19 tells us that he said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it."¹ They thought he was talking about the building – which was massive, and that claim didn't make any sense to them. But he was talking about his body. The Temple was the place where God and humanity met. He was claiming to be the new temple.

2. Secondly, it wasn't just that his body was gone, he appeared to people. Starting with the women – which is not what you'd engineer if you were making this up, because at the time women did not have societal status or legal rights.

3. It's worth noting that the people most persuaded of all of this were the disciples – who are dramatically changed. They go from being the keystone cops who never seem to miss an opportunity to do the right thing, to a force that cannot be stopped.

4. Also, it's worth noting that the New Testament claims to be a history book and it's full of detailed historical claims. It does not read like a fairy tale – it doesn't open, "A long time ago in a faraway land." It gives names and dates. It names locations.

a) The claim is that Christ's death, burial and resurrection was an actual event, every bit as historically real as the assassination of JFK or this year's Super Bowl.

b) Skepticism about it is likely shaped more by anti-supernatural starting assumptions than by the evidence itself – which is not the way it is supposed to work. In fact, it's a bit irrational. Christianity rests on a historical claim. You owe it to yourself to consider the historical evidence.

c) And after Paul lays out his case in I Cor. 15, he says, "But don't take my word for this. Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people, go talk with them."

5. And of course, we need to note that we are not talking about you or me rising from the dead, we are talking about Jesus.

a) We are talking about the one who lived the most amazing life of all time; who taught with authority, performed miracles, gave us the greatest ethical system that we have. We are talking about the one who was an amazing example of love and grace and who fulfilled several hundred prophecies that had been in place for at least four hundred years.

b) We are talking about the person who had the most significant impact on the world of anyone who ever lived.

c) I think that when you step back and look at Jesus, the amazing thing is not that he rose from the dead. The most amazing thing is that he stayed dead for parts of three days!

H. Nearly every generation has books written by those who set out to disprove the resurrection only to be persuaded that it was true. Frank Morrison's *Who Moved the Stone*, Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Lee Strobel's *The Case for Faith* and many more.

1. As an aside, we have Strobel – who was trained as a Yale lawyer and who was working as an investigative reporter for the Tribune when his wife came to faith (something that horrified him). He set out to undermine Christianity and in the process came to faith. We have him speaking here this summer.

2. If you have any doubts about the resurrection, I commend any of these books to you.²

II. As I said, I believe the tomb was empty because he rose from the dead, and so I'm all in. And, so on most Easters, I spend my time trying to persuade those of you who are here but who do not really believe, that you need to follow Christ.

A. This is my 20th year at Christ Church – which means I have given a lot of Easter talks.

B. Some of you have been here for most of them – and many other sermons as well. But some of you have only heard me give twenty Easter sermons. As far as you know, I only talk about one thing.

C. You show up because you have to – it's part of your family's holiday celebration. You do not believe, but you take one for the team – and you generally advertise your interest level, by sitting like this: .

D. And just about every year, I say all of this and tell you that sitting through an hour service is not going to kill you, and note that I was you once. And then I do my best to persuade you that the question is not, do you like Jesus. It's not, do you agree with his teaching? It is not, do you think church is a good idea? The issue is not what you think about Christians. The question is, is He God, and did he rise from the dead.

E. And I direct my sermon at you. I try to persuade you that it's true. I argue that:

1. Easter is not an event to celebrate Spring. We have not gathered so people can show off new dresses and pass around Easter Lilies.

2. We believe that God showed up in human form and died in our place so that we can be forgiven, be reconciled to God and gain eternal life.

F. I direct my sermon to you, saying: there is a god – and furthermore, that you know there is a God.

1. I know you know, because this because this was my sense before I decided to plant my flag with Jesus.

2. I also know you know because this is what Paul writes in Romans 1. There are some things that we cannot not know. And the fact that there is a god is one of them. We can suppress the thought, but we do still have the thought that God is there.

III. This is what I have done every Easter I have spoken. But not this year. This year is different. This year I am leaving those of you in the cross-hairs alone.

A. I want you to know that God loves you and the life you want involves reaching out to him.

B. I want you to know that you are invited back. I am very excited about the series that starts next week. It's an exploration about how to be honest with ourselves and with God – and to head down a life path that works.

C. I want you to know that we have Lee Strobel here on July 20 and 21.

D. I want you to know that we have small group discussions that meet for those who want to take a grown up look at Jesus. Many of you have graduate level degrees in finance and law and technology but a 2nd grade understanding of Jesus and your own heart.

E. I want you to know that if you want to know more about what it means to be a Christian, I have written an article just for you. It's based on a conversation between Nikolas Kristof – a Pulitzer prize winning foreign correspondent for *The New York Times* – and Tim Keller, a prominent New York city pastor and best-selling author. And we'll send it to you if you fill out the bottom of that card.

F. And most of all I want you to know that God loves you. Really. Not because you're great. He knows you are not. He knows I am not. The love of God is not object-elicited. It is not I love you because you are lovable. It is subject generated. It is I love you because I love.

IV. Having said all of that, I want to talk to those of you who believe in the resurrection, because there is a lot folded into this claim that should give you hope and joy.

V. Let me start by being very clear what we are talking about.

A. The claim is not that after his death, Jesus lived on in the hearts and minds of all those who loved him, flooding their memories with warmth every time they heard a bird sing or a baby laugh. People do live on in that sense. But that is not the claim.

B. The claim is not that Jesus was resuscitated – that somehow, he survived the crucifixion or, that after briefly dying he was revived.³ The claim is not that he came back in a body that would die again.

C. The claim is not that Jesus rose spiritually from the grave while his body remained in the ground.⁴ The claim is not that at his death his body went into the ground to decay but that his spirit lived on. Some form of this is what most religions teach. That our soul or spirit lives on.

D. The claim of a resurrection was something quite different from any of these.

1. The claim is that after he died on the cross and was dead for parts of three days, God restored his physical body to life.

2. The claim is that Jesus's resurrection body was the same body that had died come back to life, but that it had been remade to be new and imperishable.

3. The claim is that after forty days of walking around on earth – making it very clear that he was alive and that he had a body (he let them touch him, he ate food). The claim is that after forty days he ascended into heaven with this body and that He lives on in heaven now with that same body.

E. Each of these claims is big, which should not surprise us. The resurrection of Christ is the arguably the climax of the entire Bible.

VI. So, that's the claim. Why does it matter?

A. The first and most obvious reason the resurrection matters is because it substantiates all of Christ's other claims.

1. Rising from the dead is exhibit A in the claim that Jesus is God. The resurrection sets Jesus apart from everyone else. Who else has defeated death?

a) There were other things that set Jesus apart.

(1) No other religious leader claimed to be God. They said that they were not as important as their teaching.

(2) No other religious leader said that they would rise from the dead.

2. But the Resurrection is offered as proof that Jesus is God. It was the final proof.

a) On the one hand, the resurrection was just the next thing in a long line of amazing things Jesus did. He had already lived a perfect life, demonstrated his ability to heal people; demonstrated his power over evil and nature. He had already raised others from the dead – though in those instances they came back in bodies that would die. He had already amazed all who heard him teach. In remarkable ways, he fulfilled a staggering number of prophecies that had been made about the Messiah over the years.

b) He had already done a lot. On the one hand, the resurrection was just another thing. On the other hand, it was different. It was bigger and he had pointed ahead to it as a kind of confirmation of all his other claims.

c) In I Cor. 15, the Apostle Paul argues that the resurrection is proof at another level. He says, if you want to disprove the whole thing, disprove the resurrection. Because if Christ didn't rise then it's all a bad joke. But if he did, it's fair to say: everything else he claimed was also true.

3. But there is more. You likely knew that. We talk about that. But there are other things those of us who believe the resurrection is true can learn from the resurrection.

B. Two: The Resurrection Helps us Understand What it Means to be Human.

1. As I write this, some living in Silicon Valley are promising that in a few years you will be able to download your soul into a machine and live forever. Set aside the technical challenges behind this – how we would be able to download all of our memories, how we'd be able to digitize our personality and store it on a machine. Let's assume that they can solve all of those problems. To be human is to be an embodied spirit. Biblically speaking, the body part of this is non-negotiable.

2. In fact, the very first thing the early church fought against was Gnosticism. It was those who denied that Jesus was really human.

a) This is a bit odd, because today most are willing to admit that Jesus was human, but say he is not God. Back then, they said he was God, so they denied that He was human. They said God would never lower himself like that. They said he would never become one of us.

b) John opens his letter fighting this view.

3. The resurrection reminds us that the physical world matters – that matter matters. Christianity is not a spiritual enterprise. God cares about everything. He is not particularly interested in your spiritual life. He is completely interested in everything about you.⁵

4. Heaven is not a mystical, ethereal, wispy existence.

C. The Resurrection Proves that Death has Been Defeated.

1. We just came through Good Friday – where we focus on Christ's death in our place. The big claim is that God became man not just to teach us how to live, not just to set an example, but to die in our place.

2. This sets up the central claim – the Gospel, which is a big anti-religious claim. As I have said on many occasions, Jesus and the Apostle Paul lined up more against religion than Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. We cannot reach up. But God reached down.

3. One of the other claims is that with the resurrection, Jesus defeats death.

4. With the resurrection, death loses its sting, because we see that though we die we will rise, not just spiritually. That does happen. Right away. At death our body goes into the ground and our spirit rises. But the promise is that in the future

there will be a resurrection of the dead. And death will be destroyed. No more death.

D. The claim is that Christ's body points ahead to the kind of resurrection body we will get.

1. Jesus is the first born from the dead (that is what Paul calls him in Col. 1:18) that those who follow him will experience their own resurrection in the future. You will be given a renewed, perfect body that will be free from disease and decay.⁶ That will be eternal

2. During the Middle Ages a theologian wrote that the new bodies we get are all going to us, but not us today, they will be us at 28. That sounds great.

a) There is nothing to base that on, but I am going on record as saying I sure like the idea.

3. What the Bible does say is that we will get new, amazing bodies:

a) I Cor. 15:42-44 / 50-57

4. It's hard to talk about all of this. It's a cliché to suggest that words fail, but that is my sense when we get into the last chapters of Revelation. Where John has a vision of the New Jerusalem and he says things like:

5. I think Lewis does a great job of capturing the heart of the matter when, in *The Last Battle* – which is the last book in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series – he writes:

a) And as he spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was on the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

E. There is more. But I suspect that is enough for now.

VII. Let me pull this together by recapping the good news. We're about to sign a song about the resurrection that celebrates a resurrected king.

A. We broke the good world we were given and became estranged from God.

B. God showed up to rescue us.

1. God the Father sent God the Son to die
 2. In Christ we can be reconciled to God, restored and gain eternal life.
- C. Christ not only lived the perfect life so he could be the perfect sacrifice and then give his righteousness to us.
- D. He proved all of this again by rising from the dead.
- E. And his resurrection not only tells us what it means to be human and assured us that death has been defeated and one day will be destroyed – it also points to the kind of renewed, perfect body we will get after death. You will not hear better news, ever.

VIII. Let me end the way the service began: He is risen.

¹ Also, In ?, he said, “This generation wants a sign, but they will not get one other than the sign of Jonah.

² There is so much more evidence that is added once you dig in. For instance, it is clear that the disciples were utterly convinced that He had risen from the dead. Critics of Christianity either portray the disciples as simpletons who were easily misled by third-rate magic or as conniving schemers who pulled off the biggest hoax in history. Neither conclusion is supported by the facts. Far from being quickly persuaded that Jesus was God, the disciples seem to take forever to get it. But once they did “get it” they were unshakable. Ten of the twelve die as martyrs for their faith. Whether Jesus was God or not, it is clear that they believed he was.

³ Jesus resurrection punched a hole through the bottom of the bag. Jesus did not resurrect Jairus’s daughter or the widow’s son or even Lazarus. He resuscitated them, brought them back to life, but in such a state that they all eventually died again.

⁴ This is what the Romans and Jews generally believed and such claims about Jesus would not have caused a fuss. They certainly would not have fueled the disciples to the Roman Empire upside with their claims that Jesus was the Messiah, a crusade that lead ten of the remaining eleven to die as martyrs.

⁵ Some people divide the world into the spiritual and the physical – more often called the sacred and secular divide – but God does not. Everything matters. Christianity doesn’t claim to be an other-worldly, mystical, magical, ethereal religion. It claims to be an actual event.

⁶ Many are aware that one of the lines in the Apostles’ Creed is, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” This is not a reference to Christ’s body but to yours!