

I. Intro.

A. “The Tomb is empty!” That is what Peter said.

1. He was not the first. Three of the four Gospels report that the women were the ones who discovered that the stone was rolled back and the body was gone. They were also the first to encounter the risen Christ.

B. But Peter was the one who reported it to the other disciples.

1. And he then played a big role in lighting the fire that spread throughout Jerusalem, and then Judea and then around the world. Eventually somehow reaching you and me, because here we are. In a building built so that people can worship the person whose body was not in the tomb. We gather because of our belief that He wasn't there because He was (and is) God and one of the proofs was that His body was gone because He had defeated death.

2. No resurrection - or more properly, no belief in the resurrection - would mean: no church, no Christianity. No you sitting here. You'd be sleeping in. Or watching golf. Or going to brunch early.

C. And just about everything else would be different as well – especially for those of us living in the West, because our society has been pretty profoundly shaped by Jesus. A point that's suddenly being championed by a surprising collection of academics.

1. I am talking about people like: Tom Holland – the Oxford historian with the very popular history podcast; Ayan Hirsh Ali – the former New Atheist who shocked the world with her announcement six months ago that she had become a Christian; Douglas Murray – the acerbic British intellectual and best selling author, who remains an atheist but who now says he is a Christian atheist because he is being won over by Jesus and realizes that most of what he likes (compassion, human rights, humility) he now realizes comes from Jesus; Niell Ferguson – the prominent Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard historian currently at Stanford who now finds himself in a church every Sunday morning trying to figure out what it looks like to follow Jesus; Molly Worthen, the Yale historian of religion who writes on religion for the NYT, who became a Christ follower last year after studying the resurrection, calling the evidence too good to ignore.

D. A lot pivots around an empty tomb, which sets up two questions: “How did it get empty?” And “what are you going to do about it?”

II. Well, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me back up for just a second to say:

A. Hello. My name is Mike. I'm one of the pastors, and I'm glad you're here.

B. Secondly, greetings to those joining us from one of the other campuses – Grayslate, Highland Park, Vernon Hills – or those at home.

C. And third, to assure those of you here against your will that you will survive. Brunch is coming.

- III. So, our focus today is the empty tomb.
- A. The Gospel of John reports it this way: **“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”**
- B. In the 15th chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he builds on that, making what amounts to a summary statement of the Bible’s central message – what we call the Gospel: **“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”**
- C. There are lots of other places in the Bible that talk about the resurrection. And there is more to the Gospel than this. But we’re going to focus here.
- IV. There are three things I want you to hear - that I’m praying will get your attention, because they are very important. Very high stakes. They deal with the ultimate questions.
- A. What matters most? What is the meaning of life? Who is God?
- B. Who am I? Where did I come from? What is expected of me? What happens when I die? Where do I go to get answers to these questions?
- C. We all have answers to these questions. But some of our answers are not very good. Some of the answers people base their life on – you? - are constantly changing, internally inconsistent and do not hold up to any kind of scrutiny or stress.
- D. I believe Jesus provides the path to the right answers. I’m praying that you will give Jesus some serious, grown up consideration. I want you to take a real look at the most important claims made by the most important person about history’s most important event. Call me crazy, but it seems like that is something you should give some time to. Call me crazy, but it seems like that might merit more time than the 43rd hour of sport’s radio talking about whether the Bears are going to draft Caleb Williams or season eleven of The Masked Singer.
- V. I have three points. Number one: The tomb was empty. It really was.
- A. We are getting better at spotting fake news these days. Not perfect, but better. We know that one of the ways to tell if something is true is to pay attention to the points people concede. Historians call this the Hermeneutic of Embarrassment.
- B. If I say, “Sure, over the last ten years the Packers have had a better record than the Bears, but the Bears are a better team.” All you know for sure is that the Packers have a better record. You know that because I would not have admitted it if it wasn’t true. I would not have conceded the point if I didn’t have to.
- C. Well, both the Romans and the Jewish authorities – two groups that wanted to squelch the claims that Jesus was the Messiah – both conceded that the tomb was empty. What we get are their efforts to explain it away.

D. Number one: we know that the tomb was empty.

VI. Two: We know that the belief that the tomb was empty because Jesus rose from the dead launched the church and changed the world.

A. In hundreds of thousands of ways we can see that belief in Jesus spread like a prairie fire in the first century. Even though declaring that you were a Christian could get you killed - occasionally fed to the lions or used for sport in the arena – people signed on as followers. They declared that Jesus was God and the promised Messiah and worshipped him for dying in their place. And one of the things they pointed to as proof was the empty tomb.

B. Let me note that this was not all they pointed to. And let me also be quick to note that the empty tomb doesn't prove anything – not in the way we like to prove things today. The resurrection is a historical claim. We can't go into the lab and rerun the experiment controlling for different variables and proving a theory. That is not the way history works. We can't rerun Nov. 22, 1963 to see if Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in shooting President Kennedy.

C. But, what is clear is that belief that the tomb was empty because Jesus was God changed the world. His followers formed a church, and that church has grown and marched around the world, recruiting people to embrace Jesus and his teachings. The church has – we have – done so very imperfectly. But – and as I noted earlier – people who take a close look at the evidence keep signing up. They keep saying things like, Jesus is the one who gives us human rights and humility and hospitals, can be traced back to Jesus.

VII. Three. There are good reasons to not be surprised by the empty tomb – by the resurrection of Jesus. Ordinary people do not defeat death, but Jesus was not ordinary. We are not talking about me rising from the dead. Or you. But Jesus. And Jesus was:

A. One of the premier moral revolutionaries in history - he makes every short list of the most important moral leaders.

B. And He was one of the greatest teachers of all time - he not only taught with authority, made the parable famous, turned his students (a bunch of unimpressive also rans) into great people – He gave us the greatest ethical system we have. His message - “Love your enemies. Do to others what you would have them do to you. Turn the other cheek” – his message sounds like the words you would expect God to speak.

C. And Jesus was the best influence of all time. He followers credit him with their decision to promote education, start hospitals, found orphanages, care for lepers, adopt abandoned infants and more.

D. Men and women, we are not talking about you or me rising from the dead, but Jesus, who did the most remarkable things - not just turning water into wine to save a party, but going into a hospital and healing the sick; going to a funeral and raising the dead.

E. And he perfectly fulfilled several hundred prophecies that had been given about God's plan.

F. We are talking about a person who morally beautiful, who after being beaten, whipped, mocked, spit on and nailed to a cross, asked God to forgive those who were abusing him.

G. We are talking about the person Time Magazine called “the most persistent symbol of purity, selflessness and love in the history of Western humanity.” We are talking about the person Dostoevsky described as ‘infinitely beautiful’.

H. And – and please don’t miss this – we are talking about a person who claimed to be God; who said he was born to die and who said he would come back from the dead on the third day.

VIII. Some of you are thinking, “well I don’t know about all of this. I didn’t show up here to take this seriously. And I haven’t heard this said this way before.” Well, maybe that is because you haven’t taken a grown up look. Or some of you are thinking, “Woodruff, He didn’t really claim to be God.”

A. OK, well, that rumor does bounce around the internet. But it is easy to refute. Let me concede that the fact that he claimed to be God doesn’t mean he was God. Anyone can claim anything. But he did make this claim.

1. He claimed to exist before creation.
2. He claimed that he would stand in judgement over everyone at the end of it.
3. He claimed that everyone everywhere would eventually worship Him.
4. He claimed the titles of God.
5. He forgave sins – not like, you wrong me and I say, I forgive you. But as in, you wrong him and I step in and say, “don’t worry, I forgive you.”

B. Many not only say he didn’t claim to be God, they go one step further and argue that he was just a great moral teacher. But this is not an option. CS Lewis – who had been one of those atheist academics who dismissed Christianity before he was drug (kicking and screaming) to faith by the evidence - says this more clearly than I can so I will simply read recite his statement:

1. “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

C. Let me ask - Have you taken a grown up look at Jesus?

IX. I have noted that the tomb was really empty; that this empty tomb changed the world; and that there are good reasons not to be surprised that it was empty – after all: Jesus was not an ordinary person. He was:

A. History’s most significant moral revolutionary and greatest teacher; He fulfilled prophecies; claimed to be God. And he said he was going to die and said he was going to rise again. Let me underline the last two points. They show up a number of places. Mark 8:31 actually puts them together. There we read that Jesus said, “**the Son of Man must suffer many things; be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes; be killed; and be raised again.**”

B. The first part of this – the fact that Jesus had to die and was born to die and laid down his life as a sacrifice – is important because it points to the essence of the Christian faith – which is all about God reaching down not you reaching up.

1. There is a sense in which Christianity is not a religion. If religion is the term we use to describe our efforts to please God, then Christianity is not a religion. Because it says we cannot do that. We are too broken; too sinful; too fallen.

2. Christianity is not about our reaching up. It is about God reaching down. It is not about our earning but God rescuing. About God reaching down. Jesus doesn’t claim he is simply an example or a mentor. Yes he was those. But what he claims – the reason they put him to death – is because He claims to be God in the flesh, the Jewish Messiah, the savior of the world, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

3. Men and women, understand the claim – reject it if you will, but at least understand it - the way we are reconciled with God (forgiven of our sins and set up to gain eternal life) is not by being good enough. It is not by earning. It is on the basis of Christ’s death in our place. It is by receiving. Jesus makes a very different claim than any other religious leader.

a) For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

b) We are saved by grace through faith, not of ourselves – not as a result of works, that no one can boast.

4. Jesus doesn’t claim to point to the way. He claims to be the way. He claims he was born to die to pay our moral debt.

C. And he claimed he would come back to life. He claimed that he would come back to life on the third day.

1. I would submit to you that given who Jesus is – what He said and what He did – that we shouldn’t be surprised that the tomb was empty. It would have been more surprising if he had not.

X. And let me end by saying this is good news. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is good news. It means we have every reason to believe every other claim he made – that we can be forgiven, that there is a way back to God. That a better world awaits. That we know who to follow.

- A. I'm sure you are aware there is a lot of crazy out there.
1. On the global front we are involved in two wars and holding our breath hoping that Xi doesn't make a move on Taiwan, that Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon and that Kim Jung Il behaves himself.
 2. On the national front we have mountains of debt, a polarized public, plunging birth rate and are racing towards an unthinkable election.
 3. Ethically speaking things are so fluid that holding yesterday's views today is enough to get you cancelled.
- B. There is more than a little crazy out there. And that is before we turn to your challenges. It may be that things are going poorly for you – cancer, unemployment, relational challenges, whatever. I want to say, hope can replace hopelessness. The tomb was empty. Jesus is who he claimed to be. God has a plan – and that plan demonstrates his goodness and his ability to defeat evil.
- C. We are going to close with a song that makes this point. It celebrates that Jesus turns graves into gardens, mourning into dancing, ashes into beauty, shame into glory.
- D. Before we go there let me lay out the appropriate next steps. I started by saying the empty tomb raises two big questions:
1. first - "How did it get empty?" I would argue, because Jesus defeated death.
 2. The second question is: "what am I going to do about that?"
- E. There are three logical options:
1. If you believe it – you worship and go all in. You realize that nothing else makes sense other than to be a Christ follower.
 2. If you do not – you can look again or run away. If you do not believe I do not think you can't be expected to worship Jesus. But I hope you will take another look. I hope you will avoid the nonsense of saying something like, "Jesus was a great moral reformer but nothing more." That is not a viable choice.
 3. This is important. You really need to take a grown up look at Jesus. I invite you to join me starting next Monday. I will be leading a six week study for Skeptics and Seekers. It's free. It meets at 6:30 on Monday mornings. It includes breakfast. You can use the QR code to sign up or to get a free copy of the book we will be going through. You can also just go to the Guest Center. And we will get you a book.
- F. And by the way, we meet every week. And next week we will start looking at some of the other options you have. We begin a series on idols. Good things that people try to make ultimate things.