

Luke 24:36-49: The Empty Public Square and the Empty Tomb

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, by your Spirit, would you take us and shape us and open our hearts to understand what you would teach us? We want to walk with you more faithfully. We want to rejoice in your salvation. We want to encourage one another with your truth. So would you come and help all that we do and that we say and that we reflect on, bring glory to you? In Jesus' name, amen. Now there are conversations on airplanes that you soon forget, and then there are others that you never, that you'll stay with you for life, and I want to tell you about one of those in the second group. I was on a flight from New York City to Chicago some years back, not too many years back, but some years back. But because of bad weather, we were forced to land in a nearby city, and I can't remember which one that was. But once we had landed, we were told to remain seated since we would not be getting off the plane. We sat there, as it turned out, for at least two hours, which is very unusual.

[2 : 30] Naturally, the man sitting next to me, I'm going to call him John for now, and he and I engaged in conversation. I learned the sort of things you learn in such conversations. He lived in New York City. He was vice president of a wellness firm there, and he enjoyed reading a good book.

Eventually, the conversation turned to matters of faith, and I, of course, said I was a Christian. Perhaps to find out just what sort of Christian I was, he mentioned that he was now married to his male partner, having divorced his wife some years back. He pointed out that certain fundamentalist Christian friends hadn't accepted his second marriage. I just listened. Next, I learned that he was Roman Catholic, but that he thought that all religions were basically the same. He added, almost offhand, that he was in the habit of attending and participating in seances with a group of friends. His expression told me he was eager to hear my thoughts on any or all of the above.

Right there on the plane, in other words, he was inviting me into the public square, one theme for people. It's a great thing to hear my thoughts on the other.

This is a great thing to hear, and I'm going to see you next time. We're going to be a part of the program today, where people engage freely and civilly with one another about things they believe to be true and good and worth celebrating. And we spoke freely, because even though we knew others could easily tune into our conversation, and they probably were, after all, we're on a plane, neither of us imagined that we could get into any trouble for the things that we were saying. As I try to do in such situations, I was praying mentally as we spoke, asking God to give me the wisdom and the words to say. Since John had mentioned several things I could comment on at this point, I didn't make reference to the fact that he was gay.

I did, however, respond to his point about all religions being the same, saying, yes, they are indeed similar where you'd expect them to be here and there, but also quite different in some fundamental ways. But this topic wasn't really exercising him at the moment. What was really troubling, as I was soon to find out, was after I told him a conversion story of a woman in Mexico who had been drawn into the occult? My parents used to live in a city called Cuernavaca, and this woman happened to be from Cuernavaca. This woman, she was a nominal Christian, had become the apprentice of a well-known psychic healer who went by the name of Pachita, and had learned to perform psychic surgery alongside this woman, believing that the witchcraft had to be good because it was all aimed at helping people get better. Along with the apprenticeship, the woman had taken up transcendental meditation, and as part of that practice, she was instructed, once she found herself in a state of deep meditation to invite a spirit guide to join her there. So, assuming that this too was a very compatible practice with Christianity, she asked Jesus to come and join her in that space.

[5 : 59] But it so happened that one day she came to realize that all of this was a form of real deception. She was in a trance, and the Jesus she was expecting to meet turned into something like a great ferocious wolf instead. And it wasn't long before one thing led to another, and she had given her life to Jesus. And I turned to John, my fellow passenger, and I said, what I'm trying to say is that there is great deception in these practices, no matter how much this or that healing may work.

I waited, a little bit worried that that was going to end the whole conversation, but he really, surprisingly, wasn't silent for long. And he said, you know, one seance that I participated in not long ago was very dark. In fact, it was something like something was trying to strangle me, and I had to get out and run away. And a few moments later, he asked me, how am I supposed to tell whether what I'm dealing with is good or bad? Great question. Now, I have no idea of where John is today, but I'm thankful for the delay on that plane that gave me the chance to have that conversation and to point him to the one rule we have, scripture, as our guide. And I've told you this story partly because it sums up where we've been in this mini-series. It highlights the predicament that you and I are in if we're committed to the idea that you make the road by walking, that we have nothing outside ourselves to help us discern the nature of things that are unseen, no standard to guide us in the area of human sexuality. But the story also brings us to the third core value of progressive Christianity.

It's the idea, as John said, that all religions are the same. Now, what's usually meant here is not precisely, of course, all religions are exactly the same. That's not normally what's meant. What's meant is that all the religions grasp something of the reality that we call God, a little bit like in that picture parable of the men who take hold of this or that part of an elephant, but because they're blindfolded, they simply mistakenly assume that they're grasping the whole of the reality.

The British philosopher of religion, John Hick, was one of the major proponents of this progressive view of the religions. Although he was raised in an evangelical home through contact with Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu communities in Birmingham, England, he came to believe that underneath all of these external things of the religions, creeds, forms of worship, you name it, he said, quote, basically the same thing was going on in all of them. And what was that thing that he believed to be going on in all of them? And he wrote, human beings coming together within the framework of an ancient and highly developed tradition to open their hearts and minds to God. It only made sense for him, therefore, to conclude that all religions are equally valid ways to find salvation.

This idea, very popular today, brings up the whole matter of the public square and how we might empty it metaphorically, at least when it comes to beliefs about God and the way of salvation.

[9 : 52] And I think that's just what our Western culture has done. We've said that you and I have no business interfering in each other's spiritual lives. Am I right? Here's an experiment. Go down to Byward Market after church today and tell the first person you meet that a man who died and rose again 2,000 years ago has a claim on his or her life. If you get the reply, hey, buddy, you do you, all right? You're only going to be getting one of the polite versions of one of the most culturally acceptable reactions today to this idea. It's an answer that's intended to remind you and me that if God has something to say to me, assuming there is a God, well, he'll have to say it directly, which means he's not going to say it through a preacher he happens to send to tell me.

And that's where we are. We can have very lively discussions down there in Byward Market about all sorts of things related to food and entertainment, housing and transportation, you name it, all sorts of things. But as soon as we touch on matters that have the label personal values, well, folks

quickly vacate the public square.

Apart from arguing that the deep unity of the religions is the best way to achieve lasting peace today, well, progressive Christians will want to say, surely the sense of fairness, a sense of fairness requires us to say that whatever way people choose is the one that's right for them. And the belief or attitude here usually goes by the name of religious pluralism. So it's not just a description of multiple religions, it's an ideology that says what I've tried to describe. Now, on a personal note, of all the core values of progressive Christianity, this is the one I've probably struggled with the most. In fact, years back, I found a kind of modified form of this somewhat appealing. I was content to say something almost like this. I was content to say something like, well, some degree of salvation must be available in all the religions. But if you want to have the fullness of what God has, well, you'd probably do best to become a Christian. Now, I'll try to respond to these claims after we've had a chance to look at Luke 24. But before we turn to scripture, I'd like us briefly to think about the basic problem I've tried to give a name to, the empty public square, and ask how it is that faith has been ruled out as a way of knowing. How has faith been ruled out as a way of knowing?

Leslie Newbigin, missionary in India many years, is very helpful here with a simple illustration. He gives, he says, imagine you're walking along the road, and you see a pile of bricks and bags of mortar and a bunch of workers hovering around, and you're wondering, well, I wonder what could possibly be going up here on this site. And Newbigin says, you have two choices and only two. [13:21] You can stand around and wait till it's built, and then with the powers of observation, you can go ahead and conclude, well, they built a fitness center or whatever. But if you don't plan to stand around and wait till they're finished building, your other choice is to take the word from the builder.

Ask the builder. Our walk is by faith, not sight in this case. So faith as a form of knowledge, faith as a way to know, taking a reliable witness's word. This doesn't mean that faith is blind, right? Because by faith, we do come to know God himself and his ways and his plans in the measure that he reveals them to us, of course. And this brings us to Luke 24, which is all about reliable witnesses. Right from the start, it's all about bearing witness, right from the empty tomb at the beginning of Luke 24 to the end. And to you, you are witnesses when Jesus tells his disciples.

These speak of the builder and the obligation we have to take the builder's word, to take him at his word. So turn with me to that chapter. We've only read the last part. I'm not going to read the whole chapter, but I am going to take you through five scenes very quickly to highlight this business of bearing witness and how it's happening. So it starts, as I said, with the empty tomb.

And the empty tomb is a bare fact. It's a naked event, if you like, because the women, verse 4 says, are perplexed. Verse 4 tells us they are perplexed. They have no idea what to make of it.

But God graciously tells them what it means. He sends two men in dazzling apparel, still there in verse 4. They tell the women that Jesus has risen from the dead and point them to a greater witness, Jesus himself. They say, verses 6 and 7, remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified on the third day rise. Remember how he told you.

[15:37] And verse 8 tells us that they remember Jesus's words. Scene 2. I'm sorry. Yes, scene 2. The women have rejoined the 11 and the rest of the disciples and they are now bearing witness themselves to all these things, says verse 9. That is, to what they've seen, what they've heard, what they've realized, what they have remembered or recalled with the help of these men in white garments. So it's striking, as it should be, that the disciples find what they say to sound made up, sound made up, verse 11.

They're in a state of disbelief, of unbelief. Peter is no exception, although he does get up and rush to the tomb and after he looks inside and sees only the garments, well, he too is left in that original state of marveling, of perplexion there at the empty tomb. Scene 3. Two disciples are on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus joins them, but for the moment doesn't reveal his identity to them. And this allows Jesus to hear their testimony to what's going forward in the days and what's unfolding. It's a true testimony as far as it goes because they tell about Jesus's ministry, his arrest, his crucifixion, and now the report about the tomb having become empty. But I say the report is only true as far as it goes because Jesus rebukes them for their slowness of heart, verse 25. Slowness of heart in receiving the testimony of the prophets. Had they taken hold of that reliable testimony, in other words, they would have been able to say not only that something marvelous has been taking place, but why?

Scene 4. And we're still in the Emmaus Road story because it's the next day. This scene puts God's kindness to his people on display because Jesus comforts these two disciples with the revelation of his identity. He has already explained the scriptures to them, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, verse 27. And now he lets them see who he is as he breaks bread with them.

And through that encounter, they come to understand why it was that they were so moved as he explained the scriptures to them on the day before. The text doesn't say this was the work of the Holy Spirit, but we can be certain that as their hearts were warmed, as the text tells us, tells us that as Jesus opened up the scriptures, that it was the Holy Spirit himself who was bearing witness to the truth of what he was saying to them. Scene 5. The disciples are now all together back in Jerusalem, putting together Peter's report that Jesus has appeared to him now, and the Emmaus Road report. And they're putting all this together, and they're consulting. And Jesus appears to them all. Now, it's important that we not miss the joy of the occasion because it's there. The disciples are truly marveling at what's taking place. Right before their eyes, Jesus is showing them that his new form is not non-physical, as they were bound to imagine. He shows them his hands. He shows them his feet.

[19:14] He even takes a piece of broiled fish and eats it in front of them. And the testimony of their marvel should cause us to marvel too, even today, even if we've read this story a hundred times, because we're dealing with a work of God that's on the order of creation itself.

The resurrection of the body, which we profess belief in, is the most amazing thing we can imagine, because it puts the promise never to die again right there in front of us on full display.

But with all that, we shouldn't miss the rebuke. For all the joy, there is still a rebuke. And Jesus' question to his disciples, all gathered together, why? This is verse 38. Why did doubts rise in your hearts? Just as the eleven and other disciples failed to take the women's report seriously, so too, as a group, they had failed to take hold of what the prophets had foretold about Jesus.

Well, for instance, what? Well, the fact that Isaiah had prophesied that God's servant would need to suffer for our transgressions, Isaiah 53, 5. Or that David had foretold that God would not permit his holy one to see corruption. Now, these things would have been discussed. These things were part of their ordinary lexicon. Well, these things hadn't taken root in their hearts. And yet, even here, Jesus is a good shepherd who leads them to pasture. And he explains to them all that the scriptures had to say about him, taking all of the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, explaining to them where it is that he, Jesus, fit in and what was going on and everything that the scriptures bear witness to and how they point to Jesus. And what Jesus is doing here is an act of sheer kindness and mercy.

And when we put together what we've just seen with the verses that follow, we get a full picture of the new beginning that is about to happen for the disciples. Four brief points. Jesus has given them peace. When he appears among them and says, peace to you, he's not just announcing peace, although he's certainly doing that. He's actually bringing it to them because his resurrection means peace with God. Take it from Paul. Paul will say, Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification, raised so that we might be made right with God. He was raised that we might be reconciled to God, to have peace with God. The second thing that Jesus has given his disciples apart from this peace is understanding, understanding of how present things, what present things mean and what's going forward in the light of everything that has been taught in the past in the scriptures. And then thirdly, he gives them a commission. He says, verse 48, in a very short verse, probably the shortest in the chapter, you are witnesses of these things. Specifically, they now know that they are to be custodians, if you like, of God's word. They were to carry the message that Jesus was going to suffer on the third day and that Jesus was to suffer on the and on the third day to rise from the dead, verse 46, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem in the following verse, verse 47. So peace, understanding, a commission which involves purpose. Fourthly, he gives them a promise, the promise that of the power from on high to fulfill it. So he says, go wait and wait till the promised spirit has come. Now, I don't know how all of this strikes you as you have this panoramic view of Luke 24, but I think it's all about the builder telling us what he's building. And it's a rich telling because he he tells us how he's used under witnesses in the past, prophets, David. He tells us how he's employed extraordinary witnesses like those like those men in dazzling apparel. He tells us how he's used ordinary witnesses in spite of their unbelief, confusion, and and state of perplexity. And he tells how he promised to empower yet more ordinary witnesses so that the good news of

salvation in Jesus could be made known to every nation. And this brings us back to the challenge of religious pluralism where we began.

[24 : 18] Apart from showing us how God has acted and spoken decisively in Jesus, how can the lessons of Luke 24 help us to respond to the progressive to the progressive Christian claim that all religions provide valid paths to God? Well, I want to just make two points. In the first place, I think Luke 24 helps us to be clear about what salvation is and what it isn't. It's not about a vague opening up of the individual soul to the mystery we call God. That would reduce faith to a kind of thing we could just take for granted, like an electric current that you and I have, and we could just switch it on and off at will. Rather, salvation is God's idea worked out in history through means that he chooses. And what's important is that salvation doesn't remain an idea, but because salvation is ultimately what?

Salvation is ultimately a person, the incarnate word himself, who intrudes, if you like, something we, that we dislike in our, in our, in our private, private culture. But he intrudes into what we imagine to be private space. And through his intrusion, he calls sinners like you and me to be united to him in his death and resurrection. And the amazing thing is that it doesn't matter who the delegated witnesses are, who they happen to be, because it's the Holy Spirit who does the calling and who confirms in our hearts that what we hear with our ears is from God. And what's faith if under, if salvation is understood this other way? Well, but faith is by nature a response of trust in something that's there.

Saving faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that enables us to trust in something that God has done, God has promised, and God has revealed. Second point, I think in the second place, Luke 24 helps us to think properly about the nature of religion and what its limitations are. And here we can, we can ask a progressive Christian friend, how do you know that the religions lead to salvation? The religions as such. If the idea in the parable of the elephant and the blindfolded men is that we don't have reliable witnesses to the big picture, well then who exactly is telling us reliably that they're all grasping different parts of an elephant. And in the end, you see the parable shows its own limitations. It breaks down, because what we're left with in this sea and a sea of multiple narratives is just conflicting stories about what salvation is and how you obtain it, what the human problem is and how you get out of it. As it happens, one of those narratives tells us that salvation, understood as enlightenment, comes as we don't concern ourselves much with God and with salvation. These questions that distract us from the real, from really, really tuning into our hearts. So we're supposed to detach ourselves from these matters. And that, and that leads, leads us, leads us to, to this modified proposal, to the effect that the religions, well, they offer degrees of salvation to salvation to their adherence, but that the fullness of salvation is found in Jesus. This, this sounds somewhat appealing on a certain level. It sounds like, well, I still get to, to invite people to trust in Jesus.

But still, there's the big question, how do we know that the great religious traditions offer some kind of partial salvation? Where does that come from? What if, what if the religions are not interested in the biblical idea of salvation at all?

What if salvation, as they conceive it, involves the ultimate extinction, excuse me, of the individual person? The ultimate extinction of the individual person.

[28 : 39] For that matter, is it precisely faithful adherence to religion that saves? Is that how we want to think of the matter? I think these are real questions that we can put to, to friends we meet as God gives us the opportunity.

Biblically speaking, it's apparent that when God saves someone, he does so in spite of their religion and not because of it. We have to remember that as the disciples assembled together on that first day of the week, they were being religious.

As the gospel accounts taken together, they tell us that they were trying to come to terms with what's going on. They're, they're no doubt praying. They're no, no doubt doing all sorts of things as faithful Jews.

And yet, as we saw, they're in a state of unbelief. Newbigin reminds us that we often think, well, Jesus appeared to the believers. Well, they weren't believers when he appeared to them. He just appeared to them. And that's important to remember. Or think of Saul, a faithful, dedicated, card-carrying Jew, whose sincere convictions led him to persecute the church.

[29 : 51] Religion is not a bad word, of course. I'm not here to tell you that. But the point is, is that it's a mixed bag. Even Christianity, insofar as we can make of it a mere religion, can be something

we need to be saved from.

The standard for all religion, therefore, including Christianity, is the gospel. The good news of reconciliation with God that has come through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

As we think of religion this way, Christianity can then become a patterned way to respond to the gospel. Through particular forms of worship, through gathering, through catechizing, through all of these ways in which we encourage one another in the Christian life.

But these things do not save us. Rather, we're saved for them. We're saved so that we can walk in them. Otherwise, we're getting at the cart before the horse.

After we've said all this, there's still the question, but what about those who never even get to hear the gospel? And here I'm going to start closing. Now, on one level, this is a very valid question.

[30 : 59] Former Hindu students of mine back in India sometimes asked, what about my relatives who never even heard of Jesus? It's a real question. It's a good one. It's a valid one.

But happily, as we turn to scripture, we find out we're not the first ones to ask this kind of question. Luke 13 records how once, when Jesus was teaching, some unnamed person came up and said, Lord, will those who are saved be few?

You remember how he answered? Now, one thing he didn't do was get into the question of numbers and the final count. What he did do was to turn the question right around and make it very personal as he speaks to you and me through his word very personally.

He said, strive to enter through the narrow door, which here in his teaching means, do not presume on your religious membership. Because he says, many who think themselves very closely associated with the big names, with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, will actually find themselves thrown out of the kingdom.

While many will come from all corners of the earth, Jesus says, and find themselves in God's kingdom. And I think Jesus' message here in saying that there will be surprises is that he, being the architect and builder of the city that we're thinking about in this series, that city with foundations, he knows what he's doing.

[32 : 30] Partiality and randomness don't apply to God. What's key is that we grasp the very personal, the very urgent nature of the call when we hear it.

Come follow me. Now, from our side, things might really seem unfair. Stella and I have had a chance to live in so many places where Christians are in a very small minority.

And you say, well, this isn't fair. Where little Jimmy is raised in a home where his parents teach him to trust in Jesus. While little Chloe is told all her life, look, you're just going to have to figure it all out for yourself.

You're going to have to make the road as you walk it. But what we regard as the accidents of history present no barriers at all to what God can do in anyone's life.

Here's how J.I. Packer and Roger Beckwith address the issue. And with this, I'll close. They wrote, no limits can be set to the dealings of the merciful God with individuals, even within non-Christian religions.

[33 : 37] I think it's key there. It's not because of our religion that God looks down favorably on us. He calls his own and he knows his own. In other words, we say in the Collect for Purity every time we gather, that unto God all hearts are open, all desires are known.

He knows every heart. He knows every desire. He knows his own, and not one of them will perish. But then Packer and Beckwith add this, reminding us of the need to continue to faithfully proclaim the good news to people of all nations.

They add this, supernatural revelation sets forth Jesus Christ as the only Savior from sin and charges the church to preach this gospel throughout the world as man's one hope in this world and the next.

So may God give us the courage, give us the strength for this task that lies ahead of us. Shall we pray?

Dear Lord, we thank you for your great salvation worked out in history.

[34 : 52] We thank you for your word and for the many witnesses who brought it our way so that we can know what it is that you've been building. So we ask that you would give us grace every time we hear your voice to really take hold of it, to take hold of your truth, to take hold of your words of hope.

And this we do, as we do this, we also long for the day when the redeemed from all nations will come into your kingdom. So we pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.