

AM Luke 23:26-24:12 The first sceptics of the Resurrection

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[0 : 00] So we'll start at Luke 23 verse 26. My intention this morning is to preach from the first 12 verses of Luke 24.

But we'll start at Luke 23, 26 and read Luke's account of the crucifixion. And as we read, the first verse mentions a man called Simon of Cyrene, a lesser known Bible character.

And this evening, God willing, we'll come back to think a little bit about him and his significance. But we'll read now, reading God's word from Luke's gospel, chapter 23 and verse 26.

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them, Jesus said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

[1 : 13] For behold, the days are coming when they will say, Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed. Then they will begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us and to the hills cover us.

For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? To others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, He saved others, let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one.

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews.

One of the criminals who were hanged, reeled at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

[2 : 32] And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And he said to him, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he breathed his last.

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was innocent. And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home, beating their breasts.

And all his acquaintances, and the woman who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things. Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea.

[3 : 37] He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action. And he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid it in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was a day of preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning.

The woman who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, Why do you seek the living among the dead?

[4 : 42] He is not here, but is risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified on the third day rise.

And they remembered his words. And returning from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now, it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James.

And the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb, stooping and looking in.

He saw the linen cloths by themselves, and he went home, marveling at what had happened. Amen. Our theme, as you may see from the sheet, is the first sceptics of the resurrection.

The first sceptics of the resurrection, boys and girls, I'm not sure if you've heard the word sceptic before, but a sceptic is someone who doesn't really believe something.

[5 : 50] Maybe you meet someone tomorrow, and you ask them, well, what did you do on Saturday?

And they said, well, I went to the moon, or something like that. And you say, no, I don't think you did.

So, to be sceptical, is not to believe something. So that's what we mean when we're talking about sceptics. So, of all the subjects in the world, we could spend our time considering this morning.

It doesn't get much more important than this. If Jesus Christ didn't rise from the dead, then the fact that we're at church today is, at best, a waste of our time, if not a complete tragedy.

If Jesus has not been raised, then our whole lives, if we're Christians, have been based on a lie. The Apostle Paul says that out of everyone in the world, Christians are the most to be pitied if the resurrection didn't happen.

[7 : 09] So it's absolutely vital for us to be convinced ourselves about the truth of the resurrection, and also have the confidence to tell others about it.

It's not hard to find sceptics of the resurrection. If we stood out in the street this morning, it wouldn't take long if we asked people whether they believed Jesus rose from the dead.

It wouldn't take long to find someone who would say, no way, no way. It's just a myth. It's just a story. It never happened. But if we want to find sceptics of the resurrection, we can actually find them in the Bible itself.

We can actually find them among people who loved Jesus. The first Christians after the resurrection, what were they doing?

Well, what they weren't doing was hanging around, waiting for a resurrection. They weren't desperately hoping that Jesus would come back. As far as they were concerned, it was all over.

[8 : 20] They point blank refused to believe reports that he had risen. But in these opening 12 verses of the final chapter of Luke, we see a movement from despair and unbelief to surprise and then, if not quite yet joy, at least hope.

Why such a dramatic turnaround? What changed? Well, to find out, let's follow in the footsteps of these early sceptics turned believers.

Firstly, let's try and grasp their despair. So we start this morning with despair. Maybe that's where some of you start this morning, but hopefully will not end there by God's grace.

So it's Sunday the 5th of April, and the year is 33 AD. A group of women get up at the crack of dawn, laden down with spices and ointments.

They make their way, perhaps through the winding streets of Jerusalem, till they're outside the city walls. They go to a new tomb cut into the rock, where Jesus' body had been hastily laid on the Friday night as the Jewish Sabbath was approaching.

[9 : 49] We've been told in the last chapter, we read it earlier, that the women saw the tomb, they saw where the body was laid. So there's no chance that they've got the wrong grave.

So what are they doing as they head out so early? Well, they're going to embalm a body. As they walk, mostly in silence, undoubtedly, there's absolutely no hope or expectation of anything else.

There's one dilemma in their minds that they're churning over and over. Mark tells us about that in his gospel. Their only dilemma is who's going to roll away the stone for us so that we can get in and put these spices and ointments and perfumes on the body of the Lord Jesus.

There was no hope of a resurrection. It wasn't even on the cards. It's not even like the king, when Daniel is in the den of lions and the king thinks, well maybe, maybe somehow he has survived.

the disciples, they weren't even thinking that. These women, they weren't even thinking that. Yes, the Jews had an expectation of resurrection on the last day.

[11 : 15] Do you remember when Jesus told his friend Martha that her brother would rise again? She said, yes, I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day. But they had no hope of someone coming back to life here and now.

As far as Jesus' followers are concerned, it's over. Whoever Jesus may have been, he wasn't the Messiah.

Later on in this chapter, the two on the road to Emmaus will say, verse 31, we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped.

We had hoped, but we were obviously wrong. I remember reading an article entitled A Month From My Wedding Day.

It was by a woman who had been meant to be getting married the previous month, but for reasons that she didn't go into, it had all been called off. Imagine the crushing disappointment of that.

[12 : 23] the rawness of the hurt, the sense, perhaps, of being taken in, of having been deluded. And if a flawed human being can leave someone feeling that amount of hurt and betrayal, what would it be to be let down by someone who you'd started to believe was God himself?

one who had led you to hope not just for a happy life here and now, but had promised everlasting life. Jesus had promised an everlasting life, but he couldn't live up to it, or so it seemed.

Death by crucifixion was too big an obstacle to Jesus' claims. the true Messiah could never die a cursed death like that.

Of course, we know that the true Messiah had to die a death exactly like that, but for them, this is just a deal breaker. And the rest of the disciples, they've locked themselves away for fear of the Jews.

One of the oldest attempts to explain away the resurrection is that the disciples stole Jesus' body. But look at them as they're pictured for us.

[13 : 44] They're totally crushed. The sorrow is like a dead weight on their hearts. Even if they wanted to go out and try and deceive people, they're in no fit state to go out and do that.

Never mind stealing a body. They're not trying to launch a religious movement. They're trying to hide everything they have been living for over the past three years.

They've been completely shattered. They're in utter despair. Now surely we don't need to deal or dwell on this too much.

You might say after all, we know how the story ends. But even as Christians and even as Christians who are convinced of the truth of the resurrection, we are not exempt from despair.

If only it was that straightforward. A few years ago I read a collection of letters by John Newton who wrote Amazing Grace.

[14 : 52] In one section Newton writes about a minister's wife who had just come out of a four-year depression. He took that as an encouragement to keep praying for William Cooper or Cowper, a famous hymn writer who battled with depression and tried to take his life on a number of occasions.

Christians are not exempt from despair. There are no easy answers or solutions. And yet the women in this passage have made things worse for themselves in at least two ways.

And so the angels' words that come to them come with a gentle rebuke. The first problem is that they have forgotten Jesus' words.

So while they're perplexed about the stone that the two angels appear to them and the first thing the angels say is they say remember what he told you.

Verse 6 Why do you say the living among the dead? Verse 6 He is not here but is risen. Remember how he told you. So neither Jesus' death or his resurrection should have been a surprise.

[16 : 20] Jesus had spelled out what was going to happen to him. Back in chapter 9 after Peter's confession of him as Christ Jesus said the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Notice by the way the angels say remember how he told you the woman. Notice the privilege these women had.

They had been with Jesus when he said it. They hadn't been away somewhere when the men had all the important discussions. These women were apparently part of Jesus' inner circle.

But they along with the rest of the disciples had forgotten what he said. And that is often our problem isn't it? We forget that Jesus told us that in this world we will have trouble.

And so when we find things are a struggle we think there must be something wrong. We forget that Jesus told us parables to show that the growth of the church would normally be unspectacular and at times barely visible.

[17 : 43] And so when the church doesn't grow or at least doesn't grow the way that we would love or hope or expect we can so easily get discouraged. We think that unless there's something a powerful revival going on then there's nothing going on.

But Jesus tells us that normal kingdom work is slow and steady. It's a farmer planting a seed and you get up the next morning and there's nothing.

And you get up the next morning and the next morning and it's very slow and steady. But that is normal kingdom growth and life. So these women forget Jesus' words but they also look for him in the wrong place.

So if we go back up to verse 5 why do you seek the living among the dead? They're seeking the living among the dead.

Or verse 5 you could translate it why do you seek the living one among the dead? they're seeking the living one among the graves.

[18 : 54] And again there's maybe a gentle rebuke here for us this morning. Are you seeking life purpose meaning satisfaction in anything or anyone other than Jesus?

Well it won't work because it would be to seek the living among the dead. Are you trying to fill the spiritual emptiness in your life by being religious?

Church attendance, good works, prayer, all good things yet separated from a real relationship with Jesus. It's seeking the living among the dead.

So these women they forget Jesus words and they look for him in the wrong place and it leads to despair. despair. And it will do so for us as well.

But then secondly we move from despair to surprise and disbelief. So secondly this morning surprise and disbelief. have you ever arranged a surprise party for someone?

[20 : 06] You know the constant tension of trying to keep it all a surprise. If they do find out that the party or the present well it won't be ruined but something will be lost.

And because we are so familiar with the gospel something can be lost for us as we read them. one of our struggles is that we read the gospels without raising an eyebrow.

We are not surprised at what Jesus says. We don't notice the twists at the end of many of his parables. We are not shocked at who the son of God comes to earth and spends his time with.

So when we get to this chapter we know what's going to happen. We know these women are going to arrive at the tomb. They are going to find the tomb empty. but they don't know that. As they arrive at the tomb they find the one thing they don't expect and they don't find the one thing they do expect.

Look at verse 2. The one thing that they don't expect is the stone rolled away. But that's exactly what we find. And then verse 3.

[21 : 21] The one thing they do expect to find is the body of the Lord Jesus. After all they've come to embalm it. But it's gone. It's not there. And they're perplexed.

They're baffled. In the shock of everything that's been going on over the last number of days. This is what's kept them going.

We have to find someone to move the stone and then anoint the body. That has been their task. And now their plan which has left them with some last grain of purpose has been derailed.

And notice what they don't say. They don't say, of course, silly us, he must have risen. If you found an empty tomb, would the first conclusion that you jumped to be that the person had been resurrected?

Well, it wasn't their first assumption either. Instead, they jumped to the obvious conclusion, as John's gospel tells us, that someone has moved the body.

[22 : 39] These women don't come that morning hoping against hope to find that Jesus has been raised. It wasn't even on their agenda. But have you ever noticed how the angels try to convince them?

The angels don't bring any dramatic new argument. Instead, they simply point them back to the words of Jesus. They say, remember how he told you.

Jesus himself will do the same thing later on in the chapter. In verse 27, he'll point the two on the road to a mess back to Moses and the prophets. In verse 44, he'll point the rest of the disciples back to the same Old Testament scriptures, the law, the prophets and the Psalms.

Maybe you say, if only I could have been there and seen the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes, then I would have believed. If only I could see that today somehow, I would believe.

the Bible says, no. It's not that there's lack of evidence for the resurrection, that there's more evidence for the resurrection than for the fact that Julius Caesar ever lived.

[23 : 59] It's not that you need faith to believe and we're somehow scraping the barrel to find evidence. No one has been able to convincingly explain away the empty tomb.

Many have tried to, you've maybe heard of the journalist Lee Strobel. He set out to try and disprove the resurrection. Yet he ended up being converted himself.

By the way, there's a movie version of his book, The Case for Christ. It's free to watch on Amazon Prime. It's not that there's lack of evidence for the resurrection, resurrection.

But at the end of the day, if you don't believe in the resurrection because of Jesus' words, you won't believe at all. If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, Jesus said, that is, if they don't listen to the Bible, neither will they be convinced, even if someone should rise from the dead.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. If you're not a Christian this morning, even if someone were to rise from the dead, Jesus says you wouldn't believe.

[25 : 17] But if you are a Christian, you can be confident in the evidence for the resurrection. And yet, don't think that even if you could convince someone of the truth of the resurrection, that they would repent of their sins in and of themselves.

Because at the end of the day, people don't believe in Jesus. Not because of a lack of evidence, but because they don't want to believe in him. So if the women who see the empty tomb, if they are slow to believe, will the men point blank refuse to listen?

And we see their reaction in verse 11. The apostles act more like Richard Dawkins than the future leaders of the church. These words seem to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.

That word is translated as an idle tale or nonsense is a medical term. It was used by Greek writers to describe the babbling of a fevered and insane mind.

And you can nearly hear them saying, well this is exactly the sort of thing that you'd expect from a few women crazy with grief and lack of sleep. women would have been admissible in a law court at the time.

[26 : 43] The apostles certainly don't believe them here. And yet it's more evidence that the gospel accounts aren't elaborate conspiracy theories written by the early church.

If they wanted this new movement to be taken with any sort of seriousness in the first century, they would have been shooting themselves in the foot to say that it was women who found the empty tomb.

The only reason you would write a book in the first century that depended on the testimony of women was if it actually happened. Sometimes we think that people who lived a long time ago were a lot more gullible than we are.

That they only needed the slightest excuse to believe in something like a resurrection. But just because they didn't have microwaves or computers didn't mean that they were stupider than we are.

The apostles needed convincing and it would take time before they were convinced. Imagine you heard that a loved one had been killed in an accident but then as you rushed to hospital someone tells you it's all a mistake and they're fine.

[27 : 53] Would you just say oh okay then and turn around and go home? Would you be convinced before you saw them yourself? Before you hugged them? Before you talk to them? You're not going to believe unless you see them for yourself.

No matter how much you want to. And neither would the apostles. Those who wrote the New Testament weren't convinced because they wanted to believe.

They weren't convinced because they somehow convinced themselves. They were convinced in spite of themselves. And then they carefully recorded their doubts even though it makes them look bad so that we could be sure.

They carefully recorded their doubts even though those doubts make them look bad and disbelieving and of little faith so that we could be sure that these were people who were only convinced because the resurrection was real.

people. So we have despair, we have surprise and disbelief. But then finally, amazingly and more briefly we have hope.

[29 : 02] So finally this morning hope. Some looks are imprinted on our minds aren't they? Maybe for some of the men here it was the moment you stood at the front of a church and looked across to see your bride standing there.

And maybe for others it was the moment you saw your first child. Or perhaps the moment you said goodbye to your loved one knowing that you would never see them again. And of all of the scenes in your life that you have forgotten those remain as fresh and vivid as ever.

They are etched on your mind. Well Peter has just had one of those moments that he would rather blot out. A moment that he would rather not be etched on his mind when he denied Jesus for the third time and Jesus turned and looked at him.

Yet here in verse 12 is another look one that he would cherish for the rest of his life. Stooping and looking in he saw the linen cloths by themselves.

Of course it had to be Peter didn't it? The rest apart from John as were told elsewhere. Point blank refused to believe. But look at verse 12 how it begins.

[30 : 25] But Peter. But Peter. Impetuous outspoken Peter. Peter who said that he would never deny Christ and then spectacularly did just that.

Flawed yes. But Peter wears his heart on his sleeve. And he's starting to realise that Jesus is to be believed even when it goes against everything he thinks possible.

So he runs to the tomb hoping against hope and what does he see? The grave clothes are by themselves. Can you feel the surge of hope rushing through his numb heart?

What's the big deal about grave clothes being by themselves? Well if someone had stolen the body they wouldn't have bothered unraveling all the clothes first there would have been no point. How are we to understand this word marvelling in verse 12?

Well John's gospel tells us that this is the point when Peter believed. The rest didn't believe not yet but Peter went away marvelling.

[31 : 38] All the pieces weren't quite fitting together yet but the penny was beginning to drop. And he went away marvelling. So what about you?

Will you leave here today marvelling believing? Perhaps you're waiting for some sort of explanation of the resurrection that you can fit into human categories but the message of the Bible is that things are so broken and messed up here that we need a salvation that comes from outside this broken world.

There's no point saying that you can only believe in a salvation that you can recreate. If we could explain away or recreate the resurrection it wouldn't have been needed.

If there's no resurrection then all there is is despair. To see the utter hopelessness of it. Anything of lasting good that you could hope for from this life would be gone.

Any idea that this isn't all that there is would be mistaken and we might as well eat and drink for tomorrow we die. But if you believe in the resurrection and I know many of you do well doesn't that change everything?

[32 : 53] The story didn't end in despair and shattered expectations and now as you get up tomorrow in whatever you face in this incoming week there's no area of life that the resurrection doesn't impact.

it impacts your present struggles. In light of this hope the Bible can call them light momentary afflictions. And perhaps your afflictions seem anything but light and momentary.

But in the light of eternity that's what they become. The resurrection means you can be confident about your future. If God raised Jesus from the dead that means the payment for your sins has been accepted.

Your past sins may still be painfully imprinted on your mind and yet in God's eyes they are cast into the depths of the sea.

The resurrection affects your relationships with those around you. The one thing that defines that unbelieving friend or family member is that if they aren't united to Christ they won't share in his resurrection.

[34 : 03] but on the other hand all believers will share it. Whether we see eye to eye with him on smaller issues or not.

So let's focus on what we have in common. Jesus' resurrection is nothing less than a foretaste of new creation.

The new creation that will break into this doomed and dying world. if there's no resurrection all there can be is despair. We can amuse ourselves, distract ourselves for a while but all there is is despair, hopelessness, pointlessness, futility.

But by God's grace this picture of despair and disbelief has been turned into hope. For the disciples, for us, and for millions of people throughout history.

so let's keep praying that that would be the case for many around us in our communities in this day as well. That they would experience the same resurrection power that the disciples slowly came to believe.

[35 : 20] This resurrection power that transformed them, that has transformed us and that can transform many around us as well. Amen. Well, in light of the joyful certainty of the resurrection, let's turn to the words of Psalm number 18.

Towards the front of the psalm book, page... I'll find the page number in a minute. So Psalm 18, 18, and verse 18, so page 20, Psalm 18, and verses 18 to 24.

And as we sing these words, we'll sing them primarily as a song of the Lord Jesus. us. I think of the Lord Jesus singing verse 18, They threatened me in my distress, but God stood by me in my plight.

He brought me out and set me free, brought me out of the tomb and set me free, because he took delight in me. Verse 20, According to my righteousness the Lord dealt with me faithfully.

There are a couple of ways we can understand verses like these in the Psalms, verses which maybe make us uncomfortable as a claim of perfect righteousness.

[36 : 47] On one level, we can simply take them as claims that any believer can sing, that we are not guilty of what we are falsely accused of at times.

And yet, there is another level as well, that these are first and foremost the words of the Lord Jesus. So the Lord dealt faithfully with him, the Lord rewarded him for his righteousness.

We have no righteousness of our own that we will be rewarded for, but Christ's righteousness is counted as ours, and part of his reward was a people for himself, even a people in the south of Scotland in this day.

Resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and the salvation of his people. So verses 18 through 24, starting on page 20, if you're able, we'll stand to sing.

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[38 : 01] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.