

Jesus is Truly Alive!

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[0 : 00] All right, keep your Bibles on to page 999 if you can, and we will look through that passage again as appropriate on Easter Sunday.

! You also have an outline in your newsletter to help you follow along if you like. And so no surprises if you've looked at the introduction to see what I might be starting with.

And I wonder how many of you remember the show Ripley's Believe It or Not. Anyone? Too young? Jeff. He was alive then. Steph did? Okay.

All right, this Ripley's, that by the way is Superman, but he's hosting that show, not Superman.

But Ripley's Believe It or Not was a show in the early 2000s inspired by an American by the name of Robert Ripley. And Robert made a living out of discovering true but bizarre stories.

[1 : 07] And also collected strange artifacts and brought human exhibits, sort of strange human exhibits into his show.

And Robert opened what he called auditoriums, spelt auditoriums, ODD, where he would display strange artifacts or exhibits.

So on the next slide, like that picture on the left, that's Robert Ripley, by the way. Okay. That, the thing that he's dangling is actually a real life shrunken skull.

And the one next to it, none of you seem shocked, but anyway. And the next one, the thing that he's holding there is a miniature, not backpack to sight, yep. That is a miniature, mummified boy.

True, if you believe it. Now, on the next slide is what I call the human exhibit. That was a man he managed to find, don't know where he found it, but he came to one of his auditoriums.

[2 : 13] And this man could rotate his head 270 degrees. And so that's why you can see him looking backwards. Now, there are actually still around 20 or so auditoriums in the world.

And Australia has one as well. Has anyone been there? Do you know where it is? Gold Coast, yep. Surface Paradise. That's right. So next time you're there, you might want to check it out.

Or maybe not. Now, we know that strange things do happen in the world. But sometimes, like these things, they are just so far-fetched that it's simply too hard to believe, isn't it?

And this year, as we celebrate Easter, I think many people think the same of Jesus' resurrection.

Now, of course, there are those of us who are Christians who certainly believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

But rising from the dead is not something that happens every other day, is it? And so you may be here today thinking the same, that Jesus' resurrection is actually very, very hard to believe.

[3 : 24] Maybe, as well, you think it doesn't really matter. Even if what the disciples told was a fairy tale, which they sincerely but naively believed in, well, what really counts is that it inspires us, doesn't it?

Well, actually, I'm afraid to say that that's actually not good enough. Because if Jesus did not rise from the dead, if he's not truly alive today, then really there is no hope in this fanciful story.

But if Jesus really is alive, then it changes everything. And the disciples knew this. The gospel writers knew this.

And that's why all of them, the four gospel writers, they record the events of Jesus' resurrection carefully to demonstrate to us that, no, this is all actually true.

And so this is the Sunday, whether you're already convinced or not, I want to spend some time looking again at those events so as to affirm the truth that these things did happen.

[4 : 38] And we're going to look at Matthew's gospel, one of the four accounts, to follow along.

Now, before I do that, though, I want to say that the fact that there are actually four separate and distinct accounts of the resurrection of Easter Sunday, and if you read through them, actually, there are details that are actually quite hard to reconcile.

But I think rather than show that these accounts then are false because they can't be all reconciled neatly, actually demonstrate that they are authentic. It shows that these four writers didn't collude amongst themselves to come up with a fake story.

No, they were confident enough with their own eyewitness accounts or from the sources that they drew from to let these separate accounts stand as they are.

They didn't find, they didn't feel the need to actually have to make sure all these details were ironed out in order to make sure they were true.

But despite the differences in places, the more important thing really is that on the crucial details, they all agree. They all agree that Jesus died, that he was buried, and then afterwards the tomb was empty.

[6 : 03] And so that demands an explanation, doesn't it? Now, because the burial of Jesus is so important, we have begun our reading tonight on the night of Good Friday, even though it's Easter Sunday today.

In fact, the early Christians thought that this was important too because do you recall that when you just read the Apostles' Creed, we recited that he was crucified, died, and was buried, and then it's only in the subsequent line, two lines later, that we then say he rose from the dead.

Many of our hymns that we sing today, I think even the songs that we just sung, go straight from died to rose again. But if there's any budding songwriters out there, I wonder whether we ought to reinstate buried in our future songs as well.

So you budding songwriters, take note of that, see what you want to do with it. But let's begin in verse 57 of chapter 27, when, as evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph.

He had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock.

[7 : 20] He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. So why is Jesus' burial important?

Well, because it's evidence that Jesus really died. You see, it wasn't just the disciples or the women that took custody of Jesus' body after his death.

Rather, it was the Romans, Jesus' enemies, who took him down from the cross. And these were professional people, people, I mean, people who were schooled in putting people on the cross. And so if there was even the slightest hint of life in Jesus as they took his body down, they would have known. And yet, they could tell clearly that Jesus was dead.

Then, it was Joseph of Arimathea who asked Pilate for the body. Not one of the twelve disciples or the women, but almost an outsider, independent of the disciples, even though he was a believer.

[8 : 24] Now, so crucial is Joseph that he's actually recorded in all four of the Gospels as the one who asked Pilate for the body. Also, except for the Gospel of Mark, all the other Gospels also tell us that Jesus' body was then wrapped in linen and laid in Joseph's new tomb.

That is, a tomb where no one has yet been laid or buried. Why? Because when the time then comes later, there can be no question that the missing body had to be Jesus, right?

There was only one body. And so there's no confusion when there's no body left there which body was the one that was gone. Well, more than that, a big stone was then rolled over it, which is hard to dislodge, so we know that the tomb is secure.

And then Matthew tells us, sitting there to witness all of these were the two Marys. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. And the other Mary, if you look back in verse 56, is the mother of James and Joseph.

And so these two Marys become the crucial additional witnesses, not just to Jesus' death, but now also the burial, and eventually they will be the first to see him or see the empty tomb.

[9 : 47] And this too is another pointer to the authenticity of this account, because in those days, no Jewish man would fabricate a story such that women are the key witnesses to an event.

They are wrong, of course, but back in those days, they considered that women were not reliable witnesses. So if you want to fake a story, you don't boost your credibility by putting women in as your key witnesses, do you?

And yet, we know that it's not just Matthew, but all four Gospel writers put the women first. As the witnesses. So it would be even more absurd, wouldn't it be, if they then colluded and came together

and say, let's make up this false story and, ha, let's put women in it, because that would really convince people.

And so I think really, we are left to conclude that what they tell us is what really did happen. Now also unlikely is what Matthew now then describes in verse 62.

So reading on the slide, the next day, the one after preparation day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. Sir, they said, remember that while he was still alive, that deceiver, can't even name him, Jesus, but that deceiver said, after three days, I will rise again.

[11:05] So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. this last deception will be worse than the first.

Take a guard, Pilate answered. Go make the tomb as secure as you know how. So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Now, why do I say that this is likely to be true again? Because if you're the disciples and you're just advised a plan to steal the body and then to lie afterwards about it, you're hardly going to give that away by writing it into your gospel, would you?

Instead, we can be certain that what Matthew says about the fears of the chief priests are true because if you think about it, why would anyone put a guard in front of a tomb?

Why guard a dead body? Now, maybe if there were treasures in there, you know, you didn't want Indiana Jones to get to it, you put a guard. Maybe if it's a prison and you didn't want to break out, you put guards.

[12:18] If it's a palace and you wanted to protect a king or a president, you put a guard or many guards. But why guard a dead body?

Even if the disciples were to steal the body, so what? Why go to all that effort unless you had heard that Jesus proclaimed that he would rise from the dead?

Then it makes sense because you don't want the disciples to get any funny ideas and try to pretend after stealing the body that Jesus did come alive again.

Now, incidentally, I think this all shows that the promise that Jesus made about his resurrection was not some secret that was just known among his inner circle, the disciples and, you know, the women, but actually it was more widely known as well, including to outsiders like the Pharisee. But now, because the guards were posted, we have another set of witnesses, don't we? The guards saw the tomb was sealed and then they saw as well the tomb was empty afterwards.

[13:29] And these guards are no friend of Jesus, were they? And so by Easter morning, we actually have a cast of witnesses, don't we? Who saw Jesus die and his lifeless and dead body wrapped in the linen, laid in a new tomb where no other body was laid.

And come Easter morning, the 24-7 security detail guarding the tomb could vouch that the tomb had not been tampered with because the seal was still intact.

Which brings us now then to Easter morning. Chapter 28, verse 1. And we read, After the Sabbath at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary met Lynn and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake. For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and going to the tomb rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow.

The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. And so as I said earlier, the same Marys who witnessed Jesus' death and then burial are now the first ones to see the empty tomb.

[14:42] Now, actually, no one sees the resurrection of Jesus himself because by the time the earthquake occurs and the angel appears to roll the stone away, Jesus was actually no longer there.

Right? All the angel does is do the big reveal. You know? Ta-da! Verse 5. The angel said to the woman, Do not be afraid for I know that you're looking for Jesus who was crucified.

He is not here. He has risen just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. And if you look at the other Gospels, you will see that what was lying there was simply the linen cloth that Jesus was wrapped in.

which is again another piece of evidence because if you're going to steal the body, you're not going to unroll all that linen, you know, meters and meters of it, and then leave it there and just take the body, which is a rotting, decomposing body anyway.

You want to have the cloth around. You don't want to carry a decomposing body. So here is another piece of evidence that actually this is a true account. Then the angel said, Go quickly and tell his disciples, He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee.

[15:57] There you will see him. Now I have told you. So what the angels do is to send the women out to be witnesses to the resurrection. But as the women did, verse 8, they had another surprise.

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Suddenly Jesus met them. Greetings, he said. It's like, hello, kind of thing.

They came to him, clasped his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.

So they finally see Jesus in the flesh and fall down to worship him. And Jesus merely repeats the instructions of the angel, because Jesus, who will then himself, go and appear before the disciples.

Now here we also read that the guards became like dead men, but that doesn't mean that they were not able to witness everything that happened. Sure, they did not see Jesus like the women did, but they saw everything else.

[17:01] They saw and heard the angel and what he said, and they also saw the empty tomb. So verse 11, while the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priest everything that had happened.

When the chief priest had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, you are to say his disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.

If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

So, actually, initially, these soldiers were true witnesses because when they went to the chief priest, they actually described and sort of explained everything that did happen.

But what happened then was that the chief priest turned them into false witnesses. And to be honest, the plan of these elders wasn't very impressive, was it?

[18:09] Because they simply lie about the very thing that they had put guards in place to prevent. Not a really good plan, is it? How is it possible if they were guarding this tomb that they could not prevent the very thing that they were trying to prevent?

Oh, because they fell asleep. Now, think about it, though. even if they were asleep, let's give that, you know, it was a long night.

Do you think it would have been possible for the disciples to roll away that large stone quietly? Not to make a single noise, to go in and drag out that body?

I don't know whether you've carried a sleeping man. It's not easy. All right? They're flopping around or whatever. It's not a rigid thing that you can carry. You know. And then, to roll the stone back quietly.

And then, for the seal to still be intact. Besides, if the guards were really asleep, then, shouldn't the chief priests be punishing them?

[19:20] And if the disciples did really steal the body, why don't you send the guards out to go search for them? Arrest them. Bring them in. Extract the confession as to where the body is.

It would have been very easy to do. I mean, that's what normally happens, isn't it, in the movies? Have you watched those Jackie Chan movies or whatever? Where you get those low-ranking policemen coming to that corrupt chief inspector, very sheepish, to say, oh no, the hero has escaped.

You know, what does the chief inspector do? Slaps them around the head and say, just go. Go and find him and don't come back until you've found the hero, right? That's what they should have done. Instead, the soldiers get rewarded for their failure, provided, provided, they spread a false story, which Matthew says, by the time of his writing, was still circulating around.

And, if you're interested, I'm sure, if you look up the internet today, that story probably is still circulating around somewhere. Now, one wonders how the guards could live with themselves in the knowledge of this lie.

[20:33] No doubt, having that large sum of money would help numb the guilt. You know, on a quiet day when their conscience was gnawing at them, perhaps they could take comfort in the mention that they'd managed to buy by the sea with that money and think how they've, you know,

set their children and their grandchildren up with all that money so that they would be comfortable. Maybe that's how they got by. But imagine if it were the disciples instead that knowingly lived with a lie, the one that the chief priest accused them of, of stealing the body and then lying to say Jesus rose from the dead.

Do you think they would have been able afterwards to do what they did in Acts, to suffer for Jesus and some even to die for Jesus? I don't think so. Nobody dies for a lie that they know.

So I wonder today which set of witnesses you are more convinced by. Is it the testimony of the guards that the disciples stole Jesus' body or the one which the women eventually told the disciples that Jesus is alive?

I think Matthew's account shows us which is the one that is more plausible, isn't it? Yes, the fact that the dead can rise from, it is an impossible thing which ordinarily you should be skeptical, but it's only impossible for humans and not God.

[22 : 05] In fact, for someone like God who is the giver of all life, that is exactly what you would expect of him, isn't it? Being able to raise the dead to life.

Well, let's return now to the responses of the women in verse 8. We read that actually they were afraid yet filled with joy. And I wonder whether you've experienced a similar situation before where you are afraid and yet filled with joy.

Often that may relate to things we're really looking forward to and we really want in life and yet we're afraid because we don't want our hopes to be dashed. Now remember at this point the women had not seen Jesus yet, right?

They may have believed the angel, seen the empty tomb, which makes them think that something amazing has happened, but there's still a possibility for them that this was just a cruel hoax.

And friends, we too have not seen Jesus alive yet, have we? But like the women, we can be fairly certain of this. Even the skeptics in this world who are not Christians would concede that Jesus did die, he was buried and then three days later the tomb was empty.

[23 : 34] And so the question to ask is what explanation best fit these events? Even if we haven't seen Jesus alive, do we believe the soldier's story or do we believe Matthew and the women's story?

I don't know about you, but somehow I'm not convinced by the soldiers. So today, you may be here today and you've been coming for a while.

This might be the day today, isn't it? Easter Sunday of all Sundays to finally believe that Jesus is alive and therefore commit to following him.

If that's what you'd like to do tonight, then please come and talk to me afterwards. I'd love to be able to pray with you. But even for us who have believed, it's good to be reminded that the resurrection is not a fairy tale, that it matters that Jesus is truly alive because if he is alive, he changes our lives too.

Because he lives, every wrong that we've done can be forgiven because of his death on the cross. Because he lives, he is able to give us his spirit. We have his life in us.

[24 : 53] By the spirit, which death can no longer take away. Because of this, we have a relationship with God which endures forever and ever. And so knowing this, I think, should fill our hearts with the same joy that filled the women.

And even though, unlike the women and the disciples, we're not going to get to see Jesus immediately or quickly like they did, but friends, we will see Jesus one day, in person.

You know, sometimes I do take funerals and family members that aren't sure about their faith in Jesus or the faith of the loved one who has passed away, they often say that he or she is in a better place now or that they are at peace.

But they never say it with a sense of confidence. It's often just a well-intentioned wish or desire, but nothing really to base it on.

Friends, when we believe in Jesus, when we know he truly lives and is alive, we can be sure. We can say as Job did in that first reading in the Old Testament.

[26 : 05] Now, as Vanessa was saying, Job spoke in the depths of his suffering. He had just lost all his children. He was rich, he had lost everything.

He himself was sitting covered in sores. His friends had come supposedly to comfort him, but instead they castigated him instead. And yet, in spite of all that, he could find it in his heart in chapter 19 to say this of God, which rings true for us with Jesus as well.

He said, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth, and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.

I myself will see him with my own eyes, I, and not another, how my heart yearns within me. Because Jesus, our Redeemer, lives, we will see him with our own eyes. we, I, you, and not another.

[27 : 21] Do you ever have that longing to want to see Jesus in person? Especially if, like Job, life is a bit challenging now.

Well, this Easter, because Jesus is truly alive, we can believe and worship him. we can know that one day we will see him in person.

Now, next week, we will consider what the other thing the women were asked to do was, and that is go and tell. But for today, I think our main takeaway, really, from Easter Sunday, is to rejoice.

Be filled with joy like the women did. Strengthen our faith in the knowledge that despite the false narratives in the world and the lies that Satan might tell, the tomb was empty not because the disciples stole the body, but because Jesus rose from the dead.

And that fills our lives with hope and joy until we see him face to face. Let's pray. Amen. Amen.

Father, thank you.

[28 : 40] Thank you that Jesus is raised from the dead. That even as he promised it would happen, he lives and can never die.

And because he lives, we too will live. And because he lives, we too now have life by his spirit to be in fellowship with you. And Father, we long for that day when we will see him in person face to face. We rejoice now, but our joy will be made complete on that day. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.