

The Problem Of Human Unbelief

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 April 1989

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] We're looking at Luke 24, and as you already know, it is on page 85, verse 13 of 24.

And just to pray, and then I'll talk to you about it.

Our God, it was your purpose, by your Holy Spirit, to inspire St. Luke to write this story about your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ.

In order for us to understand this story, we ask that your same Holy Spirit will inspire us as we think about it, and as we meditate on it, and as we try and become subject to the things that you are saying to us in it about your Son, Jesus Christ.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[1 : 54] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, now, this is the way it is. I would like to contend, for purposes of gaining your attention, that this is by far the most beautiful story that has ever been told in the whole history of the world.

Now, that's just me talking, so don't take that too seriously. But I want to just tell you reasons why I think that may be true. I mean, I'm not the judge of it, and you're not the judge of it, but it still may be true.

One is that it concerns the most important day in the whole history of the human race, and that is the day on which Christ rose from the dead.

It concerns the most unique person in the whole history of the human race, and that is the person of Jesus Christ.

It also has two central characters who, in the whole panorama of history, are totally unknown.

[3 : 10] Nobody knows who they are. So, here is the greatest man in history speaking to two unknown strangers. And the subject of this story is this unique event in the whole of history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now, I've been in the religion business for a long time, I regret to say. I mean, I don't know whether I regret it or not.

It's just one of the facts of life. I, and I find that people, you know, they like a lot of religion.

They like loving each other, and they like behaving themselves on occasion. They like having a good reputation.

They like, they like lots of things about religion. But the fact of the resurrection is the fact, apart from which, I don't think there's anything to religion at all.

[4 : 28] I mean, I just think it's really not very important. And most people in our society are prepared to treat it as not very important, as you well know.

And I think they have good grounds to treat it as not very important. I mean, it's, uh, sociologists say it's a good way of making people behave.

And I suspect it is, you know, that, just as well if everybody behaves and, or tried to be honest about their income tax and drove with some modicum of care for others and took some consideration for their environment and the people around them.

But, uh, those are all good things in themselves. But, uh, they don't answer any of the ultimate questions, nor do they face any of the ultimate questions of why you should do it, uh, in terms of your own personal fulfillment.

Why shouldn't you be the exception who lives with the wonderful freedom among all the slaves of the human race?

[5 : 40] They all do what they're supposed to do so as to allow you to do what you want to do. And that's, uh, about the way we'd like to put it all together. Well, so you have this, this business of the resurrection.

Uh, and it seems to me that the central fact of the New Testament is how are you generation after generation going to teach people of the fact of the resurrection?

How are you going to bring them up against it? How are you going to bring people of the 20th century, uh, products of the enlightenment, products of the secular age, products of the consumer society?

How are you going to bring them up against the fact of the resurrection? So that they don't just dismiss it outright or try and fit it in to the narrow field of their understanding and, um, where it just, uh, they just find it.

It's better just to ignore it. How are you going to do it? How are you going to do it? How are you going to do it? And I think that this story is the most beautifully honed instrument in the whole history of human thought, which brings people up against the reality of the resurrection.

[7 : 06] If you want to know what Christianity is all about, it's contained in this little story. And, uh, I say, I mean, I've tried to make it, uh, the subject on which I would like to preach on every Easter Eve of the whole of my career, and I've done it lots of times, but, um, I'm happy to be back to it tonight.

And, uh, it seems to me a far more magnificent story tonight than it has ever been in my recollection. And, uh, it seems to illustrate the wonderful truth that, uh, you know, the best commentaries and the wisest word study books and the most brilliant theologians can't really come close to saying what this story says.

And I would like, I'd like you to drive it like a javelin right into your heart with barb so you could never pull it out. Uh, because it is so important a story.

And so utterly simple. That there were two men walking on the road to a man seven miles distance from Jerusalem.

When Jesus himself drew near and walked with him and their eyes were restrained that they didn't recognize him. And he joined with them and saw them deeply immersed in conversation and said, what is it you're talking about?

[8 : 39] And they stopped and looked sad and turned to him and said, are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days? And Jesus said, what things?

And they said concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed and in favor with God and with man. And our chief priests and rulers took him and condemned him.

And the day before yesterday, they crucified him. And we hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel.

And, uh, some of the women of our company went out to the tomb this morning where they laid his body. And they found the tomb empty.

And they said they saw a vision of angel. And the angel said, he's alive. Some of our company went out and looked at the tomb.

[9 : 44] And, uh, yes, it was even as they said, the tomb was empty. They came back and told us that. And we've left and are on our way home.

And, uh, Jesus said to them, you fools and slow of heart to believe all that is written in the prophets.

And, uh, was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and enter into his glory? Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he spoke to them of the things concerning himself.

And as they spoke, they arrived at their home in Emmaus. And he made as though he would have gone further. And they constrained him and said, it's late. It's towards evening.

Come and spend the evening with us. And so he went in with them and they sat down at table. And he, though it was not his house or his place, perhaps, took bread and broke it.

[10 : 53] And in the breaking of bread, they recognized him. And the moment they recognized him, he vanished out of their sight. And they said, did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the way?

And that same hour, they got up and they returned to Jerusalem to tell the things that had happened. That's the story.

Well, um, the way I want to, just that, I want to just be very brief with you tonight and tell you two things that come out of that story for me.

Things that I'm very anxious to share with you tonight. First, I think Luke brilliantly portrays the condition of unbelief. The condition of unbelief, which may have hold of your heart.

And if it hasn't got hold of your heart, it certainly has hold of the heart of many people whom you know, among whom you would hesitate even to bring up the subject of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or talk about the person of Jesus Christ.

[12:02] That condition of unbelief, which is so settled and so established, that you don't want to stir up the mud by raising things that you know are unacceptable.

Look, if you will, at what the condition of unbelief is as Christ describes it. First, this condition of unbelief is not ignorant of the fact of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, nor indeed of his teachings. For these were disciples, and they had heard him speak. They knew that he was a prophet mighty in word and deed.

And they were there when he was taken out to be crucified outside the city wall. They knew all that. That was part of their unbelief.

While they knew that, they didn't understand it. And so they dismissed it. The next thing about their unbelief is, in this story, is that their eyes could not see who it was that had come and joined himself to them.

[13:14] And I think that you and I, who live in such a highly visual world, should understand that. Because I think we are constantly being deceived by what our eyes see.

One fairly basic example is pornography. We've created a whole new kind of human sexuality by the use of pornography.

Which is a sexuality which is imparted through visual things. And it's terrible. In the grip it can take hold on us.

And it's totally artificial. Because it doesn't involve relationship with anybody. And so in that case, our eyes fail us very badly.

And I think because we live in a world of television and movies and all sorts of things. Our eyes and the lust of our eyes and the hunger of our eyes and the constant sort of stimulus that our eyes are to us fills us full of all sorts of artificiality.

[14:32] It's probably not surprising that in the long tradition of prayer, one of the first things you've got to do is close your eyes. Because they're so deceptive.

And I would like to suggest to you that the reason they couldn't see who Jesus was, it says their eyes were held from recognizing him. But I think the reason is because your eyes cannot see what your heart cannot imagine.

And they couldn't imagine who this person was. You know, we have all those people who go around saying, If I see with my eyes, I will believe.

And that is the primary way, I think, of setting yourself up to be deceived. Because every two-bit magician in the world can take advantage of you if you commit yourself to that statement.

He can show you what you want to see. And so your eyes aren't that reliable. And so it wasn't important that they should recognize him physically.

[15:48] First, that came later on. And a lot of people who are waiting for their eyes to be convinced, their eyes never will.

Because your eyes are never satisfied with seeing. There's got to be something more. And so that's a condition of unbelief in our society. The third condition of unbelief is the failure of our political and religious leaders.

Because these people, you see, had thought that the chief priests and rulers, if the Messiah came, if the Christ appeared, who would be the first to recognize and acknowledge him?

The chief priests and the rulers. They were the ones that had the cause of the nation deepest in their hearts. They were the ones who talked about it. They were the ones who preached about it. They were the ones who read about it. They were the ones who claimed they knew all about it. And when he came, they crucified him. Their leaders failed him.

[16:48] As I think your leaders will fail you time and time again. And they, if you're waiting for your leaders to go where you need to go, then don't wait any longer.

Because they won't do it for you. Their leaders had failed him. And the next thing, this is the fourth, was that their hope, their hopes were far too small.

You know, they said, we hope that it was he that should redeem Israel. And, uh, and we live in a world of hopes that are too small.

You know, we hope there will be an end to abortion. But, uh, that's too small. It's got to be bigger than that. We hope that we will, uh, be able to renew the environment.

But the issue is far bigger than that. We hope that people will stop fighting each other. But the issue is far bigger than that. And we are flopped off with little miniature hopes to which we commit our lives in order to realize them.

[18 : 14] And those hopes are way too small. These disciples hoped that it was Jesus who would redeem Israel. But Jesus' purpose and the kingdom which he came to announce was far bigger than this tiny little country in a remote corner of the world.

Their hopes were far too small. Um, this is one that I take some delight in telling you. Uh, they didn't believe the women.

That was a condition of their unbelief. I, uh, I, uh, Luke is, Luke is very strong on this.

And, uh, and I think the whole feminist movement has something very important to say. Which they rarely say. They, they get caught on small, you know, little issues that are peripheral to the main issue.

But I think the main issue is terribly important. And the fact that the witness of the women to the disciples was ignored. And that lovely part of the story, you know, that, uh, they could have said when in reporting that, that the women went to the tomb and found it empty.

[19 : 34] And there were angels there who said he is alive. But they didn't say that. They said, uh, the women went to the tomb and found it was empty. And the women said there were angels there who said he was alive.

Well, they didn't listen to them. And, uh, and then the next condition of unbelief is, uh, well, is that they had no place in their experience for angels.

And they couldn't fit the angels. They couldn't fit the angels in at all. And, um, any reality beyond that which we can sort of take hold of with our hands, uh, we can't, we don't know what to do with.

And so they dismissed the women's story about the angels. And then they said, we are creatures of time.

And time has already pretty well demonstrated that, uh, our hopes are gone. It is now, they said, the third day.

[20 : 47] It's too late for anything to happen. Now that was the condition of their unbelief. And that's the condition of human unbelief. As you encounter it and as I encounter it.

I think, I think, I didn't want to get into this tonight, but I think that you could go on and see how much more complex and how much more sophisticated is human unbelief, uh, as a result of philosophical trends over the last two or three hundred years.

But at the, uh, root of human unbelief are these things. And Christ carefully scrapes away the dirt so you see where the human, what the human unbelief is based on.

It's based on hopes that are too small. It's based on, uh, knowing the facts but having no understanding of them. It's based on the deceptiveness of our eyes, the failure of our leaders. It's based on not believing one another, having no room for the supernatural, and, uh, locking ourselves into the process of time so that we don't believe, um, that there is.

[22 : 11] You know, lots of people, when they come here to have their funeral, I'm telling you, because I don't want you to do this when you come here for yours. I, uh, they like you to read Ecclesiastes 3, you know, there is a time and there is a time and there is a time and there is a time.

But by the time you're in that condition, time is no longer of any importance at all. There is now eternity or nothing. And, uh, well, so Jesus has, has that.

And he starts to build on the basis of, in a sense, having, having leveled, like with a bulldozer, the, uh, the, the, the ground, by showing you what, what human unbelief is and what it's founded on.

He then starts to build. He explores their experience. He asks for, uh, their understanding. He asks them to enunciate what it is that comprises their unbelief.

And then he makes this rebuke. He takes them and says to them, you fools. By which he means you're ignorant.

[23 : 25] You know better is what he said. You know a whole lot better. You know, it's not, uh, it's cultivated ignorance that you're suffering from.

And that's why he calls them fools. I mean, it's not derisive in that sense. It's just that they are unintelligent in not understanding the evidence that they have already got right before them.

So he says they're fools. And they are slow of heart. And you know the, the heart is the base of everything of mind and will and understanding.

And, uh, it's by the heart that they should have reached out and grasped the reality of the resurrection. And it's, uh, the purpose of Christ to reach in and take hold of them by the heart and quicken them so that they will be able to grasp the reality of the resurrection.

He says you, uh, you fools and slow of heart, slow witted and slow hearted to believe, to exercise the faith that this situation demands.

[24 : 42] Because you must live by faith ultimately. You know that. And you're unintelligent and slow of heart to believe.

Uh, and you also lack the ability to reason. On the basis of what you already know, you should have been able to understand that it was necessary that the Christ should suffer.

This is the Christ speaking to two unknown disciples and saying to them, you should have known that it was necessary that the Christ should suffer and enter into his glory.

You should have been able to work that out on the basis of what you already knew. Suffering was not something which the Christ would detour. You may want to detour it.

And you may think that life is a glorious attempt to detour it. But I assure you, you won't. And the Christ would not detour it.

[25 : 55] It was necessary that he should go straight into it. In effect, he was saying to them, you, uh, you read the Bible much too selectively.

You choose what you want from the Bible. And if you weren't so selective about it, then you would recognize that the Christ must suffer in order to enter into his glory.

So that was a failure of understanding what they should have known. And, uh, he says, and, uh, you refuse to face the fact of suffering, even though it is that raw material of human life of which there is a super abundance.

And is all that raw material going to be wasted? Or is it in fact going to be the very means by which we share the glory of God and find, uh, the purpose of God?

So Jesus establishes the, uh, the structure of faith. He's, uh, he's, uh, he's in a sense, shown them what the basis of unbelief is.

[27 : 20] And then he establishes the structure of faith. And he says, he takes them back and it says, and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he spoke of the things concerning himself.

And, uh, and that's, that's why the Bible is essential. That's why we go on preaching from it week after week and reading from it week after week and an Old Testament lesson and a New Testament lesson and a Psalm and a Gospel and tentacles and trying to hammer into our hearts and minds the kind of substructure on which our whole understanding of the faith is built and without which we don't have an understanding.

See, it's not enough to have a vision. There's got to be built into us this understanding. And, uh, if you go to university and you want to become a physicist or a chemist or a historian or anything else, they spend their time hammering into you some basis on which you can understand the reality of doing business, of taking out appendixes and of, uh, doing whatever other business you're in.

Trading money, buying real estate, building bridges, whatever it is. You've got to have that. And in order for you to understand God, you've got to encounter the Word of God.

There's no shortcuts to it. And that's why on the first Easter day, Jesus took the time, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, to give the most brilliant Bible study that has probably ever happened in the history of the world.

[29 : 13] If anybody could copyright that and get it on tape, what a treasure that would be. But, uh, I suppose it's one of the...

It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? That he says, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. And you will say over and over again, this does not make sense, this does not make sense, this does not make sense.

But it only makes sense as it focuses on the person concerning whom it was ultimately written, and that person is Jesus Christ.

And, uh, that was... That's how Jesus laid the foundation for faith. And, uh, that's the only basis on which our faith can be established and grounded.

It's the only foundation on which faith can be built, is this knowledge of the Scripture. Otherwise, we can be blown out of the water by every wind of doubt or any questioning that comes along.

[30 : 18] We're just blown away by it. Until... You know, until... ...

... ..