

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN A SAVIOR WHO DIED AND ROSE AGAIN? 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8

What's your favorite Easter song or hymn? One of my favorites is the old hymn "He Lives" probably because I have many happy memories of singing that hymn on Easter Sundays growing up. But as much as I love that old hymn, there's something about it that I don't like. The last line of the chorus goes like this: "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!" Now I know where the hymn writer was going. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit does indeed take spiritual truth and impresses it upon your heart in such a way that it becomes personally real and true for you. On the other hand, there's something about that answer that's inadequate. Suppose someone really did ask you today, "Yeah, but how do you know that Jesus is really alive?" Is that the best answer you could give - "He lives within my heart"? Really.... Hard to argue with that answer, isn't it? But doesn't it sound kind of evasive... kind of subjective... kind of like a cop out? If you asked a Muslim, a Hindu or a Buddhist why they believe what they believe and they said, "I believe it because I feel it in my heart" we'd probably roll our eyes and say, "Whatever." Not very convincing, is it?

Today I'm concluding a series of messages entitled "Why Should I Believe? A Fresh Look At Old Doubts." We've made an attempt to answer seven questions that non-Christians in our culture regularly ask about the Christian faith. We say that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the two most important events that ever happened anywhere at anytime. Furthermore, we say if Jesus didn't rise from the dead on the very first Easter Sunday, Christianity is a sham. It's all just a colossal waste of time and effort. So, here's the question we want to ask and try to answer today, "Why should I believe in a Savior who died and rose again?"

Now, I'll still sing "He Lives" with great gusto and thoroughly enjoy it, but I'm glad today that I can know Jesus rose again for more reasons than that He lives within my heart. That's one good reason, but it's not the only reason. And certainly the very first Christians believed Jesus rose from the dead for other reasons, too. Let's look at one Scripture passage that underlines that fact. Now the great Christian leader, Paul, wrote those words to a church he helped establish in the Greek city of Corinth about 20-25 years after the resurrection. Most scholars agree v. 3-5 are a very early creed that goes back to within just a few years of the resurrection itself. Now Paul wasn't a member of the twelve original disciples. In fact, he helped to persecute and kill the first Christians until he had an amazing conversion experience himself a year or two after the resurrection of Jesus. About three years later, Paul went to Jerusalem himself and met with Peter, James and other key Christian leaders. He knew about this creedal statement either before that visit or he received it during that visit.

This creedal statement makes at least three key propositions. One, Jesus died and it was for our sins. Two, Jesus was buried which confirmed the reality of both his death and resurrection. On the one hand, if Jesus was buried, He must have

been really dead. On the other hand, if Jesus was buried, He was truly raised from the dead. Three, Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day after His death. Each proposition has the phrase “according to the Scriptures” attached to it meaning that the Old Testament predicted these events centuries before they happened. It also means that these events fulfilled God’s own eternal purpose.

Why is this important? Many people today assume that people back in the first century easily believed in miracles and the possibility of resurrection. It’s thought that since the first Christians loved Jesus and were heartbroken by His death, they started to believe Jesus was still with them, guiding them and living in their hearts spiritually. Maybe some even had visions of Jesus speaking to them. Over the decades these feelings about Jesus developed into stories of why He died and how He rose from the dead. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written to give a kind of pseudo-historical veneer to these lovely legends and myths and – presto! – Christianity was born! What we just read blows up at least part of that theory. The essentials of the Christian faith we still hold onto today were believed and taught within just two to five years of Jesus’ resurrection. So, the question remains: why should I believe in a Savior who died and rose again? Let’s begin with this question and suggest some answers.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT JESUS DIED FOR MY SINS?

A person can believe that Jesus was executed on a cross as an historical fact without having to believe the Christian interpretation of that event. That’s true. But it’s a fact from 1 Corinthians 15:3 that the very first Christians believed that Jesus died on the cross in order to deal with human sin although that verse doesn’t tell us how He did that. So, people ask, “Why did Jesus have to die? Your Christian God sounds like those gods from primitive times who need to be appeased by a human sacrifice. Why couldn’t God just forgive us?”

The first answer is that any and all sin or wrongdoing creates a debt that someone has to pay. Let’s suppose you allow your best friend to borrow your car and he totals it. You can do one of two things. You can do everything in your power to make your friend pay for the damage including taking him to court if necessary. Or, you can indeed forgive him, but by doing so you’re paying the cost yourself. You absorb the debt yourself. If some kind of wrong is serious, there is no such thing as just forgiving. Someone always pays. When God decided to forgive you rather than punish you for all the ways you have wronged Him and other people, He went to the cross in the person of Jesus and died there. Christians believe Jesus Christ is God. So God didn’t inflict pain on someone else, then, but rather He absorbed all the wrongdoing of the world into Himself on the cross. God is *not* like some primitive deity who demanded your blood to appease its anger. Rather, He is God who became human and offered His own blood in order to pay the cost of your sin Himself. There was a debt – a penalty - that had to be paid and God himself paid it and bore it Himself.

Now, someone might ask, "Why isn't just my own personal faith in God good enough?" Well, that leads to a second point. My sin and its consequences are far worse than I can possibly imagine. It's true that some sin is doing bad things, breaking the rules like the Ten Commandments, or being terribly self-centered. But sin can have an iron grip on your life even when you're being very good and keeping lots of rules outwardly. Whenever you take good things in life and make them the ultimate things – for instance, your money, your achievements, your drive for success however you define it, your need for the approval of other people around you, even your own efforts to act morally – you are guilty of something called idolatry. Whenever you make something else more central to your significance, purpose and happiness than your relationship with God, you are putting good things in the place of God. The simple and unavoidable fact is that all of us are guilty of wrongdoing. And sin has proven to have terrible consequences. It ruins lives. It ruins relationships. The Bible even says that human beings are so integral to the fabric of all life that things like disease, genetic disorders, famine, natural disasters, aging and death itself can all be traced back to sin ultimately. We all need a Savior.

Someone might ask, "Yes, but why must the solution to sin or wrongdoing be Jesus and Christianity? Why can't some other religion do just as well?" All the other major religions on our planet have founders who were teachers that tried to show their followers the way to salvation. In other words, "Do this and you will find God." Only Jesus claimed actually to be the way of salvation Himself. In other words, it's as if Jesus said, "I am God and I have come to you in order to do what you could not do for yourself." Thirdly, the Bible makes it clear that you need a salvation based on God's grace rather than your own moral effort. It's possible to look at Jesus as a great teacher but avoid Him as your Savior. That's what most Americans try to do. They trust in their own goodness – their own moral effort - rather than in Jesus for their standing with God. The Bible teaches clearly that you can never reach God, find salvation, or get to Heaven through your own moral effort. Your personal goodness or moral effort is not acceptable to God whose standard is perfection from day one of your life. You can't be saved by your own record, but only by Jesus' record.

It's marvelous to start living out your life every day from the platform of God's grace rather than your own moral effort. You realize that, yes, I have such a personal sin problem that Jesus had to die for me, but because God loves and values me, Jesus was *glad* to die for me. Isn't that amazing? That enables you to live every day before God and with God – before other people and with other people - with both a deep humility and a deep confidence all at the same time. It was important and necessary that Jesus die for your sins.

Author and speaker Brennan Manning has an amazing story about how he got the name "Brennan." While growing up, his best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together. They even enlisted in the Army together, went

to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines in Korea together. One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan's life was spared. When Brennan became a Roman Catholic priest he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So he took on the name "Brennan." Years later he went to visit Ray's mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?" Brennan said that at that moment he imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?" The cross of Jesus is God's way of doing all He could do for us. And yet we often wonder, *Does God really love me? Does God care about me?* Let's move to a second question:

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD?

Since that first Easter Day, an abundance of evidence has surfaced that points convincingly to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead literally and physically. Like what? There is, first of all, the evidence of the empty tomb. Not even the Jewish and Roman leaders who conspired to execute Jesus ever made the claim that Jesus' body was still in the tomb he was buried in. Everyone knew Jesus had been buried in the tomb of a sympathetic Jewish leader- Joseph of Arimathea. If that tomb was still occupied, all they had to do was open it, get Jesus' corpse out, parade it around Jerusalem and the Christian faith would have stopped right there and then. Some people say, "Well, the empty tomb was a myth or a legend that Christians developed years later." That's where our text today helps us. Two to five years after the resurrection, Christians were confessing that Jesus had been buried implying the use of a tomb. The four Gospels all independently confirm Jesus was buried in a tomb and they were all written too soon after the actual events to allow legends and myths to have developed. The simple, historical fact is that the Jesus' tomb somehow got emptied out three days after His death. No, that doesn't prove Jesus rose from the dead – that's true enough – but it's important evidence nonetheless.

A second important piece of evidence is multiple eyewitnesses. It's true that no one witnessed the actual resurrection of Jesus in the tomb early on that first Easter Sunday, but there are several records of the risen Jesus appearing to multiple eyewitnesses for a period of several weeks after that event. Each of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – report the risen Jesus was seen by eyewitnesses. It's highly unlikely – let's say impossible - that these four men got together at a Bed & Breakfast for a couple of weeks and consulted each other as they were writing their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. In fact, there's evidence that while they may have used some of the same sources, they

also had access to their own independent, separate sources. It's clear they were making a serious effort to write historical accounts of what had happened based on eyewitness accounts. For instance, they tell us the first eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus were women. In that day and age, the testimony of women was worthless. Women weren't allowed to serve as legal witnesses in a Jewish court of law. There was every reason to alter the history in order to make it more culturally acceptable, but the Gospel writers were determined to faithfully record what actually happened even if it was culturally embarrassing at that time.

From the passage we read together earlier today, Paul points to many eyewitnesses: Peter and the other disciples, some 500 people at one time, and James who was Jesus' half-brother and went on to become the first pastor of the first local church established in Jerusalem. Paul is inviting any first century doubters to check it out for themselves if they want. A lot of these people are still alive, he says! Go, talk to them, if you want! He would not have offered such an invitation if he knew he was going to be contradicted. From day one, Christians believed and proclaimed that on multiple occasions the risen Jesus appeared to individuals and groups. It's interesting to see how the evidences of the empty tomb and multiple eyewitnesses work together. On the one hand, if there was only the empty tomb, but no sightings of the risen Jesus, no one would have concluded a resurrection had occurred. On the other hand, if the tomb still held the body of Jesus, but there were reports of people seeing Him, it would have just been written off as hallucinations.

What about that theory that first century people were just more gullible than people today and could be easily persuaded to believe someone rose from the dead? When you study both Jewish and Greco-Roman thought and culture in the first century it becomes evident that both groups would have been highly skeptical of any claim that someone rose from the dead. The Jews believed a resurrection would only happen when God renewed and restored the whole world at the end of time. The Greeks and Romans had no use for the human body and thought salvation was all about being released from your body.

Frankly, another evidence that Jesus rose from the dead is the weakness of alternate explanations. For instance, some argue that these eyewitnesses just had powerful hallucinations. Psychologists tell us, however, that hallucinations are very individual events. No two people have the same hallucination. Jesus appeared to groups on occasion not just to individuals. Then again, most people who have hallucinations want very much to believe what they think they are seeing. How do you explain Thomas, the disciple who wouldn't believe unless and until he put his finger in the nail holes in Jesus' hands and feet? How about James, Jesus' half brother, who evidently wanted nothing to do with Him until something pretty powerful changed his mind and heart?

Another alternate explanation is that Jesus never really died. Despite being thoroughly discredited even by people who don't believe in the resurrection, this

theory continues to show up over and over again. It's been suggested that Jesus only fainted from exhaustion, or that He was given a drug that made Him appear to die, or later on that the tomb was so comfy and cool that He just revived on his own. This view ignores what Romans soldiers did in the first century when they made up their minds to kill you. Jesus was brutally beaten before His crucifixion – the infamous thirty-nine lashes from a Roman whip - and was probably already in serious to critical medical condition before He was even nailed to the cross. Doctors tell us crucifixion killed people by slow asphyxiation and ultimately cardiac arrest. So horrific is death by a cross that they actually invented a new word to describe the pain – “excruciating” or “out of the cross.” Roman soldiers were experts in killing people. They knew when someone was dead. Moreover, they were held responsible if a prisoner somehow escaped death under their hand. They were put to death themselves if that ever happened. In other words, they had every incentive to make sure Jesus was absolutely dead.

Yet another alternate explanation is that Jesus' followers stole His body. That was, in fact, the explanation that the Jewish leaders offered when Jesus' tomb came up empty. If you believe this theory, you must believe that many people – not just one or two - became perpetrators of a deliberate lie for a very long time. But you must also believe something even harder than that. You must believe that they continued to proclaim this lie in the face of their own personal imprisonment, torture and execution. I like how Lee Strobel puts it, “People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they're true, but people won't die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false.”

There's a final piece of evidence regarding Jesus' resurrection. It's the evidence of God's existence and His ability to do miracles. Some people just choke on the resurrection of Jesus because it is quite obviously a miracle. Ultimately, it all depends on the existence of God and His ability to intervene in the natural laws of this universe and perform a miracle. Most people just assume that when it comes to Jesus' resurrection the burden of proof is on Christians. But there is a burden of proof on non-believers, too. It's not enough simply to believe Jesus didn't rise from the dead. You need to be able to present an historically feasible alternative for Jesus' influence upon the world and His effect on billions of people for 2,000 years some other way. No, the real issue at the end of the day is not historical, but philosophical. Is there a God and can He do the miraculous?

If you are a follower of Jesus today, this message –Jesus died for our sins and rose again – is everything that matters. It is something you “received” (v. 1). It was passed down to you and you accepted it. It is something in which you now “stand” (v. 1). In other words, it's the foundation of your life. It is something by which “you are saved” (v. 2). Your present and future salvation is based on this truth. It's also something to which you need to “hold firmly” (v.2). Life has a way of testing whether you really believe in this message. There will be times in your life when you need to consciously and deliberately hold on to what you know is true. If you don't, there's the chance you might fall away and your faith might

collapse. In other words, think all the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection out and through. Don't allow yourself to have a superficial faith.

And what if you aren't a follower of Jesus today? Thank you for coming today and God bless you! What do you think now about Jesus and His resurrection? The issue isn't whether or not you like Jesus or if you admire His teaching, but whether or not He rose from the dead. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, you can safely ignore Him. If Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything about life – about your life. You need to repent. That means you need to turn away from your own self-salvation project and turn to what God has already done for you in Jesus. You also need to believe in Jesus. That means acknowledging who Jesus is and what He's done, yes, that's true. But it also means putting your trust in Him for this life and for eternity. It's giving as much as you know about yourself to as much as you know about Jesus this very day and forever.

Dr. Gary Habermas is a world renowned scholar and recognized expert on Jesus' resurrection. Back in 1995, his wife, Debbie, had the flu. When it didn't go away as quickly as it should have, he took her to the hospital for tests. The first sentence the doctor uttered to Debbie was, "You've got some serious problems here." Gary said his heart sank into his stomach, and both turned instantly to water. He had to sit down. Little did he know that his belief in Jesus' resurrection was about to be severely tested by the sting of pain and grief. Debbie was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Four months later, at the age of 43 years, she passed away just after she and Gary celebrated their twenty-third wedding anniversary. Gary Habermas had lost his best friend. During Debbie's suffering, Gary regularly took refuge in the truth of Jesus' resurrection. It had been his major research area for 25 years. He appreciated a student who asked him, "What would you do now if Jesus hadn't been raised from the dead?"

Gary knew that the resurrection had a historical, theoretical side, but he wasn't fully aware of its practical power. How did Jesus' resurrection help him while Debbie was dying? Gary says that he imagined what God might say to him in response to his questions about Debbie. He would ask him, "Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?" "Of course you did, Lord," Gary would respond. "But why is Debbie dying?" "Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?" the question would come again. "Yes, Lord, but...." "Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?" Gary imagined God repeating the same question until he got his point. There was an answer to Debbie's suffering, even if he didn't know it. If Jesus has been raised, then Gary can trust that Debbie will be raised someday too. It was sufficient to know that because of Jesus' resurrection, and because Debbie and Gary belong to Jesus, that then they will be together again—for all eternity!

The death and resurrection of Jesus are more than myths and legends. They are real, literal and historical facts. And they change everything. You ask me how I know He lives? Yes, I know because He lives within my heart, but I know for some other great reasons as well. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!