

## Easter 2021 “He Has Risen Indeed” 4/4/21

He has risen indeed! How refreshing to hear those words in a world selling false hope everywhere we turn. Have you noticed, for example, that every technological advancement sells hope? A promise to make our lives happier, better, more fulfilling? At the dawn of the digital age, the internet promised to fulfill our greatest dreams and usher in a kind of cyber utopia- a digital new heavens and new earth. But while our technology has advanced, it appears our souls have regressed. Author Andrew Sullivan recently wrote an article in NY Magazine entitled “The World is Better Than Ever. Why are We Miserable?” “this [hope in human advancement] doesn’t have a way of explaining why for example there is so much profound discontentment, depression, drug abuse, despair, addiction, and loneliness in the most advanced societies. As we have slowly and surely obtained more progress, we have lost something that undergirds all of it: meaning, cohesion and a different, deeper kind of happiness than the satiation of all of our earthly needs.”<sup>1</sup>

Sullivan, though not a Christian, perceives that for all the advancement, something is missing holding it altogether. Maybe you are here and you at times you feel the inner desperation that your life is missing cohesion- something strong enough to hold the wait of all our hopes. In the more honest and vulnerable moments in your life you long to answer the question, “Is there something greater, something deeper that I can build my life upon?” Friend, you are not here this morning or watching this message by accident. [Title Slide] God wants to draw you by the collar and whisper- yes there is! We cannot build our hopes on human achievement. Not on social movements, or politics, wealth, the American dream. Sullivan couldn’t answer the question- but Easter can- The only hope of the universe is centered on one person- Jesus, and one event- his resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus can only be the anchor of our hope if it’s true. Do you believe that Easter is an historical event or a symbolic idea? Is Easter just a symbol of human triumph, and positivity that the sun will come out tomorrow? Or did something miraculous happen that irreversibly changed the world and our eternity forever? I want to demonstrate this morning that “He is risen”, the mantra of Easter- is not just a traditional saying that gives us warm, nostalgic feelings, but an historical event we can build our hope upon. In fact, the resurrection is the most logical explanation for all the evidence we have. In this short time we have, I want to give you 3 reasons to believe the mantra “He has risen, indeed!”

### #1 Historical Credibility of the Easter Events

When we examine the historical accounts, both inside and outside of the Bible, the events of Easter pass the most rigorous tests of credibility. Almost without exception, historians (Christian and non-Christian) agree- On these Facts:

- There lived a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish rabbi named Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God and perform many miracles.
- Jesus suffered a Roman execution by crucifixion upon the decree of Pontius Pilot,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “The World is Better Than Ever. Why are We Miserable?” *New York*, 2018

- Jesus died and was placed in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb.
- After three days, the tomb was empty, there was no body to be found and there were hundreds of eyewitnesses that claimed to see the risen Jesus.

In addition to the Biblical accounts written within decades of the life of Jesus, we have evidence outside of the Bible by early non-Christian historians, Josephus (Jewish Historian late first century), Tacitus (early second century) and Lucian (mid-second century) for example.

You say, "OK- but how do we really know he died? I heard that some say he was just really injured and made a great recovery." Kind of like Princess Bride- Mostly Dead.

These Roman soldiers were experts at execution [Picture], particularly crucifixion- 10,000's. If a prisoner somehow escaped death, the responsible soldiers would be put to death themselves, so they had a huge incentive to make absolutely sure that each and every victim was dead when he was removed from the cross. In fact, did you know Scripture proves it medically that he was dead?

John 19:31-34

*But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*

The Roman practice was to take a spear and thrust it through the side into the heart of the victim- making sure they were really, really dead. This flow of blood and water separately is medically called a pericardial effusion and was a clear sign of death.<sup>2</sup> The bottom line is the Roman Soldiers didn't take down a mostly dead Jesus... they took down a fully dead Jesus.

[Blank] "So, let's just say he died, but how do we know people actually saw him alive after he died? Is this just revisionist history and legends? Wasn't it centuries later people started claiming Jesus resurrected?"

## **#2 The Credibility of the Eyewitness Accounts.**

Within two decades after Jesus' resurrection, Paul wrote of the Easter events.

1 Corinthians 15:3-7

*For I delivered to you the message that I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures.*

*And that He was seen by Peter, then by the Twelve. After that, He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, most of whom are still alive to this day.*

This statement was like an ancient footnote of verification to say- "the eyewitnesses are still here to verify what they saw. Go talk to them and they will tell you what they saw." But we get

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apu.edu/articles/the-science-of-the-crucifixion/>

even earlier verification of eyewitnesses than a couple decades. Paul was quoting a creed—something that had already been in wide circulation for years. Respected biblical scholar James Dunn says “We can be entirely confident that this summary from first Corinthians 15 was formulated within months of Jesus’s death.”<sup>3</sup> This of course disproves the theory that Jesus’ resurrection was a legend developed much later. Instead, Paul’s quote demonstrates that almost instantly thousands of Jewish men and women and some gentiles were worshipping Jesus as Savior and risen Lord. The early church exploded in growth, in part because of the testimony of these hundreds of eyewitnesses.

**[Reason #2 Slide]** “But” you say, “aren’t ancient people gullible and superstitious? Prone to believing and seeing things that didn’t actually happen? I saw Monty Python”

But remember who most of these early Jesus followers were— Jewish people. Scholar N.T. Wright explains at length in his landmark book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* that Jewish people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century did not believe a man could be God (which was blasphemy and earned the death penalty) and would have never believed it was possible for an individual in the middle of history to rise from the dead.<sup>4</sup> Jesus claimed to be God and Jesus predicted his resurrection many times, they were not prone to believe this. Notice his disciples were not waiting at the tomb on Sunday morning with a big countdown clock, a band and confetti— “He’s coming!” No, they were huddled in a room with locked doors dejected and terrified of being killed next. The women who came to the tomb were there to put burial spices on a dead Jesus, not throw him a party.

An explosive movement of Jews and Gentiles began worshipping Jesus as God and risen Lord immediately after Jesus’s death. Something momentous must’ve happened to bring this about. If it was not the resurrection what else could it have been?<sup>5</sup>

**[Blank]** “OK, fine, maybe they aren’t as gullible as I thought, but,” you say, “Maybe his followers wanted the resurrection to be true so badly that they just made it up...just an elaborate hoax, you know like crop circles and UFOs.” This leads to the 3rd reason we can say, “He is risen, indeed.”

### **#3 The Credibility of Transformed Christ-Followers**

The portrait of the disciples in Scripture before the resurrection of Jesus isn’t flattering. His followers were fickle, doubting, fearful and often confused. During Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion and the next 3 days the portrait of the disciples is one of fear, dread, unbelief, and hiding. Cowardice. Peter denies Jesus, Mark 14:50 says all the disciples left him and fled. In **John 20:19** after Jesus’ death, “the doors were locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.” Huddled together terrified for their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1, p.855

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, p.81-84

<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller, *The Resurrection of Hope*, Chapter 1.

[Reason #3 Slide] After witnessing the resurrected Jesus? These same followers are completely different people. Full of joy and hope, and bold as lions. The historical record both inside and outside of the Bible shows how the early followers of Jesus stood fearlessly, facing down kings, religious leaders, stood boldly proclaiming the gospel in the face of persecution, joyfully faced the seizing of their homes and property, courageously accepted being stoned and considered it an honor to be martyred for the name of Christ. The post-resurrection transformation of Christ-followers is one of the greatest phenomena in history that has left secular historians perplexed and fumbling for a valid explanation. Not a single eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection ever recanted their testimony that Jesus had risen from the dead, and almost all died as martyrs as a result. **James** was martyred by Herod (Acts 12), **Stephen** was martyred in Jerusalem (Acts 7), **Thomas** was martyred in India, **John Mark** was martyred in Egypt, **Philip** was martyred in Turkey, **Matthew** was martyred in Ethiopia, The **Apostle Paul** was beheaded in Rome by Emperor Nero (A.D. 66), Nero crucified **Peter** upside down the same year.

Not just the disciples, hundreds of eyewitnesses and early Christians...

Tacitus [writing about Rome under Nero]: *Christians were crucified or set on fire so that, when darkness came, they burned like torches in the night.*<sup>6</sup>

Friends, people don't do this for a hoax. Somebody cracks, somebody turns, somebody recants...Under great threat of death one of the disciples would have said- "OK, so here's the deal, we put a wig on Peter, changed out his sandals and told everyone it was Jesus...we just thought it would be a fun prank." But no one did.

N.T. Wright: "no other explanations have been offered in 2000 years of sneering skepticism that can satisfactorily account for how the tomb came to be empty, how the disciples came to see Jesus, and how their lives and worldviews were transformed."<sup>7</sup>

"OK, let's just say he did rise from the dead, that's an amazing supernatural event that I can't explain...but it's 2000 years later, *what difference does the resurrection make in my life?*"

I'm so glad you asked. Jesus said **John 11:25** *I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.*

There are lots of religious leaders, lots of faiths that promised hope and eternal life and heaven. But you can go visit their graves...because they are dead. But there is only one with an empty tomb, one who rose from the grave- Jesus. And because we worship a risen savior, we will end up just like him. This hope- the hope of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate anchor for our souls. And God is still in the business of transforming lives. You and I are eyewitnesses to the power of the resurrection- to give us hope in a bright future, a world restored, to break chains of bondage in our lives, to give us deep meaning, to enter into a relationship with God

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<sup>6</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 116 AD, 15.44

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, p.81-84

that lasts for eternity. But maybe you still have questions, doubts, that's OK. God is inviting you to a journey of discovering with Him.

[Title Slide] Danielle Vota Testimony

Why Easter? Gift, Invitation to Christianity 101, Pray