

The Last Hours: Jesus and the Empty Tomb

Matthew 27:57:28-20

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 21, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ The one thing you have to understand about Christianity is that, unlike most other religions, it's a faith founded on historical claims. **In the Christian faith, your salvation rests on the factuality of concrete people and events taking place in history.** If they didn't really exist or actually happen – if they're mere legends, myths, or fables – then Christianity crumbles. It's not like other faiths.
 - In most religions, you're suppose to follow the teachings of a revered leader, which has been preserved over the centuries in a holy book. In that sense it's like Christianity. **But the difference is that, in most religions, you're not all that concerned with the historicity of their claims. You're more focused on the morality and virtue of their teachings.** In fact, most religious texts are ahistorical in nature, meaning they're not filled with historical claims but with proverbial statements and wise sayings.

- ❖ So for example, in Buddhism, if you took away the miracles attributed to the first Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama – if you conclude that they're all legendary claims and not historical, it wouldn't be much of a loss to the faith. **The miracles of Buddha are not essential to the teachings of Buddha.** In fact, you can argue that you'll get more Buddhists in our secular age the more you detach Buddhist teachings from any Buddhist claims of the miraculous.
 - But that won't work for Christianity. **If you tried to detach Christian teachings from Christian claims of historical yet miraculous events, then you will have destroyed the faith.** Because, in Christianity, you're not saved by following good teachings that have been passed down to you. **You're saved by believing in good news – news about historical events and the work of historical persons accomplished in history.** To deny historicity is to compromise the faith.
 - That's the very argument the Apostle Paul makes regarding the claim of the Resurrection in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. **He says, if Christ has not been raised, then Christians of all people are most to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19).** If the Resurrection didn't actually happen, then we've put all our eggs in a basket that broke. We've staked everything on a man named Jesus, and he came up short. That would be pitiful.

- ❖ So it's to this historical claim of a Resurrection that we turn our attention this Easter. **We're going to consider the events in Matthew's Gospel surrounding Jesus's burial and the claim of his Resurrection.** We're going to consider (1) the plausibility of the Resurrection, (2) the deniability of the Resurrection, and (3) the desirability of the Resurrection.

The Plausibility of the Resurrection

- ❖ Let's begin with the question of plausibility. By that, I do mean the plausibility of the Resurrection, but at the same time, it's only fair to question the plausibility of the alternatives. There's definitely a burden of proof for those who claim a resurrection (and I'll do my best to offer those reasons), but **there's also a burden of proof on those who don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead.**

- ❖ **There has to be some historical explanation for the birth of the Church.** Over 2,000 years ago, a new religious movement sprang up almost overnight. Hundreds of people claimed to have witnessed a crucified man rise from the dead. Most of these eyewitnesses suffered and died for making and maintaining this claim. How do you explain that?
 - **How do you explain how, in a matter of months, thousands of strictly monotheistic Jews began worshipping a man named Jesus?** Or how did deeply-entrenched ethnic and cultural walls come crashing down between Jew and Gentile, men and women, slave and free? The NT church became a diverse, heterogeneous congregation of equals, unlike anything existing in those days. How did that happen?
 - In three hundred years, this movement would become the official religion of the Roman empire. And fast forward to today, by some estimates, Christianity makes up a third of the world's population. How do you explain it? **If not for the Resurrection, how do you explain the birth and perseverance of the Church?** What's the alternative? And which is more plausible?

- ❖ **Now when you're dealing with historical claims, plausibility is the criterion.** How do we know Caesar actually crossed the Rubicon or Washington crossed the Delaware? We weren't there. It could've been tall-tales passed down, part of the mythos of these larger-than-life heroes. It could be. But I think we're all pretty certain those events historically occurred.
 - **But no one can claim 100% certainty that an event took place in the distant past. That's too high a standard for any historical claim.** But plausibility is fair. Are there plausible reasons for believing the Resurrection historically occurred? It's a fair question. But on the flip side, how plausible are the alternatives if Jesus didn't rise?

- ❖ So let's apply this criterion of plausibility to our text. **I think there's very little question that Jesus's tomb was empty.** Because if the growing Christian movement was seen as such a threat – with disciples claiming their Lord has risen from the dead – the authorities could've easily shut down the rumors of a resurrection by producing the body. Open the tomb and prove Jesus is still dead. But they couldn't because there was no body in that tomb.
 - Now what's a plausible explanation for the empty tomb? Well the authorities offered one. They claim that Jesus's disciples came by night (during the Sabbath) and stole his body. In chapter 28:15, it says that story has been continually spread among the Jews. That's their explanation: **The tomb was empty because the body was stolen.**

- ❖ **But you really have to assess the plausibility of that claim.** It assumes his disciples were in the right frame of mind after Jesus's death to concoct and execute this brazen plan. But not only that, it assumes they were expecting and hoping for a resurrection.
 - **But if you consider their reactions after his death, it becomes clear that none of his followers expected a resurrection.** It didn't fit their categories. Even though Jesus predicted as much, they couldn't figure out what he meant to "*be raised on the third day*" (20:19). They heard him say it but they didn't get it. Resurrection didn't fit in their plausibility structure. It wasn't in their realm of possibilities.

- ❖ Just look at Matthew 27:57. Here we're introduced to Joseph of Arimathea. In the other Gospels, we're told he's a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Luke says he opposed the decision by the council to arrest Jesus because he was a disciple (Lk 23:50-51). He believed Jesus was the Christ.
 - **But now the one he called the Christ is hanging naked and dead on a Roman cross.** So how did a true believer respond? Did he sit on the edge of his seat waiting for Jesus to revive, to climb off that cross, and vindicate his glory? No, he just quietly offered to give his Lord a proper burial. **In so doing, Joseph showed reverence to Jesus but also resignation to the fact that he was dead.**

- ❖ By using his influence as a council member, he directly asked Pilate for the body. We're told in John's Gospel that Nicodemus, another follower of Jesus, worked together to remove him from the cross. Then they put Jesus in a newly cut tomb, and it says in v60 that they rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb.
 - The entrance to these tombs were built with an inclined ramp in the front where a large disk-shaped stone was placed on top. It made it easy to roll the stone down the incline to cover the entrance, but it would've required many men to roll it back up.

- ❖ Next we see Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. **Heading to the tomb early Sunday morning, the women arrive expecting to tend to a dead corpse.** The other Gospel writers say they brought more spices to anoint Jesus's body, and they were wondering how they were going to roll back that large stone all by themselves (Mk 16:1-3).
 - But Matthew tells us that a great earthquake had struck in conjunction with an angel of the Lord who descended from heaven and rolled back the stone for the women. That wasn't to allow Jesus to leave the tomb. That was to allow the women to see inside the tomb and realize no one was there. **They needed such a startling scene and such compelling evidence because they weren't expecting an empty tomb.** They weren't expecting a resurrection.

- ❖ **The irony is that the only people expecting a resurrection – at least claims to a resurrection – were Jesus's opponents.** They took his prediction of being raised on the third day more seriously than his own followers. Now they didn't actually believe he'd been resurrected, but the chief priests assumed the disciples would try to steal Jesus's body and claim that he had been raised. **Little did they know how little they had to worry about that. His followers had resigned themselves to believing their Master was dead.**
 - But the chief priests and Pharisees feared the disciples were plotting something, so they asked Pilate for soldiers to secure the site by sealing the stone and posting guards. **But again, ironically, the authorities don't realize that their actions only result in strengthening the case for the Resurrection.** Because now it's that much more unlikely that the disciples could've outwitted or overpowered armed guards to steal the body.

- ❖ Bottom line, this idea that the disciples stole Jesus's body is implausible. But you still need an explanation for the empty tomb. Well there is an alternative. **It's the explanation given by all four Gospel accounts and their eyewitness testimony – Jesus has risen, just as he said.** Look at chapter 28:5. When the two Marys arrive at the tomb, an angel was sitting on the rolled away stone and said, *“Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”*
 - And as they leave to tell the other disciples, Jesus reveals himself to them in v9, *“And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.”* **They claim to have seen his face and to have touched his feet.** And they're not the only ones. Multiple eyewitnesses claim to have seen Jesus after his crucifixion, walking on the road with them, eating and drinking with them, allowing them to touch his nail-scarred hands.

- ❖ **When you put these two facts together – the empty tomb and these resurrection sightings – it strengthens the case for the Resurrection.** If you only had an empty tomb but no sightings, then you could just conclude with the authorities that someone stole the body. And if a rumor goes around that Jesus is risen but there were no sightings – no one ever sees him again – then you could easily conclude that the Resurrection is just a fabricated story.
 - But if people are actually claiming to have seen Jesus after his death (more than 500 claims according to 1 Cor 15:6), then the plausibility of a Resurrection increases and surpasses this theory that the body was stolen. **The more plausible explanation for the emptiness of the tomb would be the eyewitness claims of a Resurrection.**

- ❖ But I know some of you are thinking, “Sure, it's plausible based on the evidence found in this narrative, but this narrative was written by one of Jesus's followers. It's biased. It's all part of the conspiracy to fabricate this idea that Jesus resurrected.”
 - But a resurrection didn't fit the plausibility structure of not only the disciples but of all peoples in those days. **If you were concocting a narrative to boost the credibility of your religious movement in the first-century Greco-Roman world, it makes no sense to make a resurrection the central claim of your religion.**
 - First-century Gentiles considered the physical body to be a prison house for the soul. Their goal was to one day be rid of this body. Resurrection would've been undesirable. And for first-century Jews, the idea of an individual resurrection, not tied to the end of the world, would've been unthinkable.

- ❖ So if the Gospel writers were simply fabricating a story they hoped would be believed by Jews and Gentiles alike, why would they include, at the core of their message, a claim that is philosophically undesirable for Gentiles and theologically unthinkable for Jews? **The most plausible explanation for why all four Gospels would include the Resurrection and why so many Jews and Gentiles would begin worshipping a Resurrected Jesus and putting their hope in sharing in his Resurrection – is because it actually happened.**

The Deniability of the Resurrection

- ❖ So even though no one can prove with 100% certainty the historical claim of the Resurrection, there are plausible reasons to believe that outweigh the alternatives. **But no matter how credible the reasons, we have to acknowledge that people will continue to deny the Resurrection.** This is our second point: The deniability of the Resurrection.
- ❖ The chief priests were confronted with an empty tomb that they could not deny. And they were presented with a plausible explanation in the Resurrection. **But in spite of the evidence, they found reasons to disbelieve that confirmed their presuppositions – that Jesus was a blasphemer and liar, that he wasn't the Christ.** So we're told in chapter 28:13 that they bribe the guards to say that they were asleep when the disciples stole the body. Which makes no sense because how would you know who did it if you were asleep?
 - **But this kind of reaction is not limited to Jesus's opponents.** Look in v17. It says some of Jesus's disciples – likely referring to a larger group and not just the Eleven – it says “*they saw him . . . but some doubted.*” Many of us probably think that we would totally believe if we could just see the Risen Jesus with our own eyes. If I could just see, I would believe. But apparently that's not the case. **Seeing is not necessarily believing.** There were some who had a resurrection sighting, and yet they found some reason to doubt it. "Maybe I was just hallucinating. Maybe I didn't get enough sleep last night. I must be seeing things."
- ❖ **The point is: You can always find a reason *not* to believe in something.** I read this book called *The Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt that makes this point – that people tend to find reasons to confirm a preconceived worldview (or plausibility structure). **It's called post-hoc reasoning or confirmation bias.** He uses this metaphor of a human rider on an elephant. The rider represents our reasoning capacities and the elephant represents our intuitions (our gut feelings or emotions).
 - We often assume our rationale minds are in control and that they determine what's true to our hearts (our gut feelings). But Haidt shows how it's actually the other way around. The elephant leads and the rider follows. **We gauge what's true based on intuition and then find post-hoc reasons to confirm what we already believe.**
- ❖ Let me give you an example. **What if tomorrow you read in the news the headline: “Archeologists find the bones of Jesus”?** Experts say they've confirmed that these are the remains of Jesus. I wonder how many of you would believe it? If you're already a follower of Jesus, would you sleep in next Sunday? Would you abandon the faith and accept the explanation that the disciples stole the body and hence the empty tomb? I highly doubt it.
 - We would probably conclude that it's just click bait or it's the product of liberal media bias. You might think these so-called “experts” are distorting the facts or jumping the gun with inconclusive evidence. You have so many reasons *not* to believe that report.

- ❖ **Well if you're a committed Christian, you need to realize that's what it's like to present the facts of the Resurrection to your non-believing friends and family.** You can give them plausible reasons for the Resurrection, but they'll always have reasons *not* to believe. In the same way you'd react to a report about the bones of Jesus, your non-Christian friends will react the same way to a claim that Jesus is risen.
- ❖ The whole point is this: **Doubt is never just a matter of the intellect. It's fundamentally a matter of the heart.** The reasons people come up with *not* to believe in the Resurrection are only the tip of the iceberg. There's so much more under the surface, in their hearts.
 - Doubting or outright denying the Resurrection doesn't come from just a lack of something in the mind. It's not like all they need are more reasons or better answers. **Doubting or denying the Resurrection really comes from the presence of something in the heart.** In every human heart there exists a deep emotional hesitancy (or sometimes a hostility) towards the claim that Jesus is alive and sitting on a throne – to come back one day to judge the living and the dead.
- ❖ **The Resurrection is *not* some generalized feel-good message about the triumph of life over death or of good over evil.** Who would have any issue with that? No, if the Resurrection is true, then there are very direct and personal implications for each and every one of us. **If the Resurrection is true, then the authority that Jesus claims to have is also true.** In v18, he says, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*"
 - But if his bones are in some unmarked tomb waiting to be found, then you can just ignore that verse. Jesus has no authority over your life, over your future, over your eternity. You can take whatever principles or lessons from his teaching that you find helpful or inspiring and just ignore the rest.
- ❖ **But if Jesus is alive today, if he reigns on high as the Sovereign, Risen Lord, then his authority is real.** He has real authority over us. And he says in v19 that he wants everyone of all nations to follow him, to be his disciples, to identify in his death and resurrection through baptism, and to observe all of his commands, to submit to all of his teaching. Those are the implications of the Resurrection that touch every single one of us.

The Desirability of the Resurrection

- ❖ **So you see, the real question is not *can* you believe in the Resurrection but *do you want to believe in it?*** The reasons for the Resurrection are there. But you have to ask, in your heart, do you want them to be true? If your intuition, your gut, your heart remains unchanged, then you'll find a reason not to believe. **The Resurrection remains deniable until it becomes desirable.** That leads to our last point: The desirability of the Resurrection.
 - This is what I mean: **The Christian is the person who not only agrees with the evidence for the Resurrection but desires the implications of the Resurrection.** You love what it means. You're going to be like Mary in v8. Who with "*fear and great joy*" obeys the call and runs to tell others the good news. Because you truly see and believe the goodness of this news – that Jesus is risen; he is risen indeed!

- ❖ Because Christ is risen, this present life is no longer as good as it gets. Because Christ is risen, these present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us. Because Christ is risen, this mortal body – prone to sickness and subject to decay – will be made new and raised to immortality. Because Christ is risen, death has lost its sting. **It's no longer a dead end. It has become a doorway to resurrection life.**

- ❖ Friends, do you see the real question is: **Do you desire the Resurrection and all that it implies?** I'm not asking if you believe the Resurrection happened. I'm not asking if you think it's historical – if you think Jesus is alive today. **The devil believes all that. The devil believes in the Resurrection, but we know that's not enough to save him.**
 - Listen to David Platt describe for us an imaginary interview with the devil. He says if you could ask the devil, “Do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?” He'd say yes. If you asked him, “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?” He'd say yes. If you asked, “Do you believe Jesus died on the cross and rose again?” He'd say yes. If you asked, “Do you believe Jesus is the only way of salvation?” He'd say yes. If you asked, “Will you commit to living a moral life, joining a church, and actively serve in ministry?” He'd say yes.
 - But if you asked the devil, “Will you repent of your sin and surrender your life to Jesus as Lord?” He will say, “Absolutely not.” That's where the devil draws the line. **He'll affirm all the reasons for the Resurrection. But, to the devil, it's the implications of the Resurrection that are so distasteful and undesirable.** That's why he refuses to accept Jesus as Lord. He won't submit to the authority of the Risen King.

- ❖ **So are your beliefs any different than the devil's?** That's a hard question we have to ask ourselves. Too many of us have grown up assuming the Resurrection to be true. It's what we were always taught. We've always believed Jesus is alive.
 - Then there are those of you who have more recently been introduced to the gospel. And now you've arrived at a place where you can confidently say you believe in the Resurrection. That's great. You're caught up with the devil.
 - Friend, you need to surpass the beliefs of the devil. **Your head agrees with the Resurrection, but now your heart needs to desire it.** If you want that kind of heart, then repent of your sin and surrender your life to Jesus as your Sovereign Lord, as your Risen King.