

Journey to the Cross – *The Conspiracy Theories* – wk 2

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - March 8, 2020

Psalm 2:1-3 (The Message paraphrase)

Why the big noise, nations?

Why the mean plots, peoples?

Earth-leaders push for position,

Demagogues and delegates meet for summit talks,

The God-deniers, the Messiah-defiers:

“Let’s get free of God!

Cast loose from Messiah!”

Acts 4:27-31 (NIV) - ²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

We’re continuing our Lenten series *Journey to the Cross* and today I’m talking about the historical truth of the resurrection. For this sermon I’m drawing from Rev. Tim Keller’s book *The Reason for God*. It’s helpful for considering some of the big questions our culture has about God and the Bible.

Does anyone here like conspiracy theories? Do you give any credence to them? How about the moon landing? Anyone think that it was a hoax, done on a Hollywood sound stage? Well, I've been to the sound stage. *Just kidding*. Anyone believe Elvis is still alive? How about a flat earth? Anyone going to that convention? Anyone have any new conspiracy theories they're considering?

I've got a new one, I thought up for this sermon. Maybe Jesus body was stolen on Holy Saturday by grave robbers who thought Jesus' followers might have buried him with expensive perfume and treasure. I mean if he had dedicated followers, they might have had a grand burial for him. I'll debunk this in a few minutes.

Well, why all this talk about conspiracies? Because we're heading into Easter and a strange thing happens. Some people and sometimes tv shows start talking about Jesus, the Resurrection, and Christianity, and start making up new theories of what it all means. Theories other than what it truly means. They start to invent explanations from new ideas in our culture.

Some people say things like, *"Maybe Jesus was like a hippie and a bunch of people followed him and someone how a religion got started."* Or Jesus couldn't have really have been resurrected, so *maybe people stole His body*. Maybe grave robbers or *maybe they were trying to start a religion, so they wouldn't be aimless after His death*. Or *maybe they didn't want to feel like failures, so they made*

up a hoax that He was resurrected. Well, seeing as how all the first disciples except John were killed for following Jesus, I think it's fair to say they didn't make this up, because people don't die for a hoax they made up.

Yes, we can make up theories today. Maybe make it a conspiracy theory, but here's the question I want to pose for us this morning. Did Jesus die and that was it? Everyone just went home and soon forgot about him and legends about him were made up years later. Or did the resurrection of Jesus happen?

This morning I want us to look at the true story of the resurrection from history. History actually paints a clear picture of what happened to Jesus and His first disciples, but people often do not study their history well. See when we consider the birth of the Christian church in Israel, during the Roman occupation 2000 years ago, we need to get things historically accurate, and then conspiracy theories will be exposed as inaccurate. And basically, if you do not believe that Jesus was resurrected, then you will have a difficult time explaining the beginning of the Christian church. So how do we know what happened?

Some of the first accounts are written in the Bible. The Gospels were written soon after Jesus' death and the letters of Paul were also written soon after his death. These weren't legends written down, they were recent events written about and Luke went about interviewing

eyewitnesses, before he wrote his account of Jesus' life and resurrection.

Now you might wonder if it's fair for the Bible to attest to its own story. Like can one letter prove a gospel that's saying the same thing. Yes. Because they were writing to people that witnessed the events, people who knew what happened. When the Apostle Paul wrote to churches his letters were public letters to be read out loud, and they were written just fifteen to twenty years after Jesus' death, to people who had been there or heard eye-witness accounts.

While some were learning what happened, others knew and needed to know what it all meant for them. They needed to know the importance for them. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul writes,

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Paul writes of a historical event, not a metaphor, not wishful thinking, and he names eyewitnesses. Paul wrote when the readers could go ask the 500; ask if they saw the risen Jesus. In the Roman world, when Paul was

writing, you could walk on nicely paved cobblestone roads to Jerusalem, and very safely, because of the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome. Again, when Paul wrote, the readers could go ask the eyewitnesses.

When we look back 2000 years on the Bible, we may wonder if it's a hoax, but we have to remember that the Apostle Paul wrote letters about the historical resurrection of Jesus to contemporaries of the resurrection. He wrote to people who had heard all the commotion, but maybe they didn't know what it all meant for them.

And here's another thing about the eyewitnesses, if Jesus followers were to fabricate a story about Jesus' body after His crucifixion, it wouldn't have been about a resurrection. If they or someone else had stolen the body, the disciples wouldn't have made up a story about the resurrection and claimed over 500 people also saw the risen Jesus, because that's not what was in their minds when someone died.

Consider the culture of the people. Some of the people in Jerusalem were serious Jews like the Pharisees, but others were more Greco-Roman culturally. The Jews believed their messiah would be raised from the dead at the time he ushered in a visible triumphant kingdom. Remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the palm branches people laid down were fit for a messiah. Remember King David, their mighty king. Their messiah was going to be like King David and wipe out the Romans.

They didn't believe in resurrections without something like an immediate defeat of their Roman occupiers. While the Greco-Roman beliefs were that the soul or spirit was good, but the physical world was weak, corrupt and defiled, so they wouldn't have wanted to be physically raised from the dead. (Pg. 215).

You see then that the physical resurrection of Jesus would have been problematic for everyone to invent, both Jews and Romans, yet that was what the first accounts kept saying, "*Jesus was alive and we saw him. Thomas even touched his hands.*" And a conspiracy that Jesus' disciples stole and hid his body, so they could say He was raised from the dead, would be historically unlikely. It shows an ignorance of their culture and beliefs. The truth is, the resurrection was something completely unexpected.

Why then did Jesus' followers believe His crucifixion was a triumph, rather than a defeat? Why? Because they saw the risen Jesus. Any theory that his body was stolen doesn't fit with the accounts of over 500 people seeing the risen Jesus. What happened at the resurrection was the explosion of a new worldview. (Pg. 217.)

Presbyterian minister in New York, Tim Keller writes, "After the death of Jesus the entire Christian community suddenly adopted a set of beliefs that were brand-new and until that point had been unthinkable. The first Christians had a resurrection-centered view of reality."

“This was not simply a resuscitated body like the Jews envisioned, nor a solely spiritual existence like the Greeks imagined. Jesus’ resurrection guaranteed our resurrection and brought some of that future new life into our hearts now.” (pg. 217.)

Now if we continue to press that maybe the resurrection was a hoax, consider that the Bible tells us the first eyewitnesses to tell their story of the risen Jesus were women. That would be unexpected for that time. Women would not have been the go-to first eyewitnesses in that culture. In that culture, women wouldn’t have been used to try to convince people something had happened. We can surmise then that they wouldn’t have chosen women to convince people, if this was a hoax or conspiracy. But God did pick women to discover the risen Jesus on Easter morning.

The only possible explanation for why women are recorded as having been the first eyewitnesses is because they were the first eyewitnesses. When women said they saw the risen Jesus, they kept saying they saw the risen Jesus, and hundreds of others also saw the risen Jesus. Because they saw the risen Jesus.

The historical fact is that the tomb Jesus was buried in on Good Friday was empty on Easter morning and then hundreds of people saw the risen Jesus. As Rev. Tim Keller writes, the truth of history is that “... the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact much more fully attested to

than most other events of ancient history we [may] take for granted.” Pg. 219. To say the resurrection is not a historical fact, actually shows one’s modern assumptions and lack of scholarship into the historical evidence and eyewitness accounts of the resurrection.

Rev. Tim Keller quotes, New Testament theologian N.T. Wright about this,

“The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the meetings or sightings of the risen Jesus... Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion experience would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they felt, no matter how many hours they poured over the scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and enter into a fantasy world of our own.” (Keller, 219-220)

People who say the resurrection of Jesus didn’t happen simply haven’t asked the tough historical questions and then followed the answers to where they lead. There are a lot of conspiracy theories people hold to in the world. But theories for falsifying the resurrection lack a true account of history. When we consider the true story of the resurrection, we consider the true story of hope we have in Jesus. It’s a Gospel story worth telling at Easter and all year long.