

### Scripture Reading—John 19:31–42

<sup>31</sup> Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away. <sup>32</sup> So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; <sup>33</sup> but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. <sup>34</sup> But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. <sup>35</sup> And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. <sup>36</sup> For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken." <sup>37</sup> And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced." <sup>38</sup> After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*. <sup>40</sup> So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. <sup>41</sup> Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>42</sup> Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

### Sermon Text—Matthew 28:1–10

<sup>1</sup> Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. <sup>2</sup> And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. <sup>3</sup> And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. <sup>4</sup> The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. <sup>6</sup> "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. <sup>7</sup> "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." <sup>8</sup> And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. <sup>9</sup> And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."

**Our Only Hope!**

**Daniel Cote**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Congregational Church**

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### Introduction

What would the world be like without Christianity? According to the noted evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, religion is evil. And the renowned author Christopher Hitchens, before his death in 2011, argued that religion poisons everything. Both Hitchens and Dawkins have argued that the world would be a better place without Christianity. But here is the thing, we don't need to think very hard to discover what the world would be like without Christianity. We just need to look at the Roman world before the rise of Christianity. In our modern world, we need only look at the parts of the world where Christianity was never allowed to flourish.

The brutality that accompanied Roman military conquest is well documented, and atrocities, massacres, and genocide were all part of the incessant expansion of the empire. Gladiatorial combat to the death was the preferred entertainment, and crucifixion to demoralize enemies was perfected. In our modern world, where Christianity has been prevented, discarded, or replaced, we find totalitarian regimes that have engaged in killing and genocide to achieve their goals. Some estimate that over 100 million or more died as the communist regime took control of China. In Russia, the rise of communism under soviet regimes is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of over 60 million. In the Muslim world, atrocities and repression are carried out in the name of Allah by Isis and other Muslim fundamentalist groups.

Yet, where Christianity has spread and informed societies throughout the Western world and other places, humanity has flourished. In his book, *What If Jesus Would Have Never Been Born*, pastor and scholar D. James Kennedy enumerates and provides supporting evidence of the benefits to society

resulting from the application of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ in society in recognition that all human life is created in the image of God.<sup>1</sup> These include hospitals, universities, literacy for the masses, civil liberties, the elevation of women, high standards of justice and moral ethics, and representative government, to name a few. Christianity has been a powerful positive influence in the world that has led to human flourishing and the freest and most productive societies. It all began with the earthly ministry of Jesus, which culminated in the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus has resulted in billions of transformed lives and the best societies the world has known.

In a certain church marketing newsletter, called the Church's Advertising Network, a campaign has been developed to attract people to church during the season of Easter. In this public relations campaign, the developers suggested that the cross be removed from the Communion table. According to the author, a survey has revealed that the cross is one of those symbols that the new generation of churchgoers considered too "churchy."

One pastor interviewed for the campaign gave his wholehearted endorsement. "We are going to attempt to concentrate on the resurrection and not the death of Jesus." Well, that seems to be very strange. Easter without the cross. If I ever say anything like that, you need to fire me. It is not possible to have a resurrection without death. Without the cross, there is no good news of salvation, there is no gospel, and there is no hope! Easter without a cross is a hoax. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." But, praise God, Christ is risen, and we have it on good authority, as we see in our sermon text from Matthew's eyewitness account of the events we just read.

### **Exposition**

The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends after dark on Saturday evening. The best timeline we have, researched and published by Dr. Harold Hoehner of Dallas Theological Seminary, places the death and hasty burial of Jesus on Friday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, AD 33. According to Matthew 27:46, Jesus died at the 9<sup>th</sup> hour, which, counting from 6:00 am, was about 3:00 pm on that day. According to Jewish customs, Jesus needed to be buried before the Sabbath because the Jews could not work on the Sabbath. Consequently, Jesus needed to be buried in a period of a few hours before the approaching sunset, which would signal the start of the Sabbath. Chapter 19 of John's Gospel provides important details regarding the events leading to the burial of Jesus. In verse 35 of this chapter, John personally testifies that he witnessed the spear thrust into the side of Jesus that ensured His death. John says in that verse that he is telling the truth "...so that you also may believe."

In the final verses of Chapter 19 of John's Gospel, he reports that Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who was a member of the Sanhedrin and a secret follower of Jesus, went to Pontius Pilate to request the body of Jesus. He was joined by Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin who had brought 100 pounds of embalming materials consisting of a mixture of myrrh and aloe. According to John 19:40, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus' body "and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews." According to Matthew 27:60, Joseph placed Jesus in his own new tomb, which had been hewn out of rock. Joseph placed Jesus in a tomb he had prepared for himself because it was nearby and the Sabbath was approaching. When he had finished placing Jesus in the tomb, he rolled a large stone against the entrance and went away. Nicodemus probably aided him in rolling the stone into place. Matthew 19:61 says that Mary Magdalene and another Mary (who was the mother of one of the Apostles, James the less) were there sitting opposite the grave while the disciples had scattered at the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

After the Sabbath, we learn at the end of Matthew 27 that the Jewish leaders went to Pilate and raised concerns that the disciples might try to steal the body. Pilate told them to make the tomb secure with guards stationed at the tomb, along with placing a seal upon the tomb, which involved placing a clay or wax seal impressed with a Roman stamp to detect tampering.

We move to our sermon text, which describes the events of that first Easter Sunday morning. The Sabbath had ended the previous evening. As dawn approached, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary returned to the tomb. They knew the location of the tomb since they had watched Joseph of Arimathea roll the stone in place. A violent earthquake occurred as an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, rolled the stone away, and sat on it. It must have been quite a scene seeing the angel perched atop the stone. Matthew likens the appearance of the angel to lightning, and his clothing is white as

snow. We can only envision some kind of glowing heavenly creature sent by God to roll the stone away and announce the resurrection of Jesus. It is no wonder that the guards shook with fear and became like dead men. The angel did not roll the stone away to allow Jesus to exit, for Jesus was already gone from the tomb because His resurrection body allowed Him to move through solid things, as we read in the Gospels. The angel is there to explain to the women what had happened.

The angel had a special message for the women and announced to them, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. <sup>6</sup> "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. <sup>7</sup> "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him..."

According to our text, the women were filled with fear and great joy; the tomb was empty, and Jesus had risen from the dead just as He had prophesied. They scurried to share the wonderful news with the disciples. But along the way, Jesus met them and greeted them, and the women grabbed hold of His feet and worshipped Him. By adding the detail about the women taking hold of Jesus' feet, Matthew shows us that the resurrected Jesus was a physical being, not an apparition or a spirit. In His post-resurrection appearances, Jesus will be touched by Thomas, and He will eat breakfast with His disciples, all to show that He was a physical being and not a ghost or projection of an image.

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me." In this last line of our sermon text, Jesus tells us not to be afraid. His message is not just for the women at the tomb; it is for all who believe in Him and trust in him for all ages. In fact, Jesus tells His disciples in the NT, "Do not be afraid" ten times. In John 16:33, Jesus says to His disciples, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." The reason we do not need to be afraid is that Jesus has overcome the world. By His resurrection, He has conquered sin and death for all who believe.

You probably remember your mother or father telling you as a child not to be afraid. However, the harsh reality is that parents cannot protect their children from everything. They cannot protect their children from every disease, natural disaster, or accident. They cannot protect their children from unfair treatment in this broken world. As parents we want to protect our children and would sacrifice everything to protect them. But the reality is that we cannot always be there for our children, and our control over the circumstances they encounter is very limited. Moreover, we all encounter scary things, perceived or real. I don't believe in Sasquatch, but I have to tell you, if I encountered Sasquatch in the parking lot at night, I would be afraid, very afraid. But still, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

A number of years ago, the Saturday Evening Post ran a cartoon showing a man about to be rescued after he had spent a long time ship-wrecked on a tiny deserted island. The sailor in charge of the rescue team stepped onto the beach and handed the man a stack of newspapers. "Compliments of the Captain," the sailor said. "He would like you to glance at the headlines to see if you'd still like to be rescued!" Sometimes, the headlines do scare us. Sometimes, we feel that evil is winning, but then along comes Easter to remind us that there is no grave deep enough, no suffering too great, no stone heavy enough, no evil strong enough to keep Christ in the grave. By His resurrection, Jesus has gained victory over sin and death and purchased our salvation. He is our present hope and our eternal hope.

Early in my ministry, I had just exited a comfortable job as an engineering vice president to pursue full-time ministry. I was overcome one day by anxiety over all the changes that were playing out in my life. Up until then, I had been the master of my destiny, in control of my life, or so I thought. But in my new life of serving God, I needed to rely upon Him to supply my needs and my family's needs. One day in a worship service, I was overcome by anxiousness as we sang a hymn. At that moment, I remember it like it was yesterday; the Holy Spirit impressed this thought in my mind, "Everything will be alright." The Spirit was telling me, "Do not be afraid."

When I was young, in my Christian walk, I had a lot of "what ifs." What if I lose my job? What if my house burns again (we had already had a major fire in 1996). What if the kids get sick or hurt? What if I get cancer or some disease? What if I made the wrong decision about my career change? What if I can't pay for my children's education? In the years since then, I have learned that because of the resurrection, Jesus turns all those what-ifs into even-ifs. Even if I lose my job, even if there is another house fire, even if the kids get sick or hurt, even if I get cancer, even if I made the wrong decision, even if I struggled to pay for my children's education; even if I get mauled by Sasquatch in the parking lot; even

if all of these things happen, I can rest secure in the love of Jesus, that He is walking with me in all of life's struggles, working all things for my good, and that He is preparing a place for me in His eternal heaven.

Jesus has turned all my what-ifs into even-ifs. I can see that now, after many years of following Him. He has been faithful in guiding, loving, and sustaining me. What about you? He created you. He loves you. If you believe in Him, He will bring you to your eternal home. He's got this! He stands on the rock of eternity, and He is qualified in every way to fulfill the promises He makes.

What are your what-ifs? What are your what-ifs that you need to let Jesus turn into even ifs? I know most of you quite well, and I know that you have a lot of what-ifs. This is a difficult life we live in this fallen world. But because of Easter, because of the resurrection, our what-ifs are turned into even-ifs. Jesus has this. He is risen, and He is the master of the universe. Even if I get mauled in the parking lot by Sasquatch, I know I'm destined for eternal life in His presence because He is risen!

The one who rose from the dead tells those who believe in Him, "Do not be afraid," and in John 16:33, Jesus says, "...take heart! I have overcome the world." Never does Jesus tell His followers that He will protect them from all difficulty. In fact, He tells them in this same verse that they will have trouble. If we study the Scriptures a bit, we learn that God uses the difficulties, challenges, and unfair treatment that we encounter to shape us and refine our character to make us more like Jesus and to prepare us for eternal life in His presence. When Jesus tells us not to be afraid, He is telling us no matter what happens, He holds us secure in the promise of eternal life in His presence in heaven that no human could ever expect or fathom, for as we learn in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "...no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"— the things God has prepared for those who love him." What God has prepared for those who love Him and believe in Him is beyond our understanding, and I believe we will be shocked, surprised, and incredibly grateful when we stand before God and Jesus in heaven and see what they have done for us.

Now, some doubt the resurrection. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18, the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But as N. T. Wright observes, it is impossible to explain the rapid rise of the Christian Church unless Jesus rose from the dead. Dear friends, we can have full confidence in the resurrection of Jesus. A Pastor was asked by a young man who was struggling with the resurrection, "How do you know Jesus rose from the dead?" The pastor replied, referring to the Apostles, "Twelve men are not going to give up their lives to simply perpetuate that which they know to be a hoax." Most of the apostles went to their deaths, proclaiming that they had seen the resurrected Jesus. Many others went to their death proclaiming the resurrection. No one is going to die to promote a hoax. It is easy to explain the rise of Islam. Muhammad and his followers had big armies that swept across the Arab world and northern Africa, raping, looting, pillaging, and forcing conversions. Christianity got its start by a small group of demoralized Apostles, some of whom had very limited education, traveling by foot, on the backs of animals, and by ship proclaiming that Jesus rose. They didn't have any armies. They didn't have any weapons, yet somehow, they ignited a wildfire that swept the world. Now, I want you to tell me how that happened unless Jesus rose from the dead and the Holy Spirit was at work in the church.

Since it is Easter, I will briefly summarize the most important lines of evidence for the resurrection and Christianity.

First, The NT can be shown to be the most reliable book of the ancient world because of the massive number of very early copies that survive to this day. In the NT, we have the testimony of at least seven eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, John, Peter, Paul, James, and Jude. Several of them were put to death for proclaiming the resurrection. As I mentioned earlier, no one is going to die to promote a hoax.

Second, Paul tells us the resurrected Jesus appeared to the apostles, 500 disciples at once, and also to Paul and James, the half-brother of Jesus. Consequently, Paul changed from the greatest persecutor of the church to the greatest evangelist of the church. James, the half-brother of Jesus, didn't believe in Jesus, but suddenly, he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Like Paul, James died because he would not stop proclaiming the resurrection. In all the NT records, there are 10 post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in six books.

Third, Jesus fulfilled dozens of Messianic prophecies. In my book, I identify 57 that are very clear made hundreds of years before He was born. Jesus fulfilled these prophecies in His earthly ministry, including that He would be raised from the dead.

Fourth, it is not only the New Testament that tells us about the birth of Christianity. There are at least 17 ancient first- and second-century sources confirming the major claims that the disciples of Jesus made, which we find recorded in the New Testament.

Fifth, the numerous miracles that Jesus performed, which included raising three people from the dead, further support his divinity and the plausibility of His resurrection. Several non-biblical ancient sources, including the Jewish Babylonian Talmud, allude to the miraculous nature of Jesus' ministry.

If you want more evidence for the truth of Christianity, I wrote a 250-page book on this topic, and it is available free on my website, as noted in the bulletin. We must take the resurrection on faith, but it is not on blind faith! God has provided those with an open mind with more than enough evidence to reach the right conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the dead. I would love to talk to anyone who has questions or doubts about the resurrection. Jesus says, in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." There is no salvation apart from Jesus, and if you have not placed your faith in Jesus, you do not have eternal life in heaven.

I will close with this. The other day, I was reading about a very encouraging recent poll conducted by Lifeway Research in which they found that 2 out of 3 Americans, (66%) believe that the biblical accounts of the bodily resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. Twenty percent disagreed, and 14% were not sure. This seemed like great news, but as author and Christian apologist Rebecca McLaughlin points out, the statistics provide reasons for hope and heartbreak. It makes me hopeful for this great nation that a supermajority of its citizens still believe in the central claim of Christianity, but I also see it as a reason for heartbreak because only 30% of Americans attend church regularly, less than half of those who believe in the resurrection.

Here is an important reality. We are called into a relationship with God, but few in America have a relationship with God. A relationship is a two-way street. God is calling us to seek Him, but few really seek Him. Praying is the way that we communicate with God, but how can it be said that we are in relationship with God if we almost never pray to Him. The Scriptures are the prime way that God communicates with His people. But how can it be said that we are in relationship with God if we never read the Bible? Sunday worship is one of the prime ways that we worship God and maintain fellowship with other believers. But how can it be said that we are worshipping God if we almost never attend church? Jesus calls all believers to do good deeds that bring glory to God, but how can it be said that we are bringing glory to God if we do nothing to serve Him? Here is a sad fact, many claim to believe in God and Jesus, but far less show that they believe by praying, reading the Bible, attending worship, and serving Him. It is the will of God the Father that we do these things.

I spent many years wandering in the wilderness before I came to Christ. As I began to read the Bible and emerge from the wilderness, I discovered that relationship with God and His Son Jesus, and true faith requires more than lip service to the resurrection. Our actions speak louder than our words in this matter.

Pastor and author Tim Keller challenges us to contemplate our relationship with God. He challenges us to consider a woman, a poor widow with an only son. She teaches him how she wants him to live, to always tell the truth, to work hard, and to help the poor. She makes very little money, but she has taken care of his every need for years, and with her meager savings, she is able to put him through college. Imagine that when he graduates, he hardly even speaks to her again. He occasionally sends a Christmas card, but he doesn't visit her; he won't even answer her phone calls or letters; he doesn't speak to her. Would you say this was acceptable? Of course not. Wouldn't we say that he was neglecting a relationship with the one to whom he owed everything? Yet that is often how we treat Jesus, who, with the Father, gave us the breath of life and to whom we owe everything in the past, present, and future.

Dear friends, Jesus is our only hope. The salvation and hope that Jesus purchased for us on the cross cost Him dearly. This Easter, let us find great joy because by the resurrection, Jesus turns all of our "what-ifs" into "even-ifs," and let us commit to loving God in the way that He has so extravagantly loved us. Amen.

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- i. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2001), Kindle, 113-47.