

## Did Jesus Rise From The Dead? You Asked For It

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Happy Easter! We are so glad that you decided to worship with us today. Over this last year, with all the changes that COVID brought, a lot of industries like travel and restaurants were hit really hard, but some industries did really well, including television streaming companies. Streaming service companies like Netflix, Amazon, Disney+, Hulu saw an average of 37% increase in subscriptions, as tens of millions of households decided to pay an extra 7 or 12 or 15 dollars a month for the privilege of watching stories unfold from the comfort of their living rooms. And there were some pretty famous series that have come out recently. Show of hands, how many of you watched Stranger Things? How about The Mandalorian? How many watched Wanda Vision? How many watched The Queen's Gambit? (In the months following the release of this show, there was an 1100% increase in the sale of chess boards!) My personal favorite: The Last Dance. Who watched this one? The age-old question...was Jordan really the greatest of all time? Part of being human is to love stories! And today, we get to talk about what Christians believe to be the greatest story ever told – the story of how God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whosoever would believe in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.

Most of the stories that we read or watch these days don't claim to be true. As the drama unfolds, both the author and the audience realize that we are talking about imaginary people in an imaginary world. But that's not what the story of Easter is like. The Easter story is not only the greatest story ever told, it's a story that claims to be true. In fact, the Easter story claims to be so true that it actually has explanatory power for *every other* story in the world, including the story of your life and my life. The Bible presents the Easter story like a key or a rubric...once you understand this story, it opens up a whole new way of understanding everything. Today what I hope to do is simply to tell the Easter story, explain why even 2,000 years later we still believe that it's true, and talk about how it has the power to change our lives today.

To tell the story, I want to use these images you see here on stage. The story begins with palm branches. Seven days before Easter, Jesus made his way into the city of Jerusalem. This was the city where Israel's kings had ruled from for nearly 1,000 years, this was the city where the Jewish temple stood, the city where people from all around the world would take a pilgrimage to in order to meet with God. Now, Jesus had been to Jerusalem dozens of times, but on this occasion, seven days before Easter, he did something he had never done before: he rode in on donkey, just like one of the most famous kings in Israel's history did almost a thousand years before. When people saw what Jesus was doing, they knew the claim that he was making, and they decided to welcome him into the city as the nation's long-awaited king. So what did they do? They cut down palm branches, they laid them on the ground, and they yelled, "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" They welcomed him as their king, they worshipped him. But in the coming days, when they realized he wasn't the kind of king they were expecting, they turned on him.

They went from laying palm branches on the road on Sunday to demanding his execution on Friday. As the crowds demanded his death, interestingly, those who had political power, the non-religious rulers of the day, tried to advocate for Jesus again and again. On multiple occasions

they tried to let him go. But the crowds had been worked into a furious mob. The leaders feared that unless they participated in Jesus' death, they would never have peace. So reluctantly, Jesus was handed over and led to the barracks to be tortured. They stripped him naked, tied his arms around a pillar, and then flogged him within an inch of his life. Roman historians tell us that it was not uncommon for the victims to have their eyes gouged out, their ears ripped off, or even for their spinal column to be severed during the flogging. The torture was so horrific that Tacitus, a prominent historian, tells us that 6 out of 10 men died from flogging alone. After they brutalized Jesus, they decided to have some sport with him. They fashioned a crown out of thorns, placed it on his head, they put a royal robe around his beaten and bloodied back, and then they knelt down and exclaimed: "hail to the king!" Then they slapped his face in disgust.

Then they took the robe off his back and placed a cross there instead. Not the entire cross, just the wooden cross beam, known as a patibulum, which weighed nearly 125 pounds. They forced him to carry it through the city streets as the crowds mocked him. But Jesus had so little strength left that after stumbling again and again under the weight of it, someone had to come help him carry it the rest of the way. Eventually, they made it just outside the city, to a location known as "the place of the skull." There, the cross was placed on the ground, Jesus' hands and feet were nailed to it, and then it was hoisted up and set in the ground. So there was Jesus, in excruciating and unimaginable pain, as people began to pass by him, taunting him, humiliating him, spitting on him. And for what crime? Welcoming children? Forgiving the adulterer? Giving sight to the blind? Teaching his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them? Even there on the cross he said: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

One theologian put it this way: "Jesus was the very embodiment of vulnerable love. He took the worst that can be done, took it from every angle, and gave back only more love" (NT Wright). The most gracious man who ever lived suffered the most gruesome torment yet to be invented. On average, people who were crucified lasted 72 hours on the cross. Three full days of suffering. There are stories of one man who lived for 9 days. But because of the brutality Jesus endured before the cross, he only survived for six hours...the six most important hours in the history of the world. Eventually he cried out: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46), and when he did, the skies turned dark. And then, when Jesus' body could take no more, he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30), and breathed his last. The soldiers pierced his body with a spear to make sure he was dead, and then his friends came, took him down off the cross, and moved him to a tomb.

That's where Jesus' body laid for the rest of Friday, all day Saturday, and early Sunday morning. The tomb was sealed and guards were posted, but then on that very first Easter morning, the stone was rolled away, and the Son rose. And I'm not talking about that distant ball of heat creeping up over the eastern horizon. No! That Easter morning, it was the Son of God himself who rose. And as he rose, he not only brought warmth and light to the world, he brought love and hope, mercy and peace, truth and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. That empty tomb became a lasting sign – not only a sign that Jesus' body was no longer bound to the grave, not only that Jesus had a new beginning, it was a sign that *humanity* would no longer be bound to the grave, it was a sign that *our lives* could have a new beginning, too. Easter takes place at the beginning of Spring, the time of the year when things that have appeared dead for so long begin

to show signs of life again. When Jesus rose from the dead, he broke the chains of earth's long winter and ushered in an eternal spring of new life for all who would believe in him.

That's the story! Not only the most important story in all of the Bible and in all of Christianity, but what all who follow Jesus believe to be the most important story in all the world. Now, here's the question: Is it just a story, or is it true? Is this story like the Iliad, the Odyssey, Avatar, Star Wars, fanciful imaginations only to be believed by little children? Or is it really true? Did it actually happen? What do we know about that?

To begin with, we know that Tacitus (one of the most highly regarded Roman Historians from the 1st century...and not a Christian), in his telling of history, tells of a man named Jesus who was arraigned before Pilate, condemned to death, and executed by crucifixion around the year 33 AD, which is exactly what the gospels recount. We also know that Thallus, a 1st century Greek historian who wrote a three-volume work about the history of the Mediterranean world, a non-Christian who says that during Passover one year, the sky went dark prematurely across the entire known world. Again, just as the gospels recount. Josephus was a general in the Jewish army in the mid 60s AD who defected from the Jewish ranks and joined the Roman military. He was not a Christian, but in his book of history he wrote these words:

“About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. He appeared to them, spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

Now just because a non-believing ancient historian said it happened doesn't necessarily mean that it happened, but it certainly lends veracity to the claim. But what else do we say about it?

What other reasons do we have to believe it's true? There is the eye-witness testimony. Not one or two or three people – but over 500 who claim to have seen him risen from the dead with their very own eyes. Many of whom swore to what they saw to the point of their death. This was not a self-serving, self-aggrandizing message. Of the twelve original apostles, Philip, Andrew, Simon and Matthias were all crucified. Peter, the leader of the apostles, was sentenced to crucifixion, but felt unworthy to die like his Lord, so the Roman Empire honored his request and he was crucified upside down. Matthew and James the greater were both killed with a sword. James the lesser was stoned to death. Jude was filled with arrows. Thomas was run through with a spear, John was boiled in oil, Bartholomew was flayed alive and then beheaded. Think about it, these were people who went from being terrified and hiding in locked rooms to traveling the globe and standing before kings and emperors sharing their faith with their lives on the line. What's the most likely explanation for their testimony and transformation? Perhaps that it really happened!

There is also the fact that in all four gospels, the first people to see the empty tomb and Jesus raised from the dead were women. In the ancient world, women weren't considered trustworthy

witnesses. They weren't allowed to testify in court. If you were inventing a story, you would never put it together the way they did.

One of the guys I have enjoyed reading and hearing from the last few years is named J Warner Wallace. He is a detective in California whose primary responsibility is to solve murder cases that have gone cold. He re-examines evidence that is sometimes 10, 20, 30 years old in an attempt to bring killers to justice. He's received numerous awards from the crimes he solved. And in all the cases he's brought to trial, over the course of nearly three decades, he has never lost a single case. He was not only a skeptic, but he was a serious cynic against people of the Christian faith. So about 10 years ago he decided to put all of his Christian friends in their place by applying his professional skills to the Easter story. He wanted to prove his Christian friends once and for all. After a few years of study and investigation, as one of the leading cold case detectives in the world who has never lost a single case, he himself became a Christian.

The Easter story is not just a wonderful story, it's a story that we have a lot of reasons to believe is actually true. And that sets us up for the third question: if the Easter story is true, what does that mean for us today? Tons of things, but I want to highlight just three. First, if the Easter story is true, it means that *we are not alone in this world*. More specifically it means *we have a God who loves us*. You might remember the story of a woman named Tonya Kach. When she was 15 years old, she was abducted by a security guard at the school she attended. For the next 10 years she was locked up in a bedroom in his house, just 2 miles from the home she grew up in. The entire time she was there, the man who took her called her by a different name, Nikki, and told her that her family didn't want her anymore, that they didn't love her anymore. After prolonged exposure to physiological warfare, eventually she believed him. One day, when she was let out on her own to go to the store, a clerk who had befriended her said: "*Good morning Nikki!*" – and something clicked in her brain. She said, "My name is not Nikki, it's Tanya. I need someone to help me." Help was sent. Tanya was reunited with her family. Reports asked her dad how he felt, and he said: "I never stopped looking for you. I never stopped. My baby's back. My baby's back. My baby's back." No matter what may have happened to you in this life, if the Easter story is true, you have a God who loves you, who has never stopped looking for you, who has left heaven, even gone to the cross and the grave looking for you, because he wanted to bring you back.

What else do we know if the Easter message is true? *Our sins can be forgiven*. I have a good friend who has a son in elementary school. And a while back, when my friend drove home from work and pulled into his driveway, he saw that his 9-year-old had taken a can of orange spray paint and painted a giant orange x in the driveway of their new home. Not a small little x that tells you where to dig a hole, a giant x that tells you where to land a helicopter! When he walked in the house, his son was hiding behind his mom in fear and shame. As the dad approached, his son reached out a bag with all the money in his piggy bank and offered to pay to have it fixed. My friend got down at his son's level and said, "It's okay, buddy. Let's go to Lowes and take care of this together." They got in the car, made a trip to get the store, got some acetone and about a dozen pieces of steel wool, went back to the house, and then the dad spent four hours scrubbing the paint off the concrete. The next time I was over at their house I was playing ball with Silas and he said, "Look, this is where I painted the X! You can't even tell it was there anymore." I said, "Cool, did you clean it off?" Innocently he said, "No, I wasn't strong enough to

make the stain go away...but my dad was.” The Bible tells us that every one of us has stains in our lives. Sin. Selfishness. Mistakes. Regrets. We know that we aren't strong enough to make them go away. But if the Easter story is true, then we have a Dad who is.

And there is one more thing we know if the Easter story is true: Our best days are still to come. I don't know about you, but I need that. I'm only in my mid-thirties, but most things in my body hurt. I have a right ankle issue, a right knee issue, a left lower back issue, I had Lasik eye surgery five years ago, and it's already beginning to fade. I was watching a comedian the other day who said he went to the doctor and the doctor said, “How can I help you?” He said, “There is a small spot about 6 inches above my left knee. That's the only place that doesn't hurt. Can you make the rest of my body feel like that?!” If the Easter story isn't true, the grave is the end for us. It's going to be painful on our way there, and then it's over – oblivion. But if the Easter message is true, no matter the pain, *there is always hope*. After getting older, one day we will grow younger.

I heard about a farming family from the 50's who made their very first trip to the big city to meet with their insurance agent. The dad pulled the pick-up truck up to the tallest building they had ever seen. He told his wife to stay in the car but took their teenage son in with them. The man at the information desk told them their insurance company was located on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor and pointed them towards the elevator. Not only had they never been in a building like this before, they had never seen an elevator before. They watched as the doors opened and closed. Open and closed. They looked at each other but didn't know what to do. An older woman who was standing beside them asked if they were going to get on and they shook their heads and said, “*No, ma'am!*” So she shuffled on and they watched as the doors closed. A few moments later, the doors re-opened and a tall, young, beautiful blonde woman stepped off and strutted right past the two of them. The dad elbowed his son and said, “*Junior, go get your mom!*”

There is no magic elevator – BUT – if God really did descend, not just to the earth, but then to the cross, and all the way to the grave, and he came back, then that means that everyone who places their faith in him will come back from the grave, too. If the tomb wasn't Jesus' final destination, it won't be ours if we place our faith in him. In John 11:25 Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.”

Part of being human means loving stories. The Easter story is not only the greatest story ever told, it's a story that we have good reason to believe is true. And if it's true, it's a story that changes everything. Let's pray.