



REALLY?

**Untruths
Uncovered**

Many untrue things are said about God, Jesus, the Bible and the Church. Let's expose some false narratives as we walk toward Easter this year. We are not trying to win arguments, but to begin conversations with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Each week's sermon will provide a thoughtful question, so you can start a conversation with a skeptic or non-believer. Ultimately, Easter morning declares the greatest news. Everyone said Jesus was dead, and that death would hold Him forever. Really? Guess what—Jesus is alive again!

One year we found real eggs in our lawn for the Easter Egg hunt. Not the plastic eggs with candy in them, but hard-boiled eggs dyed and decorated. There was, I think, a mix up in the events-planning department for Easter. Someone forgot, maybe, to make sure plastic eggs were available...I don't know, and there's no need to cast blame. But the hardboiled decorated eggs were what we found in our yard that morning. It was kind of nice. It felt very old-fashioned. But not all the eggs were found. The thing about using real eggs is that if you don't find them all on Easter, you find them a few days later! They present themselves. Here's the point: from time to time it is difficult to differentiate the real from the false, and that's when you need the real to present itself. Will the real Easter Egg please step forward? We would in many ways wish that Jesus would step back into the line of great historical figures and just be an ordinary guy, a nice man like other nice men. But Jesus was unique. As much as it scandalizes us and makes it hard for us, Jesus was—and is—one of a kind, uniquely the Son of God. Jesus made himself known as Lord and Savior.

We've been running through questions skeptics raise, or common misconceptions about Christianity, and what more common claim could there be but that Jesus was not God, Jesus was not divine, Jesus' death was not uncommon or supernatural, Jesus was just a guy—and we (some of us anyway) made Him out to be a God-figure after he was gone? The biggest problem with this is that the claims about Jesus' divinity begin almost as soon as Jesus died. You just can't create a legend that quickly. Historians have culled the books to try to find any case of a legend developing instantaneously, and they can't find it. Legends and myths develop over decades or centuries, when the facts are long lost to the fog of the past. People started saying Jesus was God immediately.

It's actually not hard to argue that Jesus was special. The dates on our calendar attempt to correspond to the number of years since his birth. The world is a different place because of Jesus. His teaching inspired poverty relief, the establishment of hospitals, women's equality, children's education, designs on universal literacy, peace and reconciliation practices, family structures, mercy for the suffering and on and on. Speaking of Jesus, Condoleezza Rice once wrote, "There has never been a more important question in the history of humankind than 'Who is this man [Jesus]?' On the day after His death, everyone would have written Jesus off. It looked very much like His small contribution was over. But somehow this Jesus of Nazareth changed the course of human history. H. G. Wells, a secularist, said, "I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as

a historian that the penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history." So who was He? He was not just a guy.

But we want to say Jesus was just a guy—even those of us who are believers want to say it sometimes—because to say that Jesus is special, that Jesus is God, is to say that not all spiritual paths lead to the same place, that there may be a single, unique way found in Jesus. And we don't want to say that because it sounds mean. We call it the scandal of particularity. Part of it is our consumer mentality that we just don't like to make a choice when it means shutting down other options. It's FOMO: fear of missing out. Keep all the options open. But there is also a noble impulse here. We live with and love and share and walk with all types of people. We celebrate the beautiful diversity of the human race and the rich tapestry of cultures. And we don't want to be domineering or judgmental; we want to be loving and open. These are two beautiful impulses—the appreciation of diversity and the impulse to humbly love and accept. Just watch out that two good things don't combine to create something toxic. When I was in Basic Training in the Army, for a short time I was in charge of the team that cleaned the bathroom in the barracks. Oh the glories of leadership. If that thing wasn't spotless, we would feel pain. Among the cleaning supplies we had Ammonia and Bleach. They both worked well. So one day I thought, why not mix them? Don't. Two good things can create a toxic blend. Diversity and Love. Beautiful! But don't let them collapse into agnostic pluralism. "I'm not sure, but I think everything will work out." This is poison. It actually serves no one. Better to stand in the courage of your convictions and be open and clear—Jesus was not just a guy. Jesus was God come to save us, and this is good news.

We try to protect Jesus; we try to protect people from Jesus. I remember a conversation with a Jewish friend in college. He came to me angry one day and said, "Do you believe this? Do you believe that salvation is through Jesus?" "I do," I said. "And that nobody can be saved except through Him?" "Yes, but it's open to all who will believe and trust in Him." I thought he was going to berate me for being closed-minded, but what he said was, "When were you going to tell me? I thought we were friends. I might not believe that, but I can't imagine believing I know the way to eternal life and not telling my friend." We want to protect people from Jesus. Jesus has made a way of salvation. The way.

Look at how Jesus rides in to Jerusalem to reveal Himself on Palm Sunday. Jesus doesn't leave us the option to call Him just a guy. Jesus reveals Himself

to be our Lord and Savior. Verses 1-3: "As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" (Mark 11:1-3). Now, whose plan is this? I mean from the very beginning, this is Jesus' plan. "I'm in charge," says Jesus. "It's My plan. But you do get to be a part of it." The disciples are not cooking up some way to make Jesus out to be something He's not. Jesus says, this is My plan.

"They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, 'What are you doing, untying that colt?'" (Mark 11:4-5). Can we pause there just for a minute? Don't miss the humor in the Bible. Jesus says, "Go on ahead. You'll see a Tesla parked by the side of the road with the keys in it. Just hop in and drive it back here." Uh, what are you doing untying that colt? What's going on here? What's happening inside the hearts of the disciples here? We know what's going on in the mind of the owner of the colt, but what are the disciples thinking? See this is the crisis moment, the tipping point, the threshold, the key moment when they decide inside themselves—in their own mind—I'm going to follow the way of Jesus. I'm going to trust Him. This seems crazy. This seems unlikely. This isn't smart. Lord, how did You ever get me into this mess? But Jesus told us what to do. I'm going to do it. "They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go." (Mark 11:6). "This is My plan. You get to be a part of it. But to be Mine, you are going to have to walk straight through the moment of crisis, through the moment of doubt and into faith. You have to believe, obey, trust, lean on Me, and then you get to see." Until you obey, until you try, you won't fully know. This is faith.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem, fulfilling a small raft of prophecies about the coming Messiah, down the Mount of Olives and up the other side to the Eastern Gate and into the city of David. "Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!' 'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'" (Mark 11:9-10). Jesus rides in among a crowd of walkers. He alone is up (not that high up, but up) on the back of a colt. Jesus enters the city of David, the city of God, Zion, the place where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac, the Temple Mount. In fact, He goes right up into the Temple itself, surveys it all, then exits again. And the people who saw Him

cried Hosanna. God saves. They knew. Not all that look at Jesus know, but when you look to Jesus don't you see? And know? They knew. God saves. Hosanna. Jesus reveals Himself today. Jesus was not just a guy. Jesus is Savior and Lord.

Jesus stands head and shoulders above all. More than that. There is none like Him. Do you know the difference between religion and faith in Jesus? Religion is what we do to attempt to please God. If I do this, then God has to reward me with this. Religions, all religions, offer advice. Do this to get closer to God. Do this to find peace. Do this to gain contentment and the good life. That's advice. You do this. I'll tell you how to get to God. Only Jesus says "I'm not here to tell you how to get to God, I'm here to tell you I am God and I have come to you." There is no one like Jesus. Faith in Jesus says, "Forget the advice." You can't get to God. But in Jesus, God has come to you. Rest all your hope in Him.

This event begins the Passion Week, the week of Christ's suffering and death. Remember what Jesus has entered the city to do. Jesus has come to die. Jesus came knowing full well He was riding toward the cross where He would suffer and pour out His life—His whole life—and pour out His blood—His whole blood—to pay a penalty that you and I could not pay and cover a debt that you and I could not cover to rescue us from our sins. We pray "forgive us our debts." Our sin creates a debt with God. God gave me life, I wasted it rebelliously, I spoiled it rebelliously, now I owe a debt. But I'm in debt. I can't pay my debt. Ever try to pay your mortgage with your credit card? Pay off your Target card with your Kohl's card? The debt is still there! Jesus alone was without sin, without debt. When He paid on the cross, He paid a debt He didn't owe and transferred the credit to you, and me, and any who would call on His name. That's not advice. That's an event. Christ has died for you. And this was an act of God himself. Jesus reveals himself Lord God and Savior God.

We've all come through this series with someone in mind. I've heard so many stories over the last few weeks about friends and family who doubt and stay away from Jesus. One man told me, "That's my brother. He can't get over the suffering question. Why would a good God allow bad things to happen?" He was actually reading a book to try to have an answer. A mother wrote me and said, "This is my daughter. What you said about not liking the church for those reasons, that's exactly where she is." We want to help. To change the course. But we can't win the day. We can't win the battle. We use 1 Peter 3:15 as our guide, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone

who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." But we don't try to win the argument, we try only to remove obstacles and offer clues and joyfully, gently offer what we know of God, the hope of glory in us. But we can't win. Only Jesus can win. Only Jesus can remove the veil. Only the Spirit of God can penetrate the heart and open the soul up to the light of Christ.

But don't you see? That's exactly what's happening. Jesus rides in. God says, "Here I am. I Myself will come into your city. I Myself will come to save. I Myself will tear open the curtain that divides. I will do it Myself. As the Lord has always said!" Genesis 46, to Jacob, "I myself will go with you." Exodus 3 to Moses, "I myself have come down to rescue my people." Isaiah 41:13-14, "'For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel, do not fear, for I myself will help you,' declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel." Jeremiah 23:3, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock." Ezekiel 34, "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness...I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord." (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15). God always promised to come, Himself. God has come. In Jesus. This is His plan. You get to be a part of it, if you pass through the crisis of doubt into faith and believe in Him.

Imagine a knight sent by a king on a great errand in a foreign land, only the knight gets captured and thrown into prison. One day the guard comes down, opens the gate and says, "You can go now." "Why?" the knight asks, full of doubt. "Your king sent another to pay your penalty and buy your freedom. He sent his own son as ransom. You and the rest can go free in his name." What are you going to do? The knight sits in the prison thinking, "That can't be true. That can't be right. The king can't love me that much. He would never spend his son on me. I can't believe it." How long will you sit in the dungeon after your freedom has been bought? Jesus isn't just a guy. He's revealed Himself. He is your Savior. He is your Lord. Walk now into the freedom He has purchased for you by His own blood.

STUDY GUIDE

REALLY? • MARK 11:1-11

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read our passage for the week, Mark 11:1-11. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Read it one more time. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- What do you notice about our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- In our passage, how do the people respond to Jesus? What is the significance of their words and actions?
- In our world today, what are some common thoughts or ideas concerning who Jesus is?
- How have your views of Jesus changed through the years?
- What does it mean that Jesus is King? (See Zechariah 9:9.) Jesus is a different sort of King, isn't He? What makes Jesus special?
- As we enter into Holy Week, what are one or two ways you can draw near to Jesus this week?

Going Deeper:

What is a word, phrase or thought from today's passage that God seems to be lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

What are some answers you have heard to this question: What makes Jesus special? Think about those around you—friends, family, co-workers. How would they answer that question? Try it out and ask someone this question this week. What do you notice when you raise that question? What do you learn from their response?

IN: Connect With the Family of God

Ask a brother or sister in Christ this week about their relationship with Jesus. What has Jesus been teaching them lately? How has Jesus been revealing His love to them?