



# **REALLY?**

## **Untruths Uncovered**

**M**any 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!

I know we are all reeling from the news that the Broncos are transferring to Salt Lake City. What a surprise. Even harder was to see that Balanced Rock fell over in Garden of the Gods. Horrible! But, it's April 1st, and that means it's Easter. And we must carry on! Actually the only April Fool's prank I ever pulled off was when I was a boy and my radio alarm woke me to hear DJs talking about how Balanced Rock fell. I ran down to tell my mom, because I believed it. It wasn't until I was saying it out loud I remembered what day it was, but I was so convincing I just kept going. I'm pretty sure I fooled her. Today, Easter, we celebrate one of the greatest (if we can put it this way) pranks April Fool's Day has ever seen. Jesus, the Son of God, gave Himself to death and then took Himself back. Jesus used His life to end death. But can we believe that?

Easter on April Fool's Day is part of what inspired this whole series we have been studying as a church since February: Really? Untruths Uncovered. We have asked, does God exist or did we make that up? Is the Bible for real? Is Jesus really special and unique? Today comes the great claim, honestly the central claim of Christianity, the claim—if it's true, the event—that gave birth to the whole Christian religion: Jesus of Nazareth rose again from the dead. You might think it was a hoax, a great prank. You might think it was a misunderstanding. You might think it was a legend that developed over time. I'm telling you, according to every way I know how to ask the question, this happened. Jesus rose from the dead and that changes everything. And the way you personally handle this information, your personal response to this will change your life. For some questions the facts hang in the balance; for this question your soul hangs in the balance.

The account we read today comes from Mark. But similar accounts are found in the other three Gospels. There are slight differences in secondary details, but those superficial distinctives only serve to back up the truth; the witnesses didn't collude to create a story. The testimony is this: Jesus was publicly executed. After He was verified dead by Roman guards, His body was handed over to Joseph of Arimathea who put it in a tomb he had

prepared for his family. This was a prominent man, a member of the Sanhedrin council. The body of Jesus was hurriedly entombed because the Sabbath was beginning on Friday night, and not just any Sabbath but the Passover Sabbath. No work could be done once the sun set. On Sunday morning, a group of women went to the tomb to complete the embalming process they could not finish on Friday—to cover the body with perfume and oils. "And they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?' But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him'" (Mark 16:3-6). Maybe it was all a misunderstanding. Or maybe not.

People ever since have been trying to tell a different story or explain this one away. You see, we know how death works. There's no question there. In fact, many of you sitting here are thinking right now, "Whatever we are doing here, it's not seriously about a man who rose from the dead, is it? I mean church is nice, there are lots of family memories around Easter, it's nice to do something religious together, but a man coming back from the dead? Nobody seriously believes that do they? Really? We know how death works. Death wins." We have all experienced that. My daughter Ellie had a pet hamster named Nibbles. Nibbles was a noble creature, but when Nibbles passed it was the first time Abigail and I had to think about what to tell our child. Where's Nibbles? What happened to Nibbles? You can't say, "Nibbles fell asleep." Ellie would wait for Nibbles to wake up; or worse, she would be too scared to go to sleep ever again! We decided to tell her the truth. Nibbles was buried with honor. A stone marked the site. Swallowed by death forever. We know how death works. Death wins. Some of you have experienced this full well. We have all lost someone, someone we cared about deeply. Maybe you have lost someone and felt the force of death swallowing the one you treasured, the force of it so strong you thought



you might get sucked right under yourself. We tell ourselves to accept it, to recognize that death is just a natural part of life. But it never feels natural. It never feels right. And do you know what? Jesus never accepted it. Just like Jesus never accepted illness, or blindness, or injustice, or lost and darkened spirituality. Jesus saw that His friend Lazarus had died, and Jesus wept. He never accepted death as a part of life. Jesus never accepted suicide bombers, terrorist killings. Jesus will never accept the Las Vegas shootings or the mass murder in the high school in Parkland, Florida. We say, get used to it. Death always wins. Jesus says, "Really?"

If you are a believer here this morning, if you believe Jesus rose from the dead, you are going to take this conversation starter card when you leave and I'm challenging you to ask someone this question: "Did Jesus really come back from the dead? Why do so many people believe it?" If you are not a believer, if you are just looking in today from the outside, first of all, we are super glad you're here! But I want to challenge you too, don't back out of that conversation. What is your theory? What happened to Jesus? I'm even going to give you a head start on this. I'm going to offer a few theories people float to explain away the empty tomb. But I'm also going to give you believers a few things to say too. I'm basically setting you up for the most awkward Easter dinner of your life! But why not? This might really matter.

Here are a few theories skeptics have used to dismiss the empty tomb. First, maybe Jesus passed out but then recovered in the tomb and walked out alive. This happens. People can be so close to death that we think they are dead, but then recover. It may have all just been a mistake. Okay. On the other hand, let's go over what happened to Jesus. By all accounts Jesus was an actual man who was killed by Roman authorities. First He was beaten or "scourged." This was Pontius Pilate's attempt to assuage the bloodthirsty crowd without full execution. Jesus was beaten and whipped mercilessly. His skin was shredded causing significant blood loss. By the time He carried His crosspiece out of the city, He would already have been almost unrecognizable. Then He was nailed, wrists and feet, to the cross and hung to die. This process would pull His arms out of joint and collapse His

diaphragm not allowing Him to breathe. Loss of blood and oxygen eventually causes a heart attack. Jesus Himself would have felt it just before He died. Which makes sense because He seems to have known He was at the end when He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Heart damage like that produces an effusion of fluid in the pericardial sac. When the Roman guard pierced Jesus side, the spear broke into this fluid causing a flow like water then blood to appear. Jesus was, without a doubt, dead. Romans knew how to kill. There is no account I know of in history of anyone accidentally surviving a Roman crucifixion. But let's say Jesus did survive—He would not have been able to get up and walk around when witnesses claimed to have seen Him, and they would have been terrified by His appearance. Nobody would see Jesus like that and say, "Jesus conquered death!" He would have looked like death. Jesus didn't pass out. He died.

Maybe the women went to the wrong tomb. This is a theory. They got confused, found an empty tomb and freaked out! The problem is the tomb is named. Joseph of Arimathea was a known leader. Anybody could go see for themselves, be it the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Roman authorities, or the followers of Jesus who went on to die claiming that the tomb of Jesus was empty. Someone might die for a misunderstanding, but who dies for something they know is untrue? Wouldn't you check? Historians agree that the fact it was a group of women first to the tomb only adds to the veracity. At the time, the testimony of women was considered unreliable, inadmissible in trial. If you were making this all up, you would not have women first to the tomb.

That leads to the next theory: It was all a hoax. April Fools! Jesus' followers stole the body and relocated it in the night. But if that's true, where did they take it? You'd have to believe that this ragtag bunch of frightened Galileans pulled off the greatest trick the religious leaders and Roman rulers over Jerusalem had ever seen, never let it slip out where the bones were (and everyone would be looking), and went on to die for the lie they constructed. That's hard to believe.

But maybe it was unintentional. Maybe they just so wanted Jesus to be alive again that the legend of His resurrection took over. This is actually, I think, what most non-believers think about Easter.

Christians got caught up in a legend. There was no ill-intent, just myth plus devotion plus time. But here's the problem, the first written testimony to these events comes within fifteen years of the public execution of Jesus. That's not enough time for a legend to grow, certainly not a legend strong enough to erase all the public experiences these people had. They were ancient, but they weren't fools! This testimony is too hard to dismiss. You tell me, tell me a story that makes sense of these facts.

So what happened? Did it happen as it says? It all hinges on this. Christianity all hinges on whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. Paul wrote later, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, this whole thing is false. God did not give His Son to die for our sins. Jesus was not any different than any other man. His claims about God are foolishness. There is no new covenant in Jesus Christ, no new relationship with God. If God is there at all, we know next to nothing about Him and have no way to please Him. Church is an empty exercise, and life itself is ultimately without meaning. We are just living organisms lost in space on a lucky rock. But if it did happen.... Jesus is not a figment of someone's imagination. Jesus really lived. Jesus really died. Jesus really rose again. The tomb is empty still, and the only thing remaining is for you and me to come to terms with it.

How do you come to terms with Jesus? That's the question I have for you. Jesus lived. Jesus died on the cross. Jesus was buried. Jesus rose again. Have you come to the cross? How do you come to terms with what Jesus did on that cross? Let's watch this final goodbye video from Billy Graham (view in the sermon video at [www.first-pres.org/easter2018](http://www.first-pres.org/easter2018)). See, that man you just heard from, he lived, and he died, and he is face to face with Jesus right now. Death wins? Really? Are you committed to Jesus? You can have that same assurance, that same confidence, that same faith. Only believe. You can be a part of all that heaven brings. Only believe. At home with God. At one with God. At peace with God in your heart. Only believe. Only believe. In Jesus Christ.

## STUDY GUIDE

### REALLY? • MARK 16:1-8

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

Read our passage for the week, Mark 16:1-8. 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?
- Why do you think Mark identified these women specifically by name in verse 1?
- Re-read verses 6 and 7. What are the women instructed to do? Why is this significant? 4. Who in your life has served as a witness to you, sharing the good news of the risen Jesus with you?
- How would you respond to the following questions: Do you think Jesus really came back from the dead? Why did so many people believe it?

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

Throughout our sermon series, we've been looking at questions to ask a skeptic or non-believer as a conversation starter. We raise these questions not to try and win an argument but to spur conversation. Who in your life might God be inviting you to start a conversation with?

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

What's one thing the Lord has shown you through our sermon series, Really? Share your insight with someone this week. Ask them what God has been teaching them lately.