

For the Love of God

The Most Astounding Claim in All of History

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The Most Astounding Claim in All of History John 14:6

Good morning! I want welcome you to Easter at the Church at Brook Hills. My name is David Platt, I'm a pastor here, and I want you know (I don't just say this), it is an honor to celebrate Easter with you today.

Before we go any further, I want to invite you to pull out that guide you received when you came in...there is an outline with Scriptures that overviews what I want us to think together about for the next few minutes. But there's also a tear-off portion on side here, and this not something we necessarily do every week, but I want invite everybody today (so not just guests who might be visiting with us, but even members of this church...even if you've been a member of Brook Hills your entire life), I want to ask you to take next moment or two and fill out the front portion that card. You put whatever information you're comfortable with on the front – We promise to respect that info, not badger you, but whether it's filling out whole thing or even just putting a first name on there, I want to ask each of you to take a moment to do that right now because this is something we're going to reference later in our time together.

And as you fill that out, I know that there are a variety of different people here today. Meaning... I know many of you are followers of Christ gathering together to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. I suppose that some of you might say you're a Christian, but it's more in name only...you're not necessarily following Jesus in your life. And then others of you don't profess to be a Christian. I know that there are people of completely different religions here...and others who claim no religion...who may be atheist or agnostic...maybe not believing in God or at least having serious questions about whether or not there is a God.

One of the things I always find interesting, though, whether here in Birmingham or as I travel to different places in the world, is that almost everybody I meet who knows anything about Jesus, regardless of their faith, almost everybody says that Jesus was a good man in history...and a man people can identify with.

He didn't live a sheltered life. He lived a common life...he was familiar with sorrow and struggle and suffering. And people not only identify with him...they admire him. Twenty-first century people find much to admire in the Jesus of the first century. He was loving and kind. He championed the cause of the poor and the needy. He made friends with the neglected and the weak and the downtrodden. He hung out with the despised and the rejected. Even when he was fiercely/unfairly attacked, he didn't retaliate. He loved his enemies...he taught others to do the same.

Jesus' Claims ...

Jesus was humble in so many ways, in every way, but what's so interesting is that alongside Jesus' humility, this is a man who was always talking about himself. Always. "I am...I am this...I am that..." he said, over and over and over again. And he made some pretty extravagant claims about himself.

A guy named John Stott, who wrote a book that we've got to give away to people who want it today (Why I Am A Christian), describes this best when he says:

"One of the most extraordinary things Jesus did in his teaching (and he did it so unobtrusively that many people read the [Bible] without even noticing it) was to set himself apart from everybody else. For example, by claiming to be the good shepherd who went out into the desert to seek his lost sheep, he was implying that the world was lost, that he wasn't, and that he could seek and save it. In other words, he put himself in a moral category in which he was alone. Everybody else was in darkness; he was the light of the world. Everybody else was hungry; he was the bread of life. Everybody else was thirsty; he could quench their thirst. Everybody else was sinful; he could forgive their sins. Indeed, on two separate occasions he did so, and both times observers were scandalized. They asked, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:5-7; Luke 7:48-49). [And] If Jesus claimed authority to forgive the penitent, he also claimed authority to judge the impenitent. Several of his parables implied that he expected to return at the end of history. On that day, he said, he would sit on his glorious throne. All nations would stand before him, and he would separate them from one another as a shepherd separates his sheep from his goats. In other words, he would settle their eternal destiny. Thus he made himself the central figure on the day of judgment."

So Stott concludes:

"These are breathtaking claims. Jesus was by trade a carpenter...from Nazareth...an obscure village on the edge of the Roman Empire. Nobody outside Palestine would even have heard of Nazareth. Yet here [Jesus of Nazareth] was, claiming to be the savior and the judge of all humankind." (Stott, Why I Am A Christian, 42-43)

I think Jesus' most astounding claim is John, Chapter 14, verse 6. Soon before he would be betrayed, arrested, and crucified on a cross, Jesus told his disciples, specifically in response to a question from one of his disciples named Thomas, Jesus said: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). *That* is an astounding claim. Just think about what Jesus was saying here.

In a world of many ways, Jesus was claiming to be the way.

In a world of many ways, Jesus was claiming to be the way. So in a world of many different religions, Jesus was saying that *he* was *the* way to God. The essence of what Jesus taught is that all people everywhere, including you and me, have been created by God, but we have all turned to our own ways.

It looks different in each of our lives...each of our stories is different...but what unites us all is that we've all turned from God's way to our way. The Bible (and Jesus) calls this sin...and

naturally, it separates us from God. Not only does it separate us from God, but it makes us guilty before God. According to Jesus, this is everyone's biggest problem. We have all (in different ways) rebelled against God, and we stand under the judgment of God. In John 3:36, Jesus talked about how all people are under the wrath of God...the just judgment of God...because we've turned away from him. And at the same time, he says that he's the way to be saved from that wrath...he's the way to be saved from that judgment. Not just a way, but *the way*...and all who don't believe in him remain under God's wrath.

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36).

That is a huge statement. Jesus here is fundamentally denouncing the mountain theory of religions that's so common in the world...that it's like we're all at the bottom of a mountain, and God (or whatever you want to call him) is at the top of the mountain...and you may take this path, while I may take that path, but in the end, we're all going to be in the same place. This idea that all religions are fundamentally the same and equally valid. So religion is a matter of preference or personal taste, and no one of them is more true than the others. Faith is kind of like ice cream...just like you choose your favorite flavor of ice cream, you choose your flavor of faith. You choose whatever way works for you.

Amidst a culture that questions truth, Jesus claims to be the truth.

And this is where Jesus' claim goes to another level when he says he's not only *the way*, but amidst a culture that questions truth, Jesus claims to be *the truth*.

We live in a culture that sets truth aside and says faith is a matter of personal taste or even tradition. So the culture tells us that if you're born in India, you're likely Hindu. If you're born an Arab, you're likely Muslim. If you're born in certain parts of our country, you're likely to be an atheist. If you're born in others parts of our country, you're likely to be a Christian. They say faith is more a matter of tradition than anything else.

And into a culture that sees faith as a matter of taste (whatever works for you) or tradition (whatever's most acceptable around you), Jesus says that faith is a matter of truth. *"So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'"* (John 8:31-32). And it makes sense when you think about it. Because all religions can't be true at the same time.

This is obvious...just think about it. Either God does exist (which Christianity and other religions would claim) or God doesn't exist (which atheism or agnosticism would either claim or lean toward). This is not a matter of taste or tradition; this is a matter of truth. Either God is or God isn't. And either atheists or Christians, for example, are basing their lives on a lie...they can't both be right.

Or think about Islam and Christianity. When it comes to the death of Christ, Christians obviously believe that Jesus died on a cross. Muslims, however, deny that Jesus died on the cross. Now at this point, I'm not even asking you to say which one you think is true...I'm just pointing out that both of these belief systems can't be true at the same time. Either Jesus didn't die on the cross and didn't rise from the grave—and if that's the case, then Christians, the Bible even says, are wasting their lives and are to be pitied among men—or...Jesus did die on the cross and did rise from the dead...in which case this has huge ramifications for every single Muslim and every single person in the world.

And eternity is dependent on what's true here...not on where we were born or what we prefer. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but certainly where we're going to spend eternity is a more important decision than whether we're going to eat chocolate or vanilla ice cream.

Jesus claimed to be true...the true representation of God...speaking the truth about God...that all people have turned away from God...and that the only way to be brought back to God was through what he would do on the cross. Days, even hours, after Jesus said these words, he went to a cross, where Jesus (who had never once sinned against God), died.

Now death is the payment for sin...the just judgment of God due sin. But if Jesus had never sinned, then why did *he* die? And the answer is, "He died in the place of sinners." He died for you...and for me. He took the just judgment due you and me in our sin upon himself...so that anyone anywhere...no matter how you have sinned against God...when you put your faith, your hope, your trust in what Jesus did for you on the cross...you can be restored to God forever. Not because this is your preference or your tradition, but because you believe this is true.

Now again, I know, that's an astounding thing to believe...I mean, after all, many people in history have made astounding claims, and just because they make them doesn't mean we should believe them...

Yes...but...this is where Jesus goes to a whole different level, because not only did Jesus claim to die, but he claimed to have the authority to conquer death...and to come back to life.

Oh...many people have made extravagant claims in history, including many religious teachers, but in all their lives, their death was the tragic end of their story. Whether it was Muhammad dying at 62, Confucius dying at 72, the Buddha dying at 80, or Moses dying at 120-years-old, all these leaders' deaths marked the end of their stories.

To all who long for peace and joy in life, Jesus claims to be the life.

But Jesus' death, in a very real sense, marked the beginning of his story. For he claimed not just to be the way and the truth, but to all who long for peace and joy in life, Jesus claims to be *the* life. And three days after he died, of his own accord, he was alive. This makes Jesus utterly unique in the history of the world. Who else has conquered death?

Which is why Jesus was always talking about life...and eternal life at that. He would meet people at different points in their lives...and he would find them with the same longings that you and I have...longings for peace, for comfort, for meaning, for joy, for life to its fullest.

And so he said to a woman at a well who had had numerous husbands, and yet found herself alone, he said: "*Everyone who drinks of this water [at this well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (John 4:13-14).

He said to a crowd of hungry people: "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall NOT hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst*" (John 6:35).

He said to a people looking at darkness in the world around them: "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8:12).

He said to a people whose joy and peace were constantly being taken from them in this world: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10).

I want to pause here, and I want to let a few other people speak to this. One of the great joys we have every week when we gather in this room is to watch people be baptized. Baptism is a visual picture of someone's personal belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the imagery is intended to illustrate Jesus' death and resurrection. In baptism, someone is immersed in water, but we don't hold them under there too long, because Jesus wasn't in the grave very long...just as he rose from the dead, people rise out of the water as a picture of deliverance from death (which is due our sin) to celebrate new life that is possible in him.

And as people are baptized, we have the opportunity to hear how Jesus has given life to people of different backgrounds...with different stories...and different struggles. So I want to invite you to listen with me both to the words of a song that reflect this reality...and the words of real lives who have realized that because Jesus died for them and rose again, they can have new life.

[NOTE: The congregation listens to a song and video testimonies from people who have been baptized.]

Three Questions ...

An important question: Do you believe His claims?

And so we come to an important question: *"Do you believe these claims of Jesus?" "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?'"* (John 11:25-26).

And there's no neutrality here...either we believe what Jesus said (and did) is true...or we believe it's a lie. It's not a matter of taste or tradition, but truth. Either way involves a step of faith. You're either going to put your faith in God or you're going to put your faith in the belief that there is no God. You're either going to believe in the resurrection of Jesus or not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. And either position you take is going to involve a leap of faith.

I always point out to friends who aren't Christians that the burden of proof when it comes to the resurrection is not just on Christians...it's on non-Christians, as well. Because there's no question – even among the most secular of scholars – that around 2000 years ago an entirely new religious community and movement was formed – almost overnight. And immediately, hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead, even when it meant they would die for claiming that. A fast-growing movement of people that now makes up what some estimate is as large as a third of the world survives as a result. So how do you explain that? If you don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, then there's a burden of proof here to provide some other plausible account for how the church started in the first place.

But even in this...even if you're inclined to believe this is true...another question still remains. What about people in the world (billions of people in the world) who don't believe this is true...who believe other things...are they really wrong? Followers of other religions, or

followers of no religion...in all their sincerity, are they really separated from God...and not able to come to God unless they believe in Jesus?

When we hear Jesus say, *"No one comes to the Father except through me,"* we immediately wonder, "Why would God only make one way to himself?" Isn't God more creative than that? More importantly, isn't God more loving than that? This is a great question, and it causes us to step back and see the whole story.

So have you ever been in a conversation with someone about some intense subject, maybe an hour or two, just diving into this subject...or maybe a week or two? And after you've been talking about this subject for a while with that person, all of a sudden, somebody else comes in and just kind of jumps into the conversation and starts bringing up things that you brought up an hour or two ago or a week or two ago; and you want to say, "Uh, who invited you into this conversation?" They don't understand where the conversation is because they haven't been there.

Well, this is where I think we need to step back. When Jesus says these words in John 14, we're coming in on a story in the Bible that happens here, a claim that happens here, but there's a lot that's happened before then. So let me give you a little context. Step back, and broaden the picture...all the way back to the beginning.

So imagine God—and I use the word "imagine" there because, like I've mentioned numerous times, I realize there are people here who may not believe there is a God, or believe there's no God. Well, just imagine it's possible that God exists. I think we'd all have to at least be willing to admit it's possible that God exists. If I were to say that something is not in this room, then that means I'd have to have searched this whole room, and then I could say, "Okay, it's not in this room." So if I'm going to say God's not there, that means I would have to have searched all knowledge to see if God is there, and if I've searched all knowledge, that means I have all knowledge—and by definition that would make me God, and I'd deny my own divinity with my own statement, "There is no God." So it's at least possible that somewhere in knowledge, there's a God who exists.

Just start there. Just imagine there is a God who exists, and that this God is perfectly good and perfectly holy . . . perfectly loving—all that is love is summed up in God. Imagine God created the world. He created a world in which he put mountains and seas and all the beauty we see in nature around us. But then, after creating all of that, he created man and woman as his prize creation, as a reflection of himself—for relationship with him. Imagine he created man and woman with a capacity to know him, to walk with him, to enjoy him. And he said to man and woman, "I want you to enjoy me and all my creation forever."

And then imagine God, the Creator, said to his creation, "If you disobey me, if you turn away from me, you will die. I don't want you to die; I want you to live with me forever." Imagine the creation says, "Yes!" But then one day, for no just reason, the man and the woman decide, "Our Creator doesn't know what he's talking about. He doesn't know what is best for us." So for no just reason, they disobey their Creator.

Then the Creator comes to them and says, "I told you that if you did this, that you would die." Imagine the Creator having in motion, even there, a plan to make it possible for his creation to live with him forever still. Imagine that plan involves calling a people to himself, from among creation—they're called the people of Israel in the Old Testament. And he says to them, "I want to show my love to you as a people, to enter into—it's called a covenant in the Old Testament, but it's like a marriage relationship—a special relationship with you in such a way that you will then show my love to all the other peoples of the earth."

And imagine this people says, "Yes," and they enter into that marriage relationship, that covenant, to enjoy God's love and to make God's love known to everyone else on the earth. But imagine, just days after entering into that covenant, imagine—just days later—they saying, "Our Creator is not worthy of worship. Let's take gold and silver and put it together in the form of a cow, and we'll worship that instead." And imagine them continuing to do that in all sorts of other ways—all sorts of other idolatry and immorality.

And imagine the Creator, in his love, sending messengers to that people, messengers that bring good news of the Creator's love for them, that if they'll turn back from their sin and turn back to their Creator's ways, that he'll forgive them and restore relationship with him. And imagine the creation taking those messengers sent from the Creator and stoning them, sawing them in half, imprisoning them, persecuting them . . . killing those messengers.

After centuries of messengers coming with news of the Creator's love, imagine the Creator committing the ultimate act of condescension and coming to creation himself, taking on a robe of human flesh, and living among his creation, loving them, serving them, healing them of diseases, and bringing good news of the Creator's love.

And imagine the creation taking the Creator himself—in the flesh—and mocking him and beating him, scourging him and spitting in his face, and then nailing him to a cross in the most cruel form of murder imaginable. And imagine, in light of that whole story, the Creator saying, not just to his creation who did that but to all people in all history, "If you will only believe in my love for you expressed on that cross, then I will forgive you of all your sins against me, and you can live with me forever."

If all that is true, do you think it would make sense to say to this God, "Couldn't you be more creative? I thought you were loving!" Now, when we realize the whole story, we realize the question is not, "Why is there only one way?" Instead, we realize that the question is, "Why is there any way at all?"

And we recognize that this is really not a matter of how many ways there are – if there were a thousand ways, we would want a thousand and one. The issue is not how many ways there are; the issue is that we want to make our own way, and the God of the universe, in his grace, has said, "I have made a way."

He has not left us alone – he has not left YOU alone – he has come to YOU, he has died for YOU, he has risen from the grave so that YOU might have life.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

A more important question: Will you receive His love?

So now the question is not just, "Do you believe his claims?" The more important question is: "Will you receive his love?" Right where you're sitting, will you receive his love for you? And will you do what Thomas did? This disciple had questions about Jesus – he heard this claim from Jesus, but he still doubted until he saw Jesus alive after death. This is what happened in John 20:27-29:

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The most important question: Will you call Him Lord?

And so we come to the most important question that every single person within the sound of my voice must answer. Not just, "Do you believe his claims?," or, "Will you receive his love?" The most important question is: "Will you call him Lord?"

Will you say, in your life, "I am a sinner...I have turned away from God...but I believe God loves me...and I put my trust in what he has done for me in Jesus...and I confess him as my Lord and my God." And John 1:12 says that (paraphrased) for all who believe in him, for all who receive him, he gives the right to become children of God.

Oh, I want to invite you, implore you, urge you, right where you're sitting today, to believe his claims, to receive his love, and to let today be the day when for the first time, not as a matter of preference or tradition, not as a matter of mere religious routine, but as a matter of life and death, you call Jesus Lord.

This is something that can only happen in our hearts, so here's what I want to do. In just a moment, we're going to stand together, and these guys are going to sing a song about Jesus' death and resurrection. And I want to invite many of you to join in and sing...but most importantly, if you have never called Jesus Lord, then I want to invite you to do that during this song. As people are singing, you feel free to join in song and to sing this for the first time meaning it. Or...if you want to just silently, by yourself, as others as singing, in your heart, say to God, "I believe. I receive. I confess Jesus as Lord."

I've prayed for this moment. My hope, my prayer is that as we sing this song all across this room, that God, in his mercy, might bring many from death to life, might bring many to believe his claims, to receive his love, and to confess Jesus as Lord.

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