



THE ULTIMATE QUESTION Matthew 28:1-15

If you have a Bible, I want to invite you to open with me to Matthew 28. Feel free to use the Table of Contents to find Matthew. It's the first book in the New Testament, which starts about 2/3 of the way through the Bible, and the chapter numbers are the large numbers, and the small numbers are verses. Matthew 28, and while you're turning there, I just want to thank you for the privilege of celebrating Easter with you. Especially if you are not a member of this church, we want you to know it's an honor to be with you on this Sunday, so thanks for making the time to be here. Matthew 28...I want to read the first fifteen verses...

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (Matt. 28:1-15)

I want to speak plainly this morning – as plainly as I possibly can. We live in a day where religion is looked at as a matter of preference or opinion. People say things like, "All religions are fundamentally the same; they're just superficially different. So choose whatever works best for you." And along the way, the question of truth is completely avoided. That is a huge mistake.

Belief is irresponsible and empty if it's not based in truth. People say, "Well, truth is subjective – a matter of preference. Something may be true for you, but not true for me." We say things like that, but we don't really believe that. You think about it, who wants to go to the bank this week and say, "I need to withdraw some money from my account," and hear the teller say, "Well, sir, I don't feel like you have money in your account." You would

say, "Well, I don't care what you feel. I know I have money in my account, and I want to withdraw it." You don't want the teller to look back at you and say, "That may be true for you, but it's not true for me."

The reality is, either you have money in your account or you don't. Regardless of how someone feels, this is an issue of truth. And the last thing we want banks doing today is giving out money based on how they feel!

Now that's a simple example, and there are thousands of others just like it in the details of our lives, so why – why when it comes to the most important questions in life – questions that deal with grand, eternal realities, why would we want to throw truth out the window? Now that brings us to what I want to call this morning...

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION...

Did Jesus rise from the dead?

I'm not talking about resuscitation, I'm not talking about reincarnation. I'm talking about resurrection. I'm talking about dead for 3 days, only to rise up from inside a tomb and walk out. Did Jesus do that? And that is a question of truth, not of preference. Either He did or He didn't, and the ramifications of the answer to that question are huge. If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, then we are wasting our time today. This whole thing's a lie. And we're fools playing a religious game. The Bible itself says that. First Corinthians 15 – Christians are to be pitied if Jesus did not rise from the grave, because they have based their lives on a lie. But if Jesus did rise from the grave, then that has huge ramifications for every single one of our lives. So did He?

Now most people think that the burden of proof here is all on Christians. Followers of Christ need to give evidence that Jesus rose from the grave. But I don't think that's completely the case. Yes, there's a burden of proof on those who believe in Christ, but there's also a burden of proof here on non-believers—those who don't believe in Christ. Because there's no question – even among the most secular of scholars – that around 2000 years ago an entirely new religious movement and community was formed – almost overnight. And immediately, hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus rose from the grave, even when it meant they would die for claiming that. A fast-growing movement of people that now makes up what some estimate is 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. So with a burden of proof on both sides, let's think about the alternative explanations and ask the question, "Which is most plausible?" And I use that word plausible because there's virtually nothing in history that can be established with 100% certainty.

Can we really know with 100% certainty that George Washington was the first President of the U.S.? Is it possible that he was just a mythical figure that people wrote about and invented in order to encourage the citizens of a new country? Now we're almost certain this is not the case, but we can't say with 100% certainty this was not the case. One author said, "We can't know with 100% certainty that all of us were not created five minutes ago, complete with built-in memories and food in our stomachs." That'll give you a headache to think about! But what's most plausible? What can we establish with the most certainty?

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS...

Here are the possible explanations that have been proposed throughout history. Some of them going all the way back to the first century like we just read about in Matthew 28.

Jesus Didn't (Even) Die on the Cross

First, some say Jesus didn't (even) die on the cross. Now this explanation comes in different forms. Muslims, for example, say that Jesus didn't even go to the cross – somebody who looked like Jesus went to the cross instead. That's what Mohammed teaches in the Koran. Now again, see the issue of truth here. Either Jesus did die on the cross or He didn't. I'm not even asking you to say for sure at this point which you believe, but it's either one or the other. It's a matter of truth and falsehood. And this is a point where the two dominant religions in the world diverge – at a point of truth, not at a point of preference or ideology or opinion.

The reality is that despite what Mohammed said six centuries after it happened, those much closer to the historical situation (Christian and non-Christian alike) reported that it was indeed Jesus who died on the cross.

Now there've been others who have said, "Yes, it was Jesus who went to the cross, but He didn't really die there. He was just hurt really, really, really, really bad." He fainted; He went unconscious; they thought He was dead, but He wasn't. Because of the time constraints with the Passover feast, they took him down before he died, buried him quickly, and later he regained consciousness and escaped from the tomb. Now this explanation thus assumes that Jesus went through six trials, no sleep, a brutal scourging, thorns thrust into his head, nails thrust into his hands and feet, and after hours on a cross, had a spear thrust into his side. Then he was wrapped in grave clothes and put in a tomb with a stone rolled over the entrance that was guarded by Roman soldiers.

So we're to believe that in that situation, Jesus regained consciousness, hopped out of the tomb, nudged the stone out of the way, hopped past the guards standing nearby, and coolly went about his way. I'm just going to say, "Not too plausible on this one."

Jesus' Tomb was not Empty

The next explanation, Jesus' tomb was not empty. Often described as the "Wrong Tomb Theory." And the theory goes that when the women went to the tomb that first Easter morning, in their grief and shock over Jesus' death, they went to the wrong tomb and mistakenly thought he had risen. And everybody else started to believe because they were going to the wrong tomb, too. And since that time, everybody's been going to the wrong tomb. If they'd only checked next door!

Now this was in a day when the last thing Roman or Jewish authorities wanted was for a group of people to claim that their leader had risen from the dead. That's why guards were posted at the tomb in the first place. Unfortunately, they apparently guarded the wrong tomb. The reality is that no one would have believed Jesus had risen from the grave if the tomb where he had been buried wasn't actually empty. All somebody needed to do was say, "He was buried over there," and it would have shut down the whole idea from the start. We stand on pretty firm historical ground that the tomb was empty. Now that doesn't in and of itself prove the resurrection of Jesus.

The Disciples Stole the Body of Jesus

What if the disciples stole the body of Jesus? That's exactly the story that the Bible tells us was contrived from the very beginning. A conspiracy theory that the disciples stole the body of Jesus and claimed that He was alive. Now there's two pretty strong reasons why this is unlikely. First, this would mean that these timid, scared Galilean disciples outmaneuvered a guard of highly disciplined/skilled Roman soldiers in order to do that which all the Jewish and Roman authorities were making sure would not happen.

Second, the whole idea was preposterous. There were many would-be Messiahs, so to speak, in those days who were executed. And in no case do we ever find any of their followers claiming that their leader had risen from the dead. And the reason was because the entire religious system was set up against that idea on all sides. In Greco-Roman thought, the goal in life was to be free, liberated from the body, and the last thing you would want to do in that worldview was to come back into the body. In Jewish belief, the idea of individual resurrection back into a world of sickness and decay and death was inconceivable. This was not even an option in Jewish thought – unless, of course, it was true.

Now you look at these last two, in particular – the empty tomb or the stolen body – both of them are undercut by the reality that people claimed to see Jesus. If you have an empty tomb but no one's seen Jesus, then you just have something strange going on, but not a resurrection. And if you have disciples who stole a body and claim that Jesus is alive, but nobody could see him alive, then you've just got some disciples who are fabricating a story. But if people actually saw Jesus after He had died on a cross, you've got a real issue.

The Disciples were Delusional when They Claimed to See Jesus

Which leads us to the fourth possible explanation that's been proposed in history: the disciples were delusional when they claimed to see Jesus. The story goes that people in that day didn't have the scientific knowledge we have today, and they were prone to believe more in the supernatural. So, in their pain and grief over Jesus' death, they still believed that Jesus was somehow guiding them and leading them.

They even had visions in their minds of Jesus speaking to them. Maybe they really believed He was still alive, or maybe they knew He wasn't, but they believed He was spiritually alive, and over the years that just developed into a myth that Jesus rose from the grave physically. Many have even said the disciples were hallucinating.

But again, this thought was unthinkable in their worldview. And according to this theory, we're to believe that this shift in worldview just sprang up overnight. No process, no development, no debate/discussion, and all of the sudden thousands upon thousands of people are believing that Jesus rose from the grave. And hundreds – not just twelve disciples – but hundreds of people have physically seen him? This is not just one person saying they saw an image in the clouds that kind of looked like Jesus. This is hundreds of people who Jesus appeared to. He ate with people. He drank with people. He talked with people. Hallucinations don't eat! Or drink! This was not just spiritual imagination – it was physical manifestation.

And ok, maybe a couple of people could have been deluded into thinking they had seen Jesus, but Paul writes in the first century, just a few years after this happened, "Jesus appeared to over 500 people, some of whom are still alive." In other words, Paul says, go ask them. You can verify this!

What if I told you that last week in preparation for the Masters, Phil Mickelson gave me a call? He wanted some tips. (For those of you who don't know, Phil Mickelson's a professional golfer and the Masters is the most prestigious golf tournament of the year.) Phil wanted me to play a practice round with him to help him out a little. And so I did. It was a busy week, but I thought, "Hey, for Phil, why not? We're buds." And so we did. I showed him how to drive the ball farther. We were even on one par 3, and I hit a hole in one. He was impressed – asked if I could be his caddy on the course this week. The problem was that I had Secret Church and Easter, and wanted to be here. So I couldn't do it.

Now if that's the case, you could easily go to Phil Mickelson and say, "Do you have any clue who David Platt is or how terrible a golfer he is?" And he'd say, "I have no clue who David Platt is and I'm pretty sure he's a terrible golfer." And you could verify that on both accounts. Which is the point. Hundreds of people were claiming they had physically seen Jesus. And do you know what? They were telling people about it, and they were losing their lives for it. Pascal said, "I believe the witnesses that get their throats cut." This was not in their best interest. N.T. Wright says,

"The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the meetings or sightings of the risen Jesus. Nobody was expecting this kind of thing. No kind of conversion experience would have invented it. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and enter into a fantasy world of our own."

Jesus Died on the Cross and Actually Rose from the Grave

That leaves us with one other possible explanation: that Jesus died on the cross and actually rose from the grave. You say, "Well, that doesn't mean a real physical resurrection of Christ caused this radical shift in history." Then what did? The burden of proof is on you. I can point you to truths that are strongly evidenced. I'm not just talking the Bible. I'm talking evidence that is granted by virtually all historical scholars, even religiously skeptical ones that Jesus died by crucifixion.

His followers believed that He rose from the grave and appeared to them. Their lives were radically changed as a result, to the point where even the most hardened advocates against Christianity (like Paul), when they saw the resurrected Jesus, became the strongest advocates for Christianity. Gary Habermas is probably the most renowned scholar on the resurrection of Jesus, a guy who has literally read every significant piece of literature on every side about the resurrection and has debated every significant scholar who would debate him, said,

"In general, the more thoroughly one option fails, the more likely the others become. And the more strongly an option is established, the more the others diminish. In particular, when the early and eyewitness experience of the disciples, James, and Paul are considered, along with their corresponding transformations and their central message, the historical resurrection [of Jesus becomes] the only plausible explanation for the facts."

From the very beginning, even the Bible tells us that people have worked to cover up Jesus' resurrection, but every proposed explanation has fallen short. Now if this is true, if Jesus did indeed die on the cross and actually rise from the grave, then the implications are startling.

STARTLING IMPLICATIONS...

I am convinced this is where Christianity stands or falls. That's not to minimize anything else Jesus did, including the cross, but we can only see the significance of the cross – or anything else Jesus did – through the lens of the resurrection. If Jesus rose from the dead, then we have to accept all that He said. If He didn't rise from the dead, then we don't have to worry about a thing He said, because it was a lie.

If Jesus Rose from the Dead...

But if Jesus rose from the dead, then He has absolute authority. Which is why right after this in Matthew 28:18, Jesus says, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."*

He has Authority Over Life and Death

Think about it, if Jesus rose from the dead, then He has authority over life and death. Listen to Jesus' words before He died, *"No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again"* (John 10:18).

Who among men determines when they live? Who made a decision one day, "I think I'd like to live," and so you persuaded your parents to bring you into the world? And who, when you are dead – when your heart flatlines – has the power to say, "I'm coming back to life"? If Jesus rose from the dead, then He clearly has absolute authority over life and death.

He has Authority Over Sin and Satan

If Jesus rose from the dead, He has authority over sin and Satan. Death is the payment for sin. We die because we sin; because we have turned from God to ourselves; because we have denounced the authority of God in our lives. Every one of us has turned against God to our own ways—our own ways of thinking, our own ways of living—and the consequence of sin, all throughout history, is death. Everyone has died...because everyone has sinned. You will die...because you have sinned. But there is one man in all history who never sinned.

You say, "Well then why did He die?" I'm glad you asked! He died for your sin and for my sin. He paid the price for sin in our place. And once He had died, He rose from the grave, not just in victory over death, but in victory over sin. Right after the Bible talks about all the people who saw Jesus alive after the resurrection, we read these words: *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). Jesus has absolute authority over sin and Satan.

He has Authority Over You and Me

If Jesus rose from the dead, He has authority over life and death, sin and Satan, which leaves one unavoidable conclusion, He has authority over you and me. And this is the foundational confession of Christianity,

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:9-13).

He Reigns Over Us Supremely

What does it mean for Jesus to have absolute authority over you and me? It means He reigns over us supremely. He is the sovereign ruler over our lives. And this is the case, whether we believe it or not. Just as the grass is green outside regardless of whether or not you believe it, Jesus is Lord – the absolute authority, the sovereign ruler, the majestic king – over your life. People say, “I’ve decided to make Jesus Lord of my life.” I hate to break it to you, but you didn’t have a choice in the matter. Jesus *is* Lord over your life. The Bible says one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The question is not whether or not He’s Lord. The question is, “Will you submit to Him as Lord now, or when it is too late?”

He Loves Us Deeply

Not only does He reign over us supremely, but he loves us deeply. Remember the reason He died in the first place. The reason we’re even having this discussion about resurrection is because God loves you enough to send His Son to pay the price for sin in your place. And we know this is not just some made up story, some fanciful myth, precisely because of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus validates everything He said, taught, and told us He came to do. He came because He loves us deeply.

He Will Judge Us Eternally

He reigns over us supremely, He loves us deeply, and He will judge us eternally. Jesus said in John 5:21-22, “*Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.*” And this is good news. It’s good news because you and I can be saved from eternal judgment if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead. But it’s also good news because the resurrection reminds us that this world is not all there is. The resurrection reminds us that there is something beyond this world. And if there’s not, if there’s not, then we have no hope when we see tragedy and loss in this world.

Tim Keller, a pastor up in New York, said,

“I always say to my skeptical, secular friends that, even if they can’t believe in the resurrection, they should want it to be true. Most of them care deeply about justice for the poor, alleviating hunger and disease, and caring for the environment. Yet many of them believe that the material world was caused by accident and that the world and everything in it will eventually simply burn up. They find it discouraging that so few people care about justice without realizing that their own worldview undermines any motivation to make the world a better place. Why sacrifice for the needs of others if in the end nothing we do will make any difference? However, if the resurrection of Jesus happened, that means there’s infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the needs of the world.”

Don’t we all have innate, built-in longings and desires for meaning and purpose and hope that says, “This world is not the total picture.” Cancer doesn’t have the last word. Tornadoes don’t have the last word. Shootings and wars don’t have the last word. Starvation and poverty and AIDS don’t have the last word. And Jesus’ resurrection from the dead reminds us, “He has the last word.” And this means that He will have the last word in each of our lives for all of eternity. We are not just playing games and going through routine on an Easter Sunday morning. This is an ultimate question.

THE PERSONAL QUESTION...

And it leads to a personal question that I've split it into two based on what we just read in Romans 10.

Do You Believe in the Historical Resurrection of Jesus?

First question I would ask every person: do you believe in the historical resurrection of Jesus. *"If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised from the dead, you will be saved."* This is where the message of Christianity is radically different from every other religion. This is no list of things to do, boxes to check off, or rituals to follow. This is truth to be believed. Ladies and gentlemen, do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? And if you do not, if you would not say "yes" to that question, then there is a burden of proof on you.

I was talking to a man who was visiting here recently. He had come to appease his father who'd read something I'd written, and this man said to me, "I used to believe in all this stuff before, but I don't think I do anymore." And I just looked back at him and said, "So have you come to the conclusion that Jesus did not indeed rise from the dead?"

And he said, "Well, no, not necessarily." And I said to him, "Well that's a question I would encourage you to dive into and resolve before you decide where you're going to stake your life for eternity. Because if Jesus did rise from the dead, then you're going in a very dangerous direction right now." He said, "I probably need to dive into that." I said, "Probably so," and I offered him some resources to help him in that journey.

What explanation above is most plausible? Do you believe in the historical resurrection of Jesus? And if you do, follow with me here, then I want you to notice in Romans 10 that this is not all that is involved in salvation. No, there's not work that's involved, not a list of things to do, but there is a confession here. And I want to urge you to listen very closely at this point because we are in a Birmingham church-saturated culture this Easter morning where the overwhelming majority of people would say they believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

But the reality is: belief in the resurrection of Jesus alone does not save you. There are scores of people in Birmingham, AL, in churches like this one this morning on Easter who believe in the resurrection of Jesus and are NOT saved from their sins. And the reason I say that with full confidence is because even the devil himself believes in the resurrection of Jesus, and he is not saved from his sin. If the devil himself were here, and I were to ask him, "Do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?" He'd say, "Yes." If I were to ask him, "Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?" He'd say, "Yes." If I were to ask him, "Do you believe Jesus died on the cross and rose again?" He'd say, "Yes." If I were to ask him, "Do you believe Jesus is the only way to be saved?" He'd say, "Yes." If I were to ask him, "Will you commit to live a moral life and come to church and get involved in leadership?" He'd say, "Yes." Because you can believe and do every single one of those things and NOT be saved from your sins.

But do you know what the key question is? The question that would change everything in that conversation is if I were to look at the devil and say, "Do you repent of your sin and surrender your life to Jesus as Lord?" And he would say, "Absolutely not." And here's why this is so important – because that's exactly what we have done today. We have said, "Believe in Jesus, pray some prayer at some point in your life, get involved in church once a

year or maybe every week (maybe even lead in the church), live a good life, and you'll be saved." And it's a lie. It's a lie. It's a lie.

Scores of professing Christians have believed half of Romans 10:9, and they think they are saved from their sins when they are not. There are scores of people – likely scores in this room – who would give lip-service to Jesus but whose lives are not surrendered to His absolute authority. And so I ask you the personal question, do you believe in the historical resurrection of Jesus?

Do You Surrender to the Universal Authority of Jesus?

And do you surrender to the universal authority of Jesus? This is what it means with your mouth to confess Him as Lord. Its not just to say magic words, but it's to have a heart condition that says, "Yes, yes, I believe Jesus died on the cross for my sin and rose from the grave as my Savior, and my life belongs to Him as Lord." And your eternity is dependent on the answer to that question.

Belief is not ultimately a matter of preference or opinion; it's a matter of truth. And so I want to ask every single person, whether this is the first time you have ever been in a church, the first time you have been in church in a long time, or if it is your regular practice to be in church; whether you are a guest or a member of this church, regardless, I want to ask you: do you believe in the historical resurrection of Jesus? And as a result, have you surrendered your life to the universal authority of Jesus?

And if you have not, I want to invite you to do that today. Not because of anything I have said, but because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for you. Believe in Him. Surrender to Him, and be saved by His mercy for you in light of His loving authority over you.

My wife Heather's family is in town. This weekend would have been Heather's mom's birthday. For years, Heather's mom would say that she believed in Jesus in her head, but just a couple of years ago, she submitted to Jesus in her heart. She went from speaking about Jesus with her lips to surrendering to Jesus as her Lord, and that made all the difference in her life. It made all the difference when after all kinds of health struggles, she found herself with kidney failure last August that led to sudden, massive bleeding in her brain one morning that she could not recover from. Yet her sudden death became a celebration of life, and here's why.

When you find yourself lying on a hospital bed, and the prognosis is not good, what matters on that day, ultimately, is not whether or not you've gone to church or made a decision or been a good, smart, kind, successful person in this culture. What matters on that day is whether or not you have trusted the one who has all authority over life and death, sin and Satan, you and me. Because when you have, then you don't have to worry or be afraid of diabetes or breast cancer or neuropathy or degenerative eye disease or kidney failure or massive bleeding in your brain, because when this body can take it no longer, you breathe your last breath, and your heart stops beating, you have victory because you have united your life with the one who conquered death, and in Him, through Him, you will live forever. That is the greatest news in the world.

I want to urge you, if you have never truly surrendered to the authority of Jesus over your life, I want to urge you to put aside your pride in these next few moments and right there where you are, humble yourself before God. Ask Him to forgive you of all your sin, and surrender your life to Him. In your heart, believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead for you, and then confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.

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