

Basic Training: Trusting The Leader
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-10; Matthew 28:1-15

Friends, our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Matthew 28:1-15. Let's listen to the Word of God. "After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day."

Do you remember what you wanted to be when you grew up? I do. I wanted to be a doctor. When we're kids, our career choices are basic: fireman, police officer, nurse, teacher. Often we want to do what our mom or dad did. We don't have great aspirations; something catches our attention and spurs our imagination and that's what we want to do.

Most childhood dreams are simple like that. We aren't determined to become Wall Street tycoons or owners of huge corporations. Even if we think we want to be an astronaut, we think it's gotta be like climbing into an airplane and heading off to the moon. When we're young, we don't understand money or jobs very well. All we want is a life where everything is OK.

But that's one childhood dream that doesn't come true. Parts of it do, if there's food on the table and our parents don't fight too much, if the bullies don't pay attention to us and there's lots of love in our homes. But one part never does. People die.

From a young age, I knew that my grandmother was a wonderful lady who showered me with love...and that she wasn't my real grandmother. My mother's mother died years before I was born and my grandfather had remarried. My sons won't know their grandfathers. From a very young age, we learn that death is a reality; no matter how smart you are, no matter how kind or cruel, no matter if you're a cheat and a crook or a saint and a blessing, you can't escape it.

We're told by society that death is a part of life; as *The Lion King* put it, there's a "circle of life." Some of us have bought into that. If we're Christian, we may try to put a Christian face on death. The worst versions aren't biblical, things like "God needed another angel." There are truthful versions too, ones that acknowledge God's sovereign reign over all things, including death, and that when someone dies, it is not a surprise to God but happens by His will.

Yet none of those answers, even the truly Christian one I just mentioned, gets to the root problem we all know in our gut – things aren't supposed to be this way. Death isn't supposed to be a part of the equation. When someone dies, we are sad because we will miss their company, their love, their presence. But even deeper than that, it's just wrong. Even when we lose someone a hundred years old, when they've lived a long life, there's something unnatural about it. Death isn't a natural part of the human equation. We all know it.

And that's what Scripture tells us. God made us to be able to live forever. Romans 5:12 from the New Living Translation puts it this way: "When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned." Let's take it to its logical conclusion – if sin enters through Adam's decision to disobey and sin brings death, then there was a point at which sin wasn't a part of things, and therefore, neither was death. Death is foreign to the way God made us to be. Through Adam, we brought it upon ourselves, ultimately from choosing to disobey God. And despite our hatred of death, we've been choosing things other than God ever since.

Through most of Israel's history, they believed there was no overcoming death. Psalm 16 this morning said, "You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." When David wrote those words, he was describing God's grace in giving him long life. Eternity with God was too much to be grasped; the grave, called Sheol, held out little hope of joy or promise or eternal life with God. David did not know how prophetic his words would be. He wrote about simply not dying young at the hands of his enemies. But God gave David those words to mean something far more than even David would know. The true Holy One, the very Son of God, Jesus the Christ – He would not see decay. He would not be abandoned to the grave, even though He died.

What we celebrate this morning is God's rescue plan. While there were hints and shadows of it before, in Jesus Christ, the dream we have all had, the dream beyond any hope, comes true. Life after death is not assumed or wished for; it's not denied as a pipe dream or explained away as an irrational desire. Life after death is proven, right in front of us. Life after death shows up outside the empty tomb.

God's rescue plan involved sending His own Son to us, the perfect One who would not only stay true to the Father and never sin, but who would die at the hands of His own people for the sins of all those who would trust in Him. Because death is unjust for a person who had committed no sin, not only did the Father raise Him back to life, He made Jesus the means by which any of us could be saved from sin. What seemed forever broken is now fixed through Jesus. There is life after life for all who trust in Him.

Nobody would make up a story like this. Nobody in that era did make up stories like this. There were mythologies about gods and goddesses, but no one told stories where the gods came and interacted in real human history, where God was intimately involved with the affairs of His people. The gods might disguise themselves as people, but to engage with them as Jesus engages with humanity, to save us from ourselves by dying Himself and rising back to life? Never! Nothing even comes close.

And nobody who wanted to start a religion would have started one this way. The ancient Greco-Roman religions helped maintain the status quo, favoring the politicians and making certain people very rich. Artisans made lots of money creating religious shrines and trinkets; priests made money from performing sacrifices. In comparison, the earliest Christians were hunted at every turn, attacked by the Jews, and slaughtered by the Romans. Instead of collecting money from believers, the apostles gave it away! Even though Paul taught that pastors and teachers could rightfully be paid for their ministry, Paul made tents so more funds could be distributed amongst the poor. There was no profit motive. In fact, being a Christian meant there was a good chance you'd lose your head, be fed to a lion, or wind up on a Roman cross.

No one would have chosen to create a religion with the stories told to us in the Bible. Jesus first appears to women. In a man's world where women's testimony wasn't admissible in the court of law, why would somebody make up a story where women are the first to know? In a culture where courage, might, and conviction were prized, why would the Gospels present Jesus' closest friends as oblivious, who doubt the resurrection even after seeing Jesus with their own eyes, who for fifty days after the resurrection go back to their old jobs and sit around in a room together praying because they are so clueless on their own? They ring true precisely because they make no sense unless they are true. Nobody would have made it up.

The Jewish authorities have an answer for the stories...the disciples stole the body. Never mind the fact that any soldier who deserted his post would have been immediately executed; never mind the fact that Jesus' disciples were so afraid that when He was arrested, they all scattered to the four winds, a kind of cowardice that would have been repugnant to Jews and Romans alike. The Bible doesn't even bring up the obvious refutation that the soldiers, instead of being punished, were alive and well after abandoning the sealed tomb. Scripture has no interest in hiding the alternate theories as to what happened. It's a believable enough story if you want to believe it.

To believe that a man has risen from the dead...that takes faith. It's easier to believe a lie that doesn't challenge what we know about the universe than to step out and believe something that will radically change our lives, that may put us up to ridicule and shame and in some parts of the world, even death...unless it's true. If it's true, even if it's implausible, we must believe it.

Even implausibility is no reason not to believe. If you told someone from just two hundred years ago that you could fly around the world in hours, that you could talk to someone 3000 miles away face to face on a gadget called a phone, if you told them of computers and space exploration, they would have thought we were crazy or gods ourselves. So much of world history is implausible – yet true. Jesus' return from the grave, based on what we see in the Bible, actually makes more sense than most of history!

After years of studying and debates, having read about other religions and atheism and everything in-between, I can tell you that the evidence for the truth of Christianity is overwhelming. Yet you must decide what you believe, and what you believe has eternal consequences. It's that important. The biblical story, its explanations, the historical narrative of the resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of eternal life makes sense of everything. They make sense of the childhood dream that one day, everything will be set right, that people aren't made to die but to live forever. But you must believe it and, in your belief, choose to follow the risen Lord who lives even now.

That leads me from a childhood dream to a childhood game – follow the leader. Did you ever play follow the leader? Someone would lead you around the playground. A line of kids would run around the merry-go-round and under the swings and over the monkey bars – I'm not sure any of those are still allowed on modern playgrounds! But we get it. Sometimes, you'd choose whether or not to play based on who was the leader. I was never any good at the monkey bars. If Joe always led us over and through and around them, I probably wasn't going to follow.

We play "follow the leader" today at our jobs. Whether it's a principal or a CEO or the local boss, somebody is setting the path we have to take. How well we follow often depends on how much we trust the leader. In my years at a call center, I saw people do better and worse on the phones based on who was making up the rules and how much they trusted them, how much they wanted to follow. Good team leaders got their teams through rough patches when it was clear the company wasn't sure what it was doing. Bad team leaders had disgruntled employees even when things were stellar. Much of our work lives are spent playing this game, too.

Easter makes us stop and ask ourselves some difficult questions. Who am I following and why? What leaders do I trust? Whose path am I on? Because more than anything, Jesus' resurrection is a call to follow the leader. The path that He points us toward is not an easy one. He Himself says in Matthew 7:14 that the gate that leads to eternal life is small and the path narrow. He points out the path itself in the gospel – it is filled with joy and fellowship with other believers, but along the way also lie difficulty and suffering. The path always leads directly to the cross where our old lives are left behind, where we crucify our sinful desires on a daily basis. But Easter shows that the path does not end at death – not the death of our old lives on the cross, not with suffering, not even with our physical deaths. The path leads to new life, eternal life, resurrected life, life with Jesus, life everlasting in the presence of God.

The question we must answer is this: do I trust the leader? Will I believe in His words and actions enough to follow Him wherever His path leads? There is plenty of evidence, but it still requires faith. There are no guarantees for this life, only assurances for the next. Yet the resurrection shows that our hope isn't empty, that we believe in something worth believing in. Is it foolish? In human terms, yes. The Bible says so. The ancients weren't stupid. People didn't come back to life then either. Again from the New Living Translation, 1 Corinthians 1:23-25 says it well: "So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength."

Which do you choose? Human wisdom or God's foolishness? Don't wait another day to make a decision. Today is resurrection day! Today is the day Jesus returned, proving everything He taught was true! Today is the day we know sins are forgiven! Today is the day we know that God loves us! Today proves that death will not reign over us forever! All that can be true for you if you turn to Him in faith and trust. It's not a choice for a day but a lifetime, but there's no better choice you can make. If you've never made the choice to follow Jesus but you want to get on His path, talk to me after the service and you can be sure you are His disciple with the promise of everlasting life.

When the women got news of Jesus' resurrection, they hurried off to tell the disciples, "afraid yet filled with joy." That fear is natural. When God steps into our lives in an undeniable way, our first reaction is usually fear. Even when it's wonderful, it's still terrifying to come in close contact with the holy. Don't let fear stop you. The women were terrified, one gospel says, but they obey what the angels say. If the story of the resurrection makes you nervous, that's OK. It's because God is working in your life.

They start on their journey. Then suddenly, Jesus arrives. As they bow to worship, He tells them, "Don't be afraid. Just go and tell the others." With that, their fear is gone. All that's left is joy. Do you have that joy today? Trust in Him, and that joy is yours, not just for today but for everyday.

As we leave this place today, that's my prayer for all of us here – that we would encounter the risen Lord Jesus and place our trust in Him. May He meet each one of us right where we are. May our doubts disappear, may our fears melt away, and may our hearts be full of joy as we know the dream is true – in Jesus Christ, eternal life is here. In Jesus Christ, God is proven true. In Jesus Christ, death is defeated. In Jesus Christ, all is reconciled. In Jesus Christ, we are made whole. He is risen! Hallelujah! Amen.