

*All Roads Lead Here: The Credible Incredible*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Daniel 7:13-14; John 20:1-21; Romans 5:6-11*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Romans 5:6-11. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Once upon a time, we used to trust the news. Walter Cronkite signed off saying, “And that’s the way it is.” Every broadcast of Paul Harvey ended, “And now you know the rest of the story.” Sensationalism sold newspapers, but real journalism was about getting the facts straight. But now, we have to filter our news. We have the rise of fake news, news stories made up just to prove a point or stir up contention. Major media slants towards political sides. The National Enquirer has become the national standard in news. So we distrust until we can figure out what’s true from what’s false. Our first question is, “Is that believable?”

Our skepticism makes Easter a hard holiday to wrap our heads around. Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ – a miracle that affects our entire eternity, but it’s hard to believe. Even if we believe that there is a God and that He intervenes in our lives, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead strains our sense of credibility. Today we’ll look at three things: who was Jesus of Nazareth? Why are the accounts of His death and resurrection believable? And what does it mean for us if it’s true? We’re going to find answers to all three questions that make the incredible story of Jesus credible and faith in Him not only plausible but sensible.

*So who was Jesus of Nazareth?* Four books tell who Jesus was and what He did from four unique perspectives. Matthew and John were His disciples. Mark was good friends with and interviewed Peter, the lead disciple and head of the church in Jerusalem for thirty years. Luke was written by an outsider who meticulously researched the story of Jesus and the early church. Four accounts written within 50 years of Jesus’ life, written by different people with different backgrounds and different agendas, who each tell the stories from their point of view. Yet because we have four perspectives, we have a very well rounded view of who Jesus was.

In His early ‘30s, Jesus entered public ministry. There are misconceptions about what He did, so let’s clear them up. Jesus was not a traveling philosopher but a rabbi, someone who was trained in the Jewish faith and taught the Jewish people the truth of God. A rabbi’s job was to focus the community on who God is and what He has done in the world, and our proper response to God. Morality was a part of that conversation, but the law given to Israel 1500 years before Jesus time set out how God’s people were supposed to live. Teaching people to be moral wasn’t what Jesus came to do.

As many of you know, we went to Williamsburg, VA on Spring Break a week or so ago. Williamsburg was for some time the home of Thomas Jefferson. In a little bookshop there, I found a copy of the Jefferson Bible. Jefferson thought that Jesus was a great moralist, but the miracles in the Bible were impossible to believe. So he cut the moral teachings of Jesus out of a Bible and pasted them into a journal. What struck me about the Jefferson Bible was just how small it was. There's not much there. That's because Jesus wasn't primarily a moral teacher. He had far bigger priorities in mind than teaching people to be good.

There were three things central to Jesus' ministry. The first was doing the miraculous to confirm who He was. Every gospel has amazing stories of the things Jesus did – and He did so many miracles so often, they summarize it, “Jesus went about the countryside healing the sick wherever He went.” The most unbelievable miracles are the ones the gospels detail for us. And the miracles served the specific purpose of proving to the masses that Jesus was the Son of God.

You cannot separate the miracles from who Jesus was. A huge part of His teaching surrounded Himself and who He was, backed up with miracles. He regularly stated that He was fulfilling prophecy. Either He was a narcissist – and that's not the mark of a good moral teacher – or He was speaking the truth. Either way, even Jesus' enemies didn't deny He did miracles.

The second central part of Jesus' ministry was teaching people about the Kingdom of God. Wherever He goes, Jesus tells the people what the Kingdom of God is like, who is invited, and how people act in the Kingdom of God. He informs us what it means to be a citizen of a Kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of this world. He invites us into that Kingdom. He shows incredible love to all sorts of outcasts who, when they turned to God in faith, could be forgiven and enter the Kingdom despite their failings. He showed immense kindness, mercy, and grace to the people who His society thought were the least worthy.

And that ties into the final part of Jesus' ministry – convincing us that we are unable to earn the Kingdom of God by our good works. Jesus taught that perfection is God's expectation for God's people. You can't just do some good things but have to be good inside and out, with every action reflecting godliness. Jesus pointed out that while the law commanded us not to kill, its fulfillment was for us not to be angry; not only were we commanded not to commit adultery, its true meaning was to keep us from lust. That threatened the religious leaders who were very careful to keep the letter of the law, but broke the spirit of it all the time. Jesus' teachings are impossible for us to carry out. Jesus' teaching shows our need for forgiveness and redemption from our failure to be godly. He secured that forgiveness for us through His death.

Now let's talk about His death and resurrection. He predicted His death over and over – and sure enough, the political party of the Pharisees had Him tried and executed for blasphemy. They didn't argue about His moral philosophy because there were no holes in it. They found Him guilty of making Himself equal to God by calling Himself the Son of God. That was the only charge that could stick. So if you ever come across someone who tells you that Jesus never said He was the Son of God, don't believe it – it was the one thing both His friends and enemies alike agreed upon.

This gets us to our second big question: *can we believe the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection?* Because if they aren't reliable and trustworthy, we might as well go home. There's no point to Christianity if these two things aren't completely true. Let's take a look.

Jesus' death followed established patterns in the Roman world. Crucifixion was not unusual and was often used on common criminals as a deterrent. The beating and abuse He suffered were cruel, but sadly not unusual. There was a twisted logic behind crucifixion. When you saw someone hanging on a cross, it told you that if you followed their path, you could be next. Crucifixion was not just death, it was abject humiliation, scorn, ridicule, abuse. Crucifixion was the Roman way to put down an insurrection before it started – to see a rebel leader naked and shamed as they died was effective at getting followers to disperse and go home.

That's what's so believable about the story. Many of Jesus' followers started going home. They are broken. Peter is convinced that he's worthless because he denied Jesus three times. All Jesus' closest friends don't understand much of anything about His resurrection. They are huddled in a room terrified that the authorities are going to come after them next.

But it becomes even more credible. When Jesus rises from the dead, He first appears to a group of women in His circle of followers. They go to the disciples who are like, "Yeah, right." This part of the story throws a curve ball at skeptics. No self-respecting Jewish man of 30 AD would have believed an impossible story from a group of women. They were incredibly sexist from our point of view – women couldn't even testify in a lawsuit. Why would anyone make up a fake story to make it harder believe in the resurrection than it already is?

And those who first see Jesus after His resurrection act like we would – they are stupefied. They can't believe what they are seeing with their own eyes. Thomas won't believe the testimony of his companions he's been traveling with for the last three years because it's too crazy a story. The story is credible because the gospel stories make the disciples – the people who led the early church – look really, really bad. Who would start a religion by telling stories of the religion's founders that make them look selfish, unenlightened, ashamed, and afraid? It only makes sense if it was the truth.

Those disciples eventually do understand and spread word that Jesus is alive. But don't take their word alone. There were over 500 eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Paul persecuted Christians until he became the final eyewitness to Jesus. If they aren't enough, take the testimony of the stoic philosopher Seneca in 73 AD, or the Jewish historian Josephus a bit later. Or take the words of Jesus' enemies in the Jewish Talmud. It rejects Jesus as the Savior and calls Him a false prophet but confirms He was a rabbi and miracle worker. Talk to historians, and even if they don't believe, if they're honest they will tell you that Jesus' death and resurrection have some of the strongest evidence of any events in ancient history...far stronger than many wars and historical figures of the ancient world we take for granted.

And finally, there was no reason for Jesus' early followers to spread word of His resurrection if it wasn't true. People started dying for spreading the faith not long after Jesus' own death and resurrection, including at least one of Jesus' closest friends, James. They were persecuted by the Jewish authorities, and eventually, the Roman authorities.

All but one of the disciples was executed. People lost their homes, their status in their communities, their livelihoods. The idea of a crucified and risen Savior was a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to the Romans. Why do we believe the New Testament? Because the only thing gained for those who follow Jesus in the first century is the Kingdom of God. There was no earthly reason to spread a false tale that only resulted in their punishment.

Chuck Colson was Richard Nixon's "hatchet man" who spent years in prison for Watergate. He became a Christian in prison and then led Christian ministries for 40 years until his death. And here's what he said: "I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world – and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

So if we've established who Jesus was and seen that the eyewitness testimony is reliable, then the only question left is, *why does the death and resurrection of Jesus mean anything today, 2000 years later?* That's where our passage today from Romans comes in. We've been studying Romans together as a congregation since January, and this passage that naturally falls today tells us perfectly why we're still paying attention to the man from Nazareth.

Here's how Romans 5:6-11 starts: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Here's the point of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – to save ungodly people. That's you and me. We might argue; we might say we're good people. But it's another thing to say that we're godly people, acting in ways pleasing to God. I might be a good driver, I'm safe on the roads, but there's a world of difference between me and a race car driver with precision skills. There is a world of difference between being nice and not doing anyone harm and seeking to follow God and act in godly ways with your whole life. In fact, we are powerless to be godly on our own. We reject God. We do what we want. Sometimes we do good things, but they come from selfish motives – even a desire to feel good about ourselves. None of that can make us godly. We've declared war on God, which puts God at war with us.

Yet Christ died for you in the midst of your sin. Not because you had turned to good; not because He saw into the future and saw the potential for good in people; no! We were hopeless, helpless, powerless, to be godly. There was nothing we could do; there was nothing in us that made God say, "This will give them the nudge they need to be like me." Christ died for us in spite of our war against Him. God the Father sent the Son to die for us so that anyone with faith in the Son would be saved from their sin and its results. God sent the Son to forgive the sin of every believer so we would become part of His Kingdom, His adopted sons and daughters.

Romans 5 goes on: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." We hear of Good Samaritans injured or killed trying to save people from a fire or a car accident. Those are terrible situations. But every Good Samaritan goes in expecting to come out alive! Occasionally, a soldier will intentionally die to save the others in his unit, to keep them from harm. We give those soldiers the greatest honors.

But Jesus death is not like either of those. Imagine an Allied soldier in WWII falling on a grenade to save the lives of a German platoon or a Japanese squadron. Imagine a sergeant jumping on a suicide bomber to save a bunch of ISIS terrorists. Sounds absolutely insane, doesn't it? But that's what Jesus did. We were at war with God, ignoring His ways, desiring to overthrow Him, sinning in every way possible. Jesus' own people, the very best of the crop, the people God chose to be His own, killed Him! If they would do it, the rest of us would have too. Jesus came to save us while we were still at war with God. He died for people who hated Him. He died a miserable, brutalizing death to rescue us while we were still deep in the enemy camp.

Jesus did it to save us from the perfect justice of God who sets everything right. Because of our sin, we should be judged and punished by God. But now, Romans says, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

God sees us as righteous now. We are clothed with Jesus' righteousness! We are justified before the Father – we aren't just declared to be not guilty, we're seen as holy and righteous in His eyes! We are saved from God's wrath, the wrath God should have – because we see all the injustice in the world and we want to see it made right. But the only way that's going to happen is if God is just and God gets angry about those injustices too. We are saved from God's wrath not because we are good, but because Christ died for us, in our place, to pay the debt we could never pay, the debt of our wrongdoings against God and one another.

But not only are we reconciled to God because of Jesus' death, Jesus has been raised to life! That's why we're here today! Jesus did not stay in the tomb. If He had, then all His teachings would have been for nothing. The ultimate proof of what Jesus taught is in His defeat of death itself. Because Jesus is alive, we know that everyone who turns away from sin and puts their faith and trust in Jesus has been saved by Him. Dead men can't save you. A dead man can't get you out of a burning building. A dead man can't do your open heart surgery. But a live one can. And Jesus is alive. He goes before the Father for you; He intercedes for you. His sacrifice reconciled us to God, and because Jesus lives, we can live like Him. We can become like Him. The Holy Spirit that Jesus gives every believer makes and molds us into His image.

As Romans 5:11 says, "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." The proper response on Easter is joy! If you believe – not just believe that God exists or even that Jesus saves, but believe that He has saved you and you want to live a changed life because of Him – then you can have that joy! You can have the confidence of knowing your eternity is secure!

And here's the thing: you know it's credible. The resurrection is incredible; we think it's physically impossible. And yet several hundred witnesses tell us that Jesus appeared to them, true flesh and blood, on multiple occasions at multiple times in multiple places after His death, witnesses who gained nothing but trouble for their testimony yet held that testimony even to death. This is not fake news. It's more trustworthy than any headline you're going to read.

Will you believe today? If you still struggle, there's only one thing I ask you to do: pray. Just say a few words to God in trust that He's there and ask Him to make faith in Him and His Son and His Spirit a reality for you. You can know the peace of being set right with God today. I encourage you to do that. And if you want to talk about it more, come see me after the service or call me this week so we can discuss it further.

And if you have that faith, if you have that peace, then rejoice, my brothers and sisters in Christ! We have a risen Savior, a risen Lord, who has defeated death, who has defeated the grave, who has defeated all the powers of this world. He lives and reigns over us even now. Know His love for you, love one another, and spread word that Jesus lives.