

WHY I BELIEVE

When I entered college as a freshman,
they put me in a quad with four other Christians.

We had answered a questionnaire about our interests,
and evidently five of us stood out as religious fanatics
and they thought it best to quarantine us.

The four guys next door to us were pretty typical college guys
for the 1970's when it was all about sex, drugs and rock n roll.
We shared the same bathroom with them,
and when I went to shave in the morning,
and when one of the coeds they had slept with the night before
would step out of the shower naked,
it took all of my spiritual maturity
not to turn away quickly and make her feel judged,
but to look at her politely and smile,
and tell her she could take as long as she wished toweling off.
Sometimes it's hard doing what's right,
but I tried to be as patient as possible.

Eventually, the other guys came to know about our faith,
and we had many late-night discussions about Christianity.
I remember the time when one guy found he couldn't out argue us,
and in exasperation made this statement:
I'm not going to believe something just so I can go to heaven when I die.

I said to him, Don,
I don't want you to believe in Christianity so you'll go to heaven.
I want you to believe in Christianity because it's the truth.

I believe what Jesus revealed about God
and what he taught about himself
is the truth.

I don't want you to believe in Jesus
because you'll go to heaven if you do.
Or because it will make you happier.
Or because it will make you a better man.

Believing in Jesus will do all those things for you.

But the reason I want you to believe in Jesus
is because I believe Jesus was divine,
God in the flesh.
His teachings reveal to us how God wants us to live
and his death and resurrection save us from our sins.

That was the claim of the Apostles and the early Christians.
God has visited us in the person of Jesus.
He was not just another rabbi.
He was not one more in a long line of prophets.
He was and is the unique and divine Son of God.

This morning I want to share with you why I believe that's true.

We are going to cover a huge amount of material this morning
and we'll have to move fast.

Here we go.
First,

1. THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST

Perhaps the most striking feature of the teaching of Jesus is that he spoke so often
about himself – and in the loftiest of terms.

Jesus said about himself:

John 6.35: I am the Bread of Life; he who comes to me shall not hunger.

John 8.12: I am the Light of the World; he who follows me will not walk in darkness.

John 11.25: I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me, though he die,
yet shall he live.

John 14.6: I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me.

Matthew 11.28: Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.

In addition he claimed that

- (1) he was without sin (Jn 8.45-46),
- (2) he had authority to forgive sins (Mk 2.1-12),
- (3) he would judge the world (Jn 5.22-29 and Mt 25.31-46), and
- (4) to see him was to see the Father (Jn 14.8-9).

All this from a man who insisted upon humility in others and who spoke of pride as a grievous sin.

The noted theologian John R. W. Stott makes this observation.

John R. W. Stott: This self-centeredness of the teachings of Jesus immediately sets him apart from the other great religious teachers of the world. They were self-effacing. They pointed away from themselves, saying, “That is the truth, so far as I perceive it; follow that.” Jesus said: “I am the Truth; follow me.”

Jesus was willing to wash the feet of his disciples, spend time with the outcasts that others despised, and give his life away in countless acts of selflessness. And yet he made the most outlandish claims about himself.

In his most daring statement, he even claimed the personal name of God as his own.

Jesus said:

John 8.56-59: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, **I AM.**” Therefore they picked up stones to throw at him ...

To understand what Jesus is claiming we need to go back to when God first revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and told him to deliver the Israelites from Egypt.

Moses said, “When I go to the Israelites and say God has sent me to deliver you, they will want to know which God.

They will ask me, “What is the name of the God who has sent you?”

What should I tell them?”

This is God’s response.

Exodus 3.14: I AM WHO I AM. Say to the Israelites: **I AM** has sent me to you.

“I AM WHO I AM” is the personal name for God, sometimes shortened to I AM.

In Hebrew: Yahweh.

And here in John 8 Jesus claims that name for himself.

He says, “Before Abraham, I was.”

What makes me so certain that’s he’s claiming the name of God for himself?

The text says those who heard him picked up stones to stone him.

Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy.

And that’s what they believed Jesus had done,

and he did not try to convince them that they had misunderstood his claim.

Jesus made the most grandiose claims about himself.

If untrue, they would disqualify him from being a good teacher or a prophet sent from God.

Here’s C. S. Lewis’ classic take on the claims of Jesus.

C. S. Lewis: A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God or else a madman or something worse.

JESUS’ “BREATH-TAKING EGOCENTRICITY” LEAVES US WITH ONLY THREE OPTIONS:

- 1. Jesus was a liar: his claims were false and he knew it.**
- 2. Jesus was a lunatic: his claims were false but he didn’t know it.**
- 3. Jesus is Lord: his claims were true.**

THE ONE OPTION NOT OPEN REGARDING JESUS:

Jesus was a good teacher.

Lewis again.

C. S. Lewis: Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Simply claiming to be divine doesn't make it true.
But it does make us wonder
who are we dealing with when we behold the man Jesus.

A liar, a lunatic or the Lord?

Here's something else that should make us wonder:
his disciples believed his claims.

2. THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

Please hear this.

When the original disciples first met Jesus,
the last thing they would have considered is that he might be God.

In Greek mythology, the gods often came to earth disguised as men.
In the Book of Acts we read about Paul healing a man in the Asia Minor city of
Lystra.

And the Gentiles there began shouting:
the gods have come down to us in human form.

That would never happen among the Israelites.
The idea that God would appear as a man
was not within their realm of thinking.
And for someone to make that claim
would be blasphemy.

But that is what the disciples came to believe.
Why?

Because the character of Christ matched the claims of Christ.

Twelve men followed Jesus daily for three years.
 They saw him when he was tired,
 when he was falsely accused, and
 when the temptation to do evil presented itself to him.
 Of those twelve, three formed an inner circle.
 Peter, James and John.
 In his most difficult and desperate moments
 they were with him.

Here's what they said about him.

1 Peter 2.21-23: Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, **who committed no sin**, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return ...

1 John 3.5: Jesus appeared so that he might take away our sins. And **in him was no sin.**

Jesus makes the outrageous claim to be God,
 and the men closest to him watch him every day for three years.
 And what do they observe?
 His character was consistently selfless and sinless.
 And because it was,
 they found themselves coming to believe what otherwise would have been
 blasphemous.

Years ago a mother told me that in the 11 service
 as Dr. Robb and I were walking down the aisle in our robes and stoles,
 her child said, "Look, Mommy, there goes God and Jesus."
 She said, "No, those are the pastors."
 And the kid said, "Well they sure dress like God and Jesus."

Other parents have told me something similar.
 They pull up next to me in a car
 and the child sees me and says,
 "There's Jesus."

My standard response is:

“Let the little fella get to know me
and he’ll never make that mistake again.”

The more you get to know me,
the more you’ll see how far short I fall of being like Christ.

But when the twelve closest to Jesus got to know him,
his claims to be divine became not less credible, but more so.
Jewish theology held that every person was sinful by nature.
The Jews believed that everyone,
even the best among them,
were the sons of Adam,
possessing his fallen nature and propensity to sin.

Disciples might revere their rabbi as a great man
but never as a sinless man.
The phrase “a sinless man” made no more sense than the phrase “a married
bachelor.”
By definition, neither was possible.

But the followers of Jesus came to believe not merely
that he was better than the rest of us.
They came to believe he was different than the rest of us.
We are sinners.
He was not.

And because his character matched his claims,
his disciples came to believe that he was God become flesh.

Another factor that convinces me Jesus was who he claimed to be
is his resurrection.

3. THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST.

This topic deserves at least an entire session by itself.
But I’ll do my best in the time we have left.

Shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus,
his disciples began to proclaim that he had been raised from the dead.

Here's Peter preaching to thousands a few weeks after the death of Jesus.

Acts 2.22-32: Men of Israel, ... Jesus ... was accredited to you by God by miracles and wonders and signs. ... You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact

Why believe Peter when he says he and the others have seen Jesus resurrected?

WHY BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION

A. The Tomb was Empty

The message about Jesus being raised from the dead was highly disturbing to the authorities.

The occupying Roman forces knew tales of a supposed Messiah who could not be killed could easily incite Jewish freedom fighters to rebellion.

The Jewish leaders knew that if the populace came to believe Jesus had come back to life, they would lose their position and their power.

After all, they had been the ones who engineered his death.

Together, the Romans authorities and the Jewish leaders did all they could to silence the disciples.

First, they warned them not to speak of Jesus.

And then they had the disciples flogged.

And when that didn't work,

they put them in jail.

And when that didn't stop their preaching,

the authorities mounted a full-scale campaign to capture and execute the followers of Jesus.

Still the message spread.

But why go to all that trouble?
Just one mile away,
 a leisurely 20-minute walk,
was the tomb where Jesus was buried.

Go there,
 get the body,
 put it on display,
problem solved.

Why not put an end to it that way?
There's only one explanation that makes sense.
The tomb was empty.

Now I know that bodies have been misplaced before.
An empty tomb by itself does not prove the resurrection.

But another reason is

B. The Eyewitnesses were Credible

First, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene,
 then to Peter,
 then to his disciples.
And then to his brother James, and
 finally to over 500 people together.
What makes them credible?

1. They knew Jesus intimately.

They were his closest friends.
They knew his voice and his mannerisms.

And after his resurrection,
 they touched him and ate with him and spent hours listening to him teach.
And they were absolutely convinced,
 convinced enough later to die for their beliefs,
 that this was the same Jesus they had spent every day with for the past three
 years.

This isn't like the guy I had never seen before
who stopped me in the airport and asked me if I was Liam Neeson.

Pic of Liam Neeson

Honestly I look more like Pete Townshend of The Who
than I do Liam Neeson.

Pic of The Who

Matter of fact, I look more like three members of The Who
than I do Liam Neeson.

The three ugly members of The Who.

The disciples were best friends with Jesus.
They knew him like no one else did.
And they said it was Jesus.

These witnesses were credible for another reason.

2. They experienced no personal benefit by claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead.

They didn't make thousands of dollars selling their story to TMZ
or become famous by giving interviews on 60 Minutes.
In fact, history tells us that because of their claims,
the disciples received not riches and fame but poverty and persecution.

One incredible alternative theory,
known as the Conspiracy theory, states that the disciples stole the body.

AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY: THE CONSPIRACY THEORY

That's why the tomb was empty.

And though they received no monetary reward
and every place they went they were threatened, beaten and imprisoned,
and though every one of them could have saved his life,
simply by saying, "It was a lie; we stole the body,"
none did.

These men were not executed because they propagated the teachings of Jesus.
 You don't kill men for saying we follow a good teacher
 who told us to love one another
 and care for the poor.

In the first century, if you're Rome,
 you execute men who say there is another Lord besides Cesar.

And that was the exact claim the followers of Jesus made.

The earliest Christian affirmation of faith was simply: Jesus Christ is Lord.
 And the disciples proclaimed the Lordship of Christ for one reason:
 he had come back from the dead.
 His resurrection had proven what they had come to believe:
 Jesus is the Son of God,
 the Savior of the world, and
 the Lord of all.

Third,

3. They were Unwavering

Do you really believe that every one of the apostles died for what
 they all knew to be a lie?
 Friends, I have a lot of faith,
 but I don't have enough to believe that one.

The disciples scatter to the ends of the earth to proclaim Christ.
 And all but one,
 John was punished by being exiled on the island of Patmos,
 but all the others were martyred for their preaching.

And no one wavers.
 Not one, hundreds of miles from the others,
 saves his life by confessing: we made it up.
 The resurrection – it never happened.

Chuck Colson of Watergate fame wrote:

Chuck Colson: 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. Take it from one who was involved in conspiracy, who saw the frailty of man firsthand. There is no way the 11 apostles, who were with Jesus at the time of the resurrection, could ever have gone around for 40 years proclaiming Jesus' resurrection unless it were true.

The disciples were credible for another reason.

4. They had been Skeptical

Some say the early witnesses so wanted and so believed that Jesus would come back from the dead that they deluded themselves into thinking that he had.

Men, that just doesn't square with the evidence.

Mary and the other women returned to the tomb that first Easter with one purpose in mind.

Mark 16.1: When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body.

They were not going to meet the living Christ; they were going to bury a dead friend.

And later that morning after encountering Jesus, Mary reported to the disciples that Jesus was alive. the disciples did not say, "We knew it; we knew he would rise again."

Luke 24.9-11: (They) returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ... But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them.

Later, after Jesus appeared to ten of his disciples,
 and Thomas was told that Jesus was alive,
 you remember how skeptical he was.
 What did he say?

John 20.25: Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by
 the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe.

Skeptics all of them.
 But something changed them.

In six weeks Peter who had denied Christ to a chambermaid
 was preaching boldly before thousands that Christ was risen
 and continued to do so even when it meant he would be crucified.

Doubting Thomas was so convinced that he traveled to India,
 proclaiming the risen Christ until he was impaled on a spear.

What changed these skeptics into believers?
 They all gave the same answer: I have seen the risen Christ.

Maybe they were sincere,
 I mean certainly they were sincere,
 when you die for your beliefs that pretty much answers the sincerity question.
 But maybe they were mistaken.

That's what others have said.
 Another common alternative theory given by nonbelievers is referred to as the
 swoon theory.

A COMMON ALTERNATIVE THEORY: THE SWOON THEORY

This theory claims that Jesus did not die on the cross.
 He appeared to die
 but later he revived and the disciples mistakenly believed him to be resurrected.
 And Jesus allowed them to continue in their wrong belief.

Of all the theories that try to explain away the resurrection,
this has got to be the weakest.

Immediately before his crucifixion Jesus was given thirty-nine lashes
with a cat of nine tails,
slicing into his back with every lash.
Often that punishment alone was enough to kill a man.

After that he was nailed to a cross,
stabbed in the side with a spear,
then placed in a sealed tomb with neither food or water.
That was on Friday afternoon.

On Sunday morning of the same weekend,
somehow he gets out of the tomb,
trudges up a flight of stairs,
and appears to his demoralized disciples,
his body covered with the wounds of his scourging and his crucifixion,
that are barely two days old.

And they think not that somehow he has escaped the Romans,
but he has conquered death.
They don't embrace him
and say, Let us get you some medical help.
They bow before him and cry out: My Lord and my God.
And because of how Jesus appears
they are now certain that they, too, will be resurrected
and can look forward to a glorious eternity with God.

You may come up with what you consider to be a good reason not to believe in the
resurrection of Jesus.
But the swoon theory ain't it.
I don't see how any rational person can believe that it is.

Where does that leave us?
 We have an empty tomb.
 That's for certain.

We have credible eyewitnesses who were unwavering and willing to die
 for a truth they were once skeptical of.

And we have two alternative theories –
 the conspiracy theory that the disciples stole the body themselves and
 the swoon theory that Jesus didn't truly die –
 that are frankly unreasonable and naive.

Believing in the resurrections means you have to believe in a miracle.
 That's tough for some of us.

But if you don't believe in a miracle to explain the change in the disciples,
 in my opinion, you have to believe in something even more incredulous.

I believe in the resurrection for another reason.

And that's because of encounters with Christ that are ongoing.

4. ONGOING ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRIST

Those who would discredit the resurrection
 need to explain the change in a man named Saul.
 A Pharisee who devoted his life to persecuting and executing Christians.

Traveling to Damascus to imprison believers there,
 here's what Saul said happened to him.

Acts 22.6-8: About noon a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the
 ground and heard a voice, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" "Who are you,
 Lord?" I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, who you are persecuting," he said.

We know Saul despised Christians as blasphemers and heretics.
 We know he was willing to imprison and execute them.

We know his name was changed to Paul,
and he became the greatest missionary of the first century,
founding dozens of churches and
leading thousands to faith in Christ.
And we know he was executed for his message.

What would it take for an Ali Khamenei,
the supreme leader of Iran,
to become a Christian?
What would have to happen for Louis Farrakhan to turn his back
on everything he believes and follow Jesus?

That's how shocking Paul's conversion was.
What changed him?

He says it was an encounter with the resurrected Christ.

Just in this series,
we've talked about Mary Poplin,
the progressive University professor, and
Joe Eszterhas,
the Hollywood Animal,
who had encounters with the living Christ
that changed their lives.

Another one that was becoming well-known when I first did this lecture
was Louis Zamperini,
the subject of Laura Hillenbrand's book *Unbroken*.

Zamperini had a difficult childhood constantly in fights and in trouble
until he began to run track.

He set records,
ran for USC
and even competed in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.
Here's a picture of him as a young man.

Picture

In 1943 Zamperini's bomber crashed into the Pacific Ocean.
After drifting 2000 miles,
46 days later one other airman and Zamperini,
weighing only 80 lbs.,
landed on the Marshall Islands,
were captured by the Japanese,
and taken to one of the worst prison camps in the Pacific.

They endured unimaginably cruel treatment at the hands of their captors,
the worse one being a sadistic sergeant named Mutsuhiro Watanabe
who took an immediate dislike to Zamperini
and continually singled him
for brutal beatings and the most demeaning of humiliations.

Twenty-five months later Zamperini was released.
He returned home and married,
but his mind was filled with rage and hatred
and his nights were plagued with nightmares of the torture he had received.

Hoping to escape his pain,
he became an alcoholic
and was repeatedly unfaithful to his wife.

Finally, he swore to himself that he would return to Japan
to murder the man who had ruined his life.

His wife went to hear a preacher named Billy Graham
and she came home and told Louie her heart had been changed.
He despised evangelists,
but to appease his wife,
he agreed to go with her.

The first night when the invitation was given,
Louie's hardened heart became enraged and
and he rushed out
only to have another night of tormented dreams filled
with the images and the cruelty of Watanabe.

Because his wife insisted,
he went back the next night
and again got up to leave when the invitation was given.

But instead of walking to the exit,
he found himself heading to the prayer room,
where he fell on his knees,
and accepted Christ.

“In that moment,” he said, “I felt the Holy Spirit enter my heart.
“When I was still on my knees, I forgave all my guards,
and I knew I was through smoking, drinking and chasing women.”

That night there was no nightmare.
And there never was again.

In 1950 Zamperini returned to Japan.

At Sugamo Prison,
he spoke to Japanese war criminals,
including the guards who had so mistreated him.
And he told them about a God of grace
who had become a man in Jesus Christ
so that their sins could be forgiven.

At the end of his talk
Louie asked for the men who had guarded him to come to the front.
As the men moved down the aisle Louie met them half way
and embraced each one.
And he told them that God loved them and he loved them.

Watanabe had not been captured.
It was believed he had committed suicide.

When Louie learned that he was still alive,
 he wrote his tormentor a personal letter,
 telling about the hatred he had had for him,
 his conversion,
 and the line: Love has replaced the hate I had for you.

Zamperini died in 2014 at the age of 97.
 Here's a picture of him late in life.

Picture

What changed Louis Zamperini?
 What removed his hatred and his anger?
 What gave him the peace he had longed for
 and the power to overcome his addiction to alcohol?
 What gave him the ability to love his tormentors
 and forgive them for all they had done to him?

Zamperini tells us:

Louis Zamperini: In that moment I felt the Holy Spirit enter my heart. When I was still on my knees, I forgave all my guards, and I knew I was through smoking, drinking and chasing women.

Here's what Laura Hillenbrand wrote about what happened when Louie fell to his knees and prayed to receive Christ.

“In a single, silent moment his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away.
 He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that Watanabe had striven to make him.
 That morning, he believed, he was a new creation.”

Louis Zamperini says it was an encounter with the resurrected Christ when the Holy Spirit came into his life that transformed his heart. And his biographer wrote that everything about his life from that moment on gave testimony that he was a life that was changed.

I wanted to share this message with you this morning for two reasons.

1. If you don't believe in the divinity of Christ,
I wanted to encourage you to think about it carefully.
If you do, I want you to know that you can be confident that your faith is well-grounded.
2. I want you to know that Jesus is alive, that you can encounter him, and because he lives, he can change your life.