

The Gospel for Skeptics & Sinners

Please open your Bible to the book of Luke 24, or turn to page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. It's our normal practice to look at the pages of Scriptures together and that's what we'll do today. We want to hear what the Lord has said. We'll be looking at this a large part of this chapter, but I'll begin by reading the first 12 verses.

Read **Luke 24:1-12**

Intro

Who doesn't like a good surprise? This past Wednesday was April 1st. And we know what that means, right? April Fool's Day. And my kids have been really interested in pulling pranks and tricks on people for April Fools.

My wife told me that several times that day, she came out of the bathroom and ran straight into a piece of tape that had been put there by one of our kids. You take a piece of clear packing tape, and you put it across a doorway, such that you can hardly see it. And then your unsuspecting victim will walk straight into it. And that happened to my wife, repeatedly.

On Tuesday, the day before, Eve told me that our son was having trouble thinking about or doing anything else because all of his attention was on preparing for pranks – and he was so excited, he couldn't focus on much else. And so we had this conversation about what makes a prank a good one.

And we said that good pranks are something surprising that people enjoy. It's not just lying to people or doing something mean – that's not a good April Fool's joke. Rather, the best kind of jokes are the one which make the person feel confused or disoriented, but also happy or relieved when it's revealed that it's just a joke.

So, he brought a computer mouse to school to try to fool people that he'd caught a mouse, and we did the tape thing on doorways. And we began to dream about what we could maybe do next year with a bit more preparation...

There's nothing quite like a good surprise. And here in Luke 24, we see several instances of surprise. People thought things were one way, but they turned out to be different. No one was anticipating a resurrection – not the women, not the disciples, not the Emmaus travelers. But their skepticism gives way to joy when they realize the good news – Jesus is raised from the dead. The best surprise of all.

But we can sympathize with their skepticism, can't we? Up to this point, books of the Bible have ended with death. Genesis ends with Joseph's death. Deuteronomy ends with Moses's death. Joshua ends with his death. But the gospels end with Jesus's resurrection.

And for those who are in Christ, your story doesn't end with death either. Everlasting life has only just begun for us. And that's why this whole chapter is just good news.

And it's the main idea for us today: **the resurrection of Jesus is good news.**

It's good news in a world of broken hearts. It's good news in a world of failed dreams. It's good news for people with messy, painful lives. Luke 24 is good food that our souls need.

And the way that we fight dashed hopes and failed dreams is by remembering the resurrection every day. This is a truth not just to die for but to live by. The resurrection saves us not just from death but also from despair.

The resurrection of Jesus is good news. And I see that it's good news in two ways in our passage. There are two big ideas here – the resurrection of Jesus is good news for skeptics, and the resurrection is good news for sinners.

Good news for Skeptics

There are fingerprints of truthfulness all over this account that I think Luke wants us to notice. And if we use our detective tools, then we can recognize and be encouraged by the reasons He gives to trust this account. I see four of them here.

First, there is the **empty tomb.**

The ladies go to the tomb early on Sunday morning. We get some of the names in verse 10 – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. Luke says that they took spices, fully expecting to anoint the body. But when they arrive, the stone has been rolled away. And then we read in verse 3, that they went into the tomb and did not find the body. He's not there. It's surprising.

This is significant because if the Jewish religious leaders could have produced the body, or shown that something had happened to the body, then they surely would have done so. If they could have shown that Jesus was still dead, they had every reason to bring that forward.

And over the years, there have been two approaches to discount the empty tomb. People either say that the early disciples were mistaken or that they were intentionally seeking to deceive people. They're either wrong or liars.

So, some will say that Jesus wasn't really dead. He was just resuscitated. And the quick answer is that doesn't really make sense because the Romans were experts at crucifixion. And they knew how to kill. And in this whole process, Jesus had been scourged and whipped and nailed to a cross. He was buried behind a large rock, so that people couldn't just say, he was raised when his body was still in the tomb. So does it make sense that this man who appeared to be dead and had been through this whole ordeal – that he was able to roll away the stone and walk out? That doesn't make sense.

Or others will say that when he appeared to people, that everyone just thought he was there. They were hallucinating. It was just their imaginations. But again, the problem is that hallucinations are not shared. It doesn't make sense for a group of people to all have the same vision of a ghost or an imagined Jesus appearing to be alive. That would be like two people having the exact same dream last night.

Or perhaps the disciples weren't mistaken, they knew that Jesus was still dead, and they lied about it. They wanted to fabricate this story of Jesus being alive. But there's problems with that too. If they believed it was a lie, then why would they die for it? Apostles like Peter began to teach that Jesus rose within weeks of His death. And they went from denying Him in fear to boldly being willing to suffer for His sake. What explains this change?

And the best answer is the straightforward one, that Jesus really was raised from the dead. And the remarkable thing is that He was raised bodily. It wasn't just some sort of spiritual resurrection. It was physical. His body wasn't there.

As Paul says later in **Acts 26:8**
“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”

That's one faith building element here. It's the first reason. You have to do something with the empty tomb.

Secondly, there is **the word of Jesus** Himself. That also supports that it really happened.

The women who come to His tomb are puzzled by the whole ordeal and they are given these words by the angel...

Luke 24:4-7

While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. **5** And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? **6** He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, **7** that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”

The angel doesn't say, “Hey, let's do some investigating about what's really going on here.” No, the angels point them back to the words of Jesus. Remember how He told you that He must be killed and on the third day rise again?

You need to remember what He said. And that's actually what Jesus says to the Emmaus travelers as well, isn't it? He doesn't first say, “touch my hands.” No, He says, you should believe the Bible.

And today, we trust that Jesus is alive because we ourselves go back to what Jesus said and taught. We believe the Bible. Our faith is built up as we study God's Word. The more you go deep into the Scriptures, the more you see and find encouragement in the amazing ways that God has woven together the one big story from Genesis to Revelation. Just as Jesus taught on the Emmaus Road, the whole Bible points to Jesus. There are shadows and hints and explicit prophecies that all anticipate the coming life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And that helps us to know that He is truly alive.

You can trust in the Scriptures. That's the second reason we see here.

The third is the **eye-witness testimonies**. In particular, Luke highlights the testimony of the women in verses 9-10. This is a helpful reason to trust this account because in that day the testimony of women was thought to be less reliable than that of men. Now, of course, that's foolish and wrong.

Why is that a reason for us to trust this account? Well, if the testimony of women is thought to be unreliable, and you were trying to make up a story about Jesus's resurrection, then you would never make up that it was women who first saw the empty tomb. The only reason that you would tell the story this way is if it actually happened this way. It's not more believable to people if you make the first witnesses women.

So you see, Luke isn't trying to make these things up. He's just reporting the events in an orderly account.

Celsus, who was no friend of Christianity, wrote against Christianity by saying that one of the reasons we know it isn't true is because it's based on the testimony of women.¹ Now, he'd probably get cancelled today for saying something like that. But in that day, this seemed like a good argument for him to make.

But here they are, that first Easter morning, these women who were marginalized in that society. Including Mary Magdalene, this woman whose life has been transformed by Jesus, now is testifying about the resurrection. In fact, Mary Magdalene has been called the first evangelist because she is the first to proclaim the good news of the empty tomb to the other disciples.

And that brings us to the fourth reason here – **the skepticism of the disciples**. Look at verse 11...

Luke 24:11

but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

So the first people that had to be convinced about the resurrection were the disciples themselves. They didn't just believe right away. Peter needs to see for himself.

Luke 24:12

But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

And so he goes and see the linen cloths by themselves. In John's account, he tells us that he also ran to the tomb (and got there first...), and he sees the cloths folded up and lying in another place. So Peter has actually witnessed two miracles – Jesus rose from the dead and a single guy folded his clothes.

And again, this is another piece of evidence. If someone stole the body away, it would be very unlikely that they would also fold the clothes and leave them behind.

So when the women report that the tomb is empty, Peter goes to see for himself. Why is that important? Well, sometimes people will say that the disciples were primitive people, they were gullible. They wanted to believe and so they hallucinated the empty tomb. They were more likely to believe in miracles or the resurrection.

But notice that in this story, no one was anticipating the resurrection. Even though Jesus had told them multiple times – no one was already leaning in that direction. The Greeks and Romans did not believe in the resurrection of the body, they thought the soul and body were totally distinct. Many, though not all, of the Jewish people believed in a final

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/who-were-the-six-women-who-saw-the-risen-christ/>

resurrection someday. But they were not anticipating a resurrected Messiah in a physical body. But eventually, these disciples believe because they saw it for themselves.

And they turn the world upside down because they knew Jesus had risen from the dead. Even secular scholars like Bart Ehrman will say that the disciples were themselves convinced that Jesus was resurrected. He thinks they were wrong. But it's hard to deny the fact that they sincerely believed it.

One of the reasons that that we can trust in the resurrection is that these skeptical disciples, who were not anticipating the tomb to be empty, became radically convinced that Jesus was alive. And as Gary Habermas says – who is one of the leading Christian scholars on this issue – as he says, this was the explosion that changed the world forever. The disciples were willing to die for this belief, and a number of them did.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that hundreds saw the risen Jesus at the same time. Even James, the brother of Jesus, became convinced that He is risen from the dead. What would it take for you to believe that your brother really was the Son of God and rose from the dead? And we know James became an early leader in the church at Jerusalem.

Then there's Paul, who was a Pharisee and radically opposed to Jesus. And he was radically converted when He is confronted by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. And he then travels about the Roman world, preaching this good news and suffering immensely for it.

None of these early disciples had reasons to make it up. It wasn't for power or money or status – the only reason that makes sense is that they really saw and touched and believed in the resurrection of Jesus.

Andrew Norman Wilson is an English writer and columnist who once wrote a biography of Jesus. He speaks about having lost his faith in his twenties and thirties, only to re-discover it again as he looked into the story of the resurrection for himself.

He writes...

“Easter confronts us with a historical event set in time. We are faced with a story of an empty tomb, of a small group of men and women who were at one stage hiding for their lives and at the next were brave enough to face the full judicial persecution of the Roman Empire and proclaim their belief in a risen Christ.”²

-A. N. Wilson

² A.N. Wilson, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1169145/Religion-hatred-Why-longer-cowed-secular-zealots.html>

There are good reasons to believe. Yes, it does take faith to believe in Jesus. But it's not an irrational faith. It's not a leap into the dark, it's a leap into the light.

Maybe you've come today and you still have some questions. That's great. Let me recommend that you read the gospels in the New Testament. Go directly to the source. And if you want to walk through it with someone, I would invite you to a study happening beginning next Sunday at 5pm. It'll be over at my house – the church parsonage. And we'll eat together and then talk about who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. Bring your questions, and we'd love to discuss them.

Maybe you want to do some further study on your own. Let me recommend a couple books (they get increasingly academic):

- *Did the Resurrection Really Happen?* By Timothy Paul Jones
- *Can we Trust the Gospel?* Peter Williams
- *Body of Proof* by Jeremiah Johnston
- *On the Resurrection* (4 vols) by Gary Habermas

The resurrection of Jesus is good news for skeptics. Secondly, the resurrection is good news for sinners.

Good news for Sinners

Sometimes people ask that question, if you could go back to any point in history, where would you go. And I remember as a kid, hearing my dad say that that he'd like to go back to this point where Jesus explains the whole Bible to these disciples after He rose from the grave.

The story in verses 13-35 is a bit cheeky, as the Brits might say. It's poking fun at these two disciples because they don't realize what's going on. Jesus has risen from the grave, and what does He do? He takes a walk, of course, and here He is walking along the road with these two guys. Look at verse 13...

Luke 24:13-17

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, **14** and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. **15** While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. **16** But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. **17** And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad.

So these two disciples are talking about the things that have happened. And Jesus draws near and sort of nudges into their conversation. Hey, what are you guys talking about?

Luke 24:18

Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

So we learn that one of them is named Cleopas; we don't know name of the other. It could have been his wife or a friend – we don't know. And Cleopas asks this ironic question. Are you the only one who doesn't know? When really, He is the only one who does know what has happened.

But they're like, “Have you been under a rock or something?” And...well, yeah, I was.

And so Jesus goes along with them. And they begin to tell Jesus about Jesus.

Kids, see if you can find what's missing here.

Luke 24:19-21

Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, **20** and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. **21** But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened.

What does he leave out? The resurrection. This is an example of a sermon without a resurrection. And that isn't good news. Paul says that without the resurrection, we don't have good news. If there is no resurrection, then the only thing to do in life is just eat, drink, and be merry. It's all meaningless in the end.

But no, the resurrection is good news because it tells us something wonderful – that death has been defeated. Eventually, they latch on to this, but at first it feels unimaginable.

Some of you remember back in 1990 when Buster Douglas fought against Mike Tyson. The odds were 42 to 1 in favor of Iron Mike. And Buster Douglas did the unthinkable – he knocked out Iron Mike. Up to that point, it was victim after victim, at the hands of Mike Tyson before Buster Douglas pulled off one of the greatest upsets in boxing history.

Well, Jesus is the true and better Buster Douglas. There was a foe who had taken out victim after victim after victim, until Jesus defeated death on the third day. He gave death the death blow. And now we can say with Paul, “Oh death, where is your sting?” Death has been swallowed up in victory. Thanks be to God!

And Cleopas said that it's been three days since Jesus died. But remember, Jesus had predicted that He would rise on the third day. He had called His shot like Babe Ruth pointing to the outfield before hitting a home run. He had predicted not only His death, but also His resurrection.

But they don't yet see or understand what has happened. Look at verses 22-24.

Luke 24:22-24

Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, **23** and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. **24** Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.

They recognize that something amazing has happened, but they don't get it yet. They're amazed but they haven't yet seen the risen Jesus. And now, Jesus once again points them back to the Scriptures.

Luke 24:25-27

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! **26** Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" **27** And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

He had repeatedly told his disciples that he would suffer and then rise from the dead. The whole Old Testament speaks about Jesus. As one of my favorite biblical scholars, Don Carson, writes, "The entire Bible pivots on one weekend in Jerusalem about two thousand years ago."³

Luke says that beginning with "Moses and all the prophets" – that's a shorthand way of referring to the whole Old Testament. Throughout the Bible, we find the truth of Jesus. And here, He is saying, I am fulfilling all of those expectations and promises. The Bible is a unified story, and it's all about Jesus. And you need to read it all in light of Him.

It's like one of those movies that you need to watch a second time to really understand it – like *The Sixth Sense* or *The Prestige* or *Arrival*. Once you get to the end, you now need to go back and watch it again. The Bible is that kind of story – it only makes sense once you read it in light of Jesus.

So these guys arrive at the town, and they urge Jesus to stay with them. And then...

³ Don Carson, *Scandalous* (Crossway, 2010), preface.

Luke 24:30-31

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. **31** And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight.

So now, Jesus sort of takes over the meal. And as He breaks bread and gives it to them, finally they see. What was it about the way He blessed and broke the bread? Maybe it reminded them of the Lord's Supper or the way that Jesus multiplied the bread in feeding the crowds? Was it the scars on His hands? We're not told.

But somehow, with all of this teaching fresh in their minds about how Jesus fulfills the Scriptures, then when they see this breaking of bread – now they get it!

But just as quickly as they get it, then He vanishes. And this is incredible, isn't it? There's a lot of mystery with a glorified body. It's recognizable, but it's different.

Luke 24:32

They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"

And as Christians, we know what this is like, don't we? When the Scriptures are read and understood, there is power in them. That's the goal in our personal Bible study and when we come to hear His Word in worship. We don't want to fill our heads with facts, we want to set our hearts on fire.

Luke 24:33-35

And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, **34** saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" **35** Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

They've already traveled seven miles today, and now they take the road back. If my math is correct, that's fourteen miles. That's quite a lot of steps on your fit bit. But they're probably so excited to tell the others what has happened, that they don't care. They're asking each other – how should we say it? Should we hide it at first? Should we say, "Guess who we just had dinner with?"

But then when they arrive, and they find the eleven disciples, someone has stolen their thunder. They're already talking about how Jesus is alive and has appeared to Simon Peter. They say, "The Lord has risen indeed!"

And isn't this fitting? This story doesn't belong to just one person. It belongs to all of God's people. And they share with each other what had happened.

And so now, their sadness has turned to joy. The Savior has come to life, and so now all that is sad is going to come untrue.

Before he passed in 2023, Tim Keller was the former pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City and a well-known author. He was converted while a student in college at Bucknell University. And he began doing evangelism on campus with InterVarsity ministry. And in that time, there were protests happening on campus over the extension of the Vietnam War. And students around the country were protesting and refusing to go to class.

And those involved with InterVarsity were meeting and praying about what they should do. Classes had been cancelled and students were gathering in the quad where there was an open mic. And eventually one of the students made a sign with white letters on a black background and posted it near the crowds. And the sign said, **“The resurrection of Jesus Christ is intellectually credible and existentially satisfying.”⁴**

Isn't that a great sign? And sophomore Tim Keller sat down and discussed this claim with any who desired. The resurrection is true. There is historically reliable evidence that it took place. And it is existentially satisfying – that is, it is good news that perfectly meets what we all need most deeply.

And this is the message of Luke 24. It is credible for our minds and satisfying to our souls.

How is the resurrection satisfying to our souls? Why is it good news for sinners? There are so many reasons. Let me remind you of just two.

The Forgiveness of Sins

First, the resurrection of Jesus means that you can be forgiven, truly forgiven, of all your sins. Because Christ has risen from the grave, we have confidence that His sacrifice was accepted. And so we believe that our sins have been covered. We can be forgiven because Jesus is alive. It is finished. There is nothing left for you to do but believe.

After he is radically converted by Jesus, Paul preaches a sermon recorded for us in Acts 13 in the city of Antioch. Listen to what he says,

Acts 13:37-38

but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. **38** Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you

⁴ Colin Hansen, *Tim Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* (Zondervan, 2023), 19-20.

Because Jesus did not stay in the tomb and see corruption or the decay of His body, He is now able to forgive sinners who trust in Him. Because He is alive, He has the authority to proclaim the forgiveness of sins.

Paul makes that point again in **Romans 4:24-25**

It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, **25** who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Jesus was ‘delivered up’ talking about His crucifixion. Jesus died for our sins, and He was raised to life so that we might be justified by faith. Because the tomb is empty, your sins will not have the final word. That’s good news for sinners. That’s satisfying for our souls.

Hope for Our Resurrection

And secondly, the reality of Jesus’s resurrection gives us hope that there is life beyond the grave. We have hope that because He lives, we will also live. He has conquered death. The Bible says that He is the firstfruits of the resurrection from the dead.

Michael Green in his book, *The Empty Cross of Jesus*, gives the following analogy.⁵ He says that in the middle ages, it was debated whether or not there was a sea route to India. People wanted to get to this land of riches and spices, but they couldn’t make it around the tip of Africa. Every attempt failed, until one Portuguese sailor named Vasco da Gama was able to get around the tip and reach India by sea. And ever since he sailed back, it became impossible to doubt that there was a way. And it was renamed “Cape of Good Hope.”

And Green says, it’s like that when Jesus rose from the dead. He is the first in sequence, more will follow. He is the Christ of good hope. We ask – is there any way through death? Can you go through and come out on the other side? And the answer is “Yes! Because Jesus took the path through darkness and death and came out in resurrection glory.” And what’s true of Christ, is true for His people. He knows the way, and He will lead us home.

So friends, brothers and sisters, the resurrection of Jesus is good news. It’s the best kind of surprise there is. It’s good news for skeptics and it’s good news for sinners. It is both intellectually credible and existentially satisfying.

Won’t you trust in Jesus today? Let’s pray...

⁵ Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (InterVarsity Press, 1984).