

Holy Week

*“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign,
but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”
(Matthew 12:39 ESV)*

The Sign of Jonah

Easter Sunday

April 9th, 2023

Matthew 12:38-42

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning church! The Lord is RISEN – he is RISEN INDEED; thanks be to God! Would you open your Bibles this morning to Matthew 12:38-42; that’s on page 817 in your pew Bibles. The resurrection of Jesus is a really big deal. It is a SUPER SIGN. We know that because Jesus said that himself on two occasions in Matthew’s Gospel; the first time he said that is in the passage that hopefully lies open in front of you now. Let me read that to you:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”³⁹ But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.⁴² The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:38–42 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

The resurrection is a really big deal, Jesus says. It is “the Sign of Jonah”. When the Sign of Jonah happens, you will KNOW that something BIG HAS HAPPENED. You will know that something DEFINITIVE has happened. You will know that SOMEONE more authoritative than Jonah has spoken to you. You will know that someone wiser than Solomon has taught you and you will be held accountable for how you have received him.

Jesus talked about the Sign of Jonah again later in Matthew’s Gospel in chapter 16. Flip forward a page or two in your Bible to Matthew 16:1-4. Let me read that passage to you as well. It says this:

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed. (Matthew 16:1–4 ESV)

“Here’s the thing about you”, Jesus said to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, “you know how to respond to meteorological signs but you don’t know how to respond to theological signs. You know that a red sky at night is a sailor’s delight – you know that red sky in the morning, sailor’s take warning – but you don’t know how to respond to an empty tomb. So you are asking for more signs – but you aren’t going to get any more signs. You shouldn’t need any more signs. Because the empty tomb is THE SIGN TO END ALL SIGNS. It is the Sign of Jonah and it ought to be MORE THAN ENOUGH.

There are plenty of Pharisees and Sadducees in our day and age.

Sceptics are always saying to us: “If the God you believe in is really there why doesn’t he do something SPECTACULAR to prove his existence? Why doesn’t he set off fireworks in the atmosphere that spell “I am here. I am real. Believe in me.” Or why doesn’t he teach the

bullfrogs to sing the Hallelujah chorus? If he did something like that, then I would be prepared to believe him.”

People say that all the time, don't they?

Well, according to Matthew's Gospel, people have been saying that for 2000 years. And the answer that God gives is still the same. He says: "I have done something spectacular. I have done something irrefutable. I have provided definitive evidence. I have given you the Sign of Jonah. That is the sign I have chosen. Consider it and conduct yourselves accordingly."

So let's do that today, let's consider together the Sign of Jonah. In doing that, I think the first question we need to answer is this: how can we know that it is true?

How Can We Know?

How can we know that it really happened? What if it was just a story made up by the disciples? What if it was a mass hallucination event? What if the disciples believed it happened – but only because they really wanted to believe that it happened? Or what if they were mistaken? What if Jesus only APPEARED to die on the cross, but then later recovered in the tomb and simply snuck out and then told everybody that he had died and risen from the dead? How can we KNOW that Jesus really DID DIE and RISE AGAIN?

Let's take a moment and work our way carefully through this issue.

First of all, I suppose someone might even ask whether or not we can be sure that Jesus really did experience crucifixion as the Gospels uniformly claim that he did. We can dispose of that concern very quickly. The fact of Jesus' crucifixion is extremely well attested and is accepted by all mainstream historians. Gerd Ludemann for example says straightforwardly:

“The fact of the death of Jesus as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable.”¹

Alright, so it happened, but did he really die? The Muslims believe in something called “the swoon theory”. They believe that Jesus only APPEARED to die but he then recovered and exited the tomb under his own power. Is that plausible?

Well, if there is one thing we know from ancient history, it is that the Romans were really, really good at killing people – and crucifixion represented the highwater mark of that art – and remember, Pilate had hoped to satisfy the crowds by severely scourging Jesus but that didn’t work. But scourging was known to kill people by itself – and Jesus was SEVERELY scourged. From there he was forced carry the cross beam of the cross toward Golgotha. He would have been nailed to the cross with a nail through each wrist and then another through his feet. The blood loss from the scourging and this nailing would have been severe. As soon as the cross was dropped into the post-hole his shoulders would have been dislocated. Hanging there, unable to pull himself up because his shoulders were out of joint, Jesus would have been forced to push up from the feet upon the 6 inch nail so as to take a breath. As he lost more blood, he would become progressively weaker and slowly but surely, he would die of asphyxiation. If this was taking too long, a soldier would break the legs of the person being crucified. Because of the blood loss associated with the initial scourging, this didn’t happen in Jesus’ case, but to be doubly sure that he was actually dead, a soldier plunged his spear into Jesus side, puncturing his right lung and entering his heart, such that when the spear was withdrawn, some fluid – the pericardial effusion and the pleural effusion – came out.²

The idea that someone might recover from that, brush themselves off and break out of a sealed tomb so as to initiate a giant conspiracy theory requires more faith than I am capable of.

¹ Gerd Ludemann in *What Really Happened To Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 17.

² As per Dr. Alexander Metherell in *The Case For Christ*.

Jesus DIED on that cross. That fact is indisputable.

But how can we know that he rose from the dead?

There are two pieces of evidence we must consider here. The first is the reaction of the Jewish authorities. Flip forward in your Bibles to Matthew 28:11-15. Matthew tells us:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (Matthew 28:11–15 ESV)

Indeed that story was being circulated by the Jewish authorities well into the second century. Christian apologists like Justin Martyr were still responding to that story in their written work – but here is why that is significant. Why would the Jewish authorities have to invent a story like that? It is not the strongest imaginable defense. The tomb was guarded. The disciples were not soldiers. The lie itself solves only a small portion of the problem. It doesn’t address the many reports of people who claim to have seen Jesus alive.

So why go with such a weak option?

And the answer must be that the more convincing option was not available to them. They obviously could not produce the body. The tomb was undeniably empty.

Think about it: the easiest thing to do when the disciples started talking about the resurrection – which they did almost immediately – would have been to haul out the body. They could have put Jesus’ decomposing corpse on a cart and hauled it throughout the city of Jerusalem – why did they not do that? And the answer is: because they could not do that. Which means, at the very

least, that the body of Jesus had disappeared.

Which leaves us with their explanation: perhaps the disciples stole the body.

Perhaps.

It is implausible, as I mentioned, to think that a handful of fisherman and accountants would be able to overpower a platoon of armed soldiers – particularly given that soldiers were generally executed if they lost custody of the people they were supposed to be guarding. But maybe it happened. Maybe the disciples pulled off the biggest lie in human history.

But then, there is the fact, that they were all tortured and 10 of those 11 were executed for propagating that lie.

How likely is that?

Do you really think it plausible that 10 men would allow themselves to be TORTURED – some of the disciples were even crucified – how likely do you think it is that men would hang on a cross for hours – maybe even days, slowly bleeding out and suffocating without a single one of them ever changing his story?

It is that fact – combined with the changed lives of the Apostles – that convinced Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide. He said:

“I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical fact.”³

Lapide, as I mentioned, is not a Christian, he is a Jewish scholar, but even he must concede that

³ Pinchas Lapide as cited by Carl Braaten in *The Resurrection Of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*.

the evidence for the resurrection is overwhelming. The famous atheist turned deist philosopher Antony Flew – also not a Christian - came to a similar conclusion. He said:

“the evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It’s outstandingly different in quality and quantity.”⁴

The Sign of Jonah appears to be the best attested sign in human history - but what does it mean?

What Does It Mean?

Jesus criticized the Pharisees and Sadducees for not being able to READ the Sign of Jonah. If you understand what a red sky at night means, and what a red sky in the morning means then why don’t you know what it means when a person rises from the dead?

The assumption is that the Sign of Jonah ought to have been easy for them to understand.

It was easy enough for the Ninevites to understand the original Sign of Jonah. When a man who was known to be lost at sea – who was reported to have been swallowed by some kind of giant fish – comes stumbling into your city, reeking of bile, with his skin bleached and seaweed in his hair – preaching a message of repentance – you pay attention. If God can rescue that prophet then surely he can rescue you – that’s the message.

And the people of Ninevah responded.

Jonah 3:5 says:

“And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.” (Jonah 3:5 ESV)

⁴ Antony Flew to interviewer Gary Habermas in *Did The Resurrection Happen? A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*.

So in that story, everybody knew what to do. Everybody understood that if a man who was thrown overboard several miles from the shore and who was swallowed by a giant whale or fish – if that brother shows up a few days later with a message for you from God – you pay attention. You do what the messenger says.

Nobody was confused by that. Everybody seemed to understand.

The MIRACLE MARKED THE MESSENGER.

That's the idea.

Well, the same basic logic applies here. As Neil Shenvi writes in his book *Why Believe*:

“The resurrection was God’s confirmation that Jesus was who he claimed to be, and it is God’s assurance to Christians that they have been forgiven.”⁵

That's it – that's the message! The resurrection – the Sign of Jonah - is God's confirmation that Jesus is who he said he was and the cross did what he said it would do.

Listen, friends, anyone can say anything about anything.

Muhammed said that he met an angel in a cave. Ok.

Joseph Smith said that an angel helped him find a buried book. Ok.

Carl Sagan said that the universe is all there is, and all there ever has been. He wasn't looking for God because he didn't think the universe required a God. Fascinating!

⁵ Neil Shenvi, *Why Believe? A Reasoned Approach To Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 60.

But here's the thing: none of those people ever rose from the dead.

But Jesus did.

Which is a good thing, because Jesus made some pretty incredible claims:

He said that he came down from heaven in John 3:13:

“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” (John 3:13 ESV)

He said that he had the power to forgive sins:

“Son, your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:5 ESV)

He said this his shed blood would purchase that forgiveness:

“this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:28 ESV)

He said that he had the power to bring people back from the dead:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25 ESV)

He said that he was the Gateway to the eternal kingdom of God:

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” (John 10:9 ESV)

Those are some pretty impressive claims! Forgiveness of sins! Resurrection unto life! Entry into the eternal Kingdom – that is everything! And if you are going to say things like that, then you better be able to back it up. You better provide some kind of SIGN proving your identity and authority.

And that's what the resurrection is.

The resurrection is THE SIGN. It is PROOF POSITIVE that Jesus IS who he says he is and that his death on the cross has accomplished what he said it would accomplish.

That's what the Sign of Jonah means – but why does it matter?

Why Does It Matter?

It matters, because apparently, every human being will be held accountable for how they have responded to the SIGNS and SIGNALS they received. Jesus said that in Matthew 12:

The men of Nineveh will rise up **at the judgment** with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The queen of the South will rise up **at the judgment** with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:41–42 ESV)

The people of Nineveh are going to have to give an account for how they responded to the preaching of Jonah.

The Queen of Sheba is going to have to give an account for how she responded to the wisdom of God in Solomon.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 1 says that all people, everywhere are going to have to answer for how they have responded to God's revelation through nature. He said:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19–20 ESV)

According to the Bible, all people everywhere are going to be held accountable for how they have responded to whatever revelation they have received – and there is a lot of it! God is constantly communicating! He is communicating through creation, he is communicating through the Bible and MOST CLEARLY and SPECTACULARLY of all – he is communicating through the person and work of Christ.

Jesus is the WORD OF GOD in human flesh!

He is the PERFECT revelation of God!

And so that you could be absolutely confident in his word and revelation, God raised him, BODILY, PHYSICALLY, VISIBLY from the dead.

He did that to INDICATE his AUTHORIZATION and APPROVAL. The resurrection was God saying loud and clear so that everyone could hear: This is my beloved Son. Listen to him. Believe in him. Follow him.

We've talked before about how MIRACLES in the Bible function like road flares. They serve to draw attention to the interventions of God in human history. They are like FIREWORKS. They are God saying: "Come on over here and SEE what I am doing."

The empty tomb then, is like the Grand Finale.

It's the BIG ONE.

It's the SHOW STOPPER.

It is the LAST and FINAL WORD.

Are you listening?

The empty tomb is God's megaphone. Through it he is calling all people everywhere to COME UNTO JESUS AND BE SAVED!!

He has the power to forgive sins.

He has the power to raise the dead.

He has the power to open and shut the door to heaven.

His ways are right and lead to life – abundant and eternal; thanks be to God! Let me pray for us.