



WHY FAITH IS NOT A BLIND LEAP

INVITE YOUR ONE SUNDAY **Why Faith is Not a Blind Leap**

INTRO: Maybe you're heard faith described this way: "Faith is a blind leap in the dark."

When people use such language to describe faith, they are using the language of superstition and not the language of biblical Christianity.

Big Idea: A blind leap into the dark is a leap into ignorance.

John Stott wrote a little book years ago called *Basic Christianity*. In that book he said that most people who reject Christianity reject a caricature of Christianity and not Christianity

itself. The idea that believing in Christ is a blind leap of faith is one of those ideas that's really a caricature of biblical faith.

Another common caricature of Christianity that people rightly reject is that Christianity is all about getting people to behave morally.

This is still an all too common view today, even by people raised in supposed Christian homes. Last week in the New York Times, a columnist by the name of Julia Scheers wrote an article about getting over her

fundamentalist upbringing and its preoccupation with sin, but the way she described her understanding of Christianity made it clear to me that she did not have a clear understanding of the gospel.

She writes, “And after years of living a ‘secular’ life, I realized that my notion of sin has evolved. As a girl, my focus was on gaining admittance to heaven.”

So, in short, her view of Christianity was that good people (people who sin less) go to

heaven and bad people (people who sin more) go to hell. In other words, admittance to heaven was about moral behavior to her. She had a concept of salvation that was behavior-centric, meaning it was all about moralism. She saw her moral performance as her ticket to heaven.

In the end, she completely rejected Christianity. Now, the problem is she rejected a caricature. The gospel of the New Testament does not teach "behave so you can go to heaven."

Being accepted by God based upon your moral performance is the exact opposite of the gospel found in the New Testament. I'll go a step further. It's the exact the opposite of the gospel found in the Old Testament. If you think salvation is based upon your moral behavior, then I hope today will be surprising for you.

When I entered college as a freshman, I had also rejected Christianity based upon a caricature of it. I had reduced Christianity to

the teachings of Jesus. I thought all religions were just some guy's teachings. Buddhism was based upon the teachings of Buddha. Islam was based upon the teachings of Muhammed. And Christianity was based upon the teachings of Jesus. And my view was, "Why should I listen to any man? No mere human being has any moral authority." If you think Christianity is primarily about the teaching's of Jesus, then I hope today will be surprising to you.

During today's message I hope to dispel the caricature of Christianity that believing is a blind leap in the dark and in passing dispel the myths that your moral behavior determines your eternal destiny and that Christianity is primarily about the teachings of Jesus.

My primary focus will be on the myth that faith is a blind leap in the dark and as we focus on that caricature, I hope to touch upon the other two along the way.

Let me first say, evidence will not make anyone believe, but faith seeks evidence and arguments, because faith swims in the waters of reality. Anselm, the famous monk who lived around 1000 A.D., put it this way, “Faith seeking understanding.”

Let’s begin with the witness of history. The witness of history is that Jesus lived, died and was buried and then He went missing.

**The historical question is, “What happened?”
What happened that explains the explosive**

growth of the early church and its continued growth for over 2,000 years?

“Christianity is unlike any other religion; the relationship of faith and history is the Christian question.” (Horton)

So, let's look at five reasons why faith is not a blind leap in the dark.

1. Extant Manuscripts - Are the New Testament documents reliable history?

“From the very beginning, Christianity was announced as a public phenomenon, a narrative of historical events and therefore susceptible to refutation.” (Horton)

When Christians assert that Jesus rose from the dead, we are making a *historical* claim, not a *religious* one.

Sir William Ramsay, who spent 15 years attempting to undermine Luke's credentials as a historian and to refute the reliability of the New Testament, finally concluded: "Luke is a historian of the first rank.... This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

More than 24,000 copies of early New Testament manuscripts are known to exist today. That fact motivated Sir Frederick

Kenyon, one of the leading authorities on the reliability of ancient manuscripts to write:

“The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”

Now all he's saying is that we have reliable historical documents telling us what the early church believed and experienced.

Jesus became flesh at just the right time in history when the oral culture still existed but a writing culture was emerging. Decades did not pass but only years between the oral transmission of the gospel to the written form.

Here's why the pop culture argument that Jesus became divine over time doesn't hold water...

The Big Fish Story rests upon the premise that people naturally lie about how big the fish was... long ago that's what David Hume said - religions are big fish stories.

Just like the gossip game. The further away you get from the people who were there, the bigger the story gets. Hume is basically right about most religious claims. But we have an

exception here, because the fish was biggest in Jerusalem within the first years of the story's telling. These stories started circulating immediately. This was the Christian story from the outset.

1 Corinthians 15:3-5

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and

that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Christ died, was buried, was raised and appeared to his disciples (1 Cor. 15) — this was a liturgical phrase dating from within two years after the events. Paul is simply repeating a phrase that he received from others.

Jesus was crucified in 33 or 34 A.D. Paul wrote this during the 40s. This was not a later addition. The story was as big as it could get

from day one. There is not enough time and not enough distance for the big fish story. And that is not just my Christian bias speaking.

Many prominent New Testament historians such as Bart Ehrman, who is a professed skeptic, James Dunn, and Gerd Ludemann, a German New Testament scholar who doesn't believe in the resurrection, date this creed from between two and five years of Jesus's death. Gerd Ludemann says, "The elements in the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus... not later

than three years... the formation of the appearance traditions mentioned in 1 Cor. 15 falls into the time between 30 and 33 CE.”

Historically, there is not enough time for a mythical Christ to appear. The Christ of the creeds is the Christ of history.

2. Embarrassing Details - Accurate history includes embarrassing details.

One of the historians' favorite tools is the criterion of embarrassment, which affirms the authenticity of stories and sayings that, as one biblical scholar wrote, "would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early Church."

Matthew 27:57-60

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate

ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock.

The burial of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph is mentioned in all four gospels. Very rarely are the same details found in all four gospels. It's also an embarrassing detail. Why?

The disciples weren't the ones who cared enough to see Jesus properly buried. Peter denies Jesus three times to a little girl and yet

a leader of the Sanhedrin (Joseph of Arimathea) respects Jesus enough to have him buried.

According to the gospels, the disciples themselves make themselves look horrible. They were cowardly. They all deserted him in his death. And these are the leaders of this movement.

The next embarrassing detail is the women at the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Suh-LO-mee).

Mark 16:1

¹⁶ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

Mark 16:5-8

⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek

Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Here's a great idea to start a false religion in the first century: Have women discover the empty tomb at a time when women didn't

even have credibility in a court of law. Their testimony counted as nothing.

None of these things are good ideas if you want to make up a religion and pull the wool over people's eyes.

Bad history doesn't include embarrassing details. Good history tells the story how it happened even when it doesn't put the writer in the best possible light.

The witness of history is that Jesus lived, died and was buried and then He went missing. (17:30)

3. The Empty Tomb - The reason there are so many outlandish theories about the resurrection is simply because the witness of history is that the tomb was empty.

It has to be explained somehow.

Matthew 27:62-66

⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ ⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵ Pilate said to

them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.”⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

- Roman Guards
- Seal

It was in the best interest of the Romans and Jews to stop the spread of the apostles' message. If the tomb was occupied with a body, they easily could have produced it to

the public, and Christianity would have swiftly come to an end.

The behavior of the Roman guards is a curiosity. Matthew explains it this way in his gospel:

Matthew 28:3-4

³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

Matthew 28:11-15

¹¹ 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.

There's no reason they would be talking about stealing the body if they could produce a body to begin with. It's only a story you come up with when you cannot come up with anything else. All they needed to do to put this story to an end was produce a dead body.

So, let's treat this like a murder mystery for a moment. Who had the motive, means and opportunity to steal a dead body?

The disciples had a motive, but they didn't have the means or the opportunity. It's more than a little implausible that they could steal the body of the most notorious criminal in the Roman empire out from under the noses of a tomb guarded by Roman soldiers. Guards who deserted their posts were crucified. What were they more afraid of than losing their lives?

Roman leaders would have had the means and the opportunity. But what sense would that make? You don't invest all the resources of the guards around the tomb to invent a religion that will undermine your empire.

There is remarkable historical consensus that Jesus was buried and then three days later he was gone from the tomb. Something happened.

4. Eyewitnesses - This isn't single witness testimony we're talking about here, but group testimony.

“An initial eyewitness identification made with low confidence indicates that even though memory was not contaminated, the ID is untrustworthy (that is, by indicating low confidence, the eyewitness is effectively saying, “There’s a good chance that I’m making an error”). In contrast, a high-confidence ID is highly accurate, a surprising

fact that has only recently come to be appreciated by experimental psychologists. In a recent review of the literature, the authors reported across 15 experiments, suspect identifications made with high confidence were, on average, 97 percent accurate!”

Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 15 that Jesus appeared to his disciples, and then to more than 500 people, most of whom were still alive at the time (around AD 55) and could be consulted.

1 Corinthians 15:6-7

⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

What about the portion of these 500 witnesses who Paul said were still living? What could they have possibly gained? Crucifixion themselves! It's one thing to give

your life for a cause you believe in, but would so many embrace death for what they knew was false?

The easiest place to refute the resurrection, to prove it didn't actually happen would have been Jerusalem. You don't become the most influential person in history based upon rumors and lies.

Remember that neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities denied the fact that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

These hostile witnesses not only make the gospel record highly credible, but rule out so many of the silly popular arguments against the resurrection, such as the women went to the wrong tomb, the apostles merely hallucinated, or the swoon theory, which says he was nursed back to health. He didn't really die, etc.

That's why Pilate wanted a guard to make sure that Jesus was dead, so nothing like the swoon theory could happen.

The Jewish leaders claimed the body was stolen by the disciples (Matt. 28:11-15) and other Jewish and non-Jewish sources confirm this.

5. External writings - There are sources other than the Bible that confirm the historicity of Christ.

Writings of extra-biblical sources, such as the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman

historian Tacitus, and the Roman governor Pliny the Younger all write about the Christians testifying to the resurrection of Christ.

The Babylonian Talmud tell us - Jesus was a false prophet hanged on Passover Eve for sorcery and blasphemy. What do you have to do to be accused of sorcery and blasphemy in Jewish culture? You have to claim to be God and perform miracles.

It also tells us that Jesus's mother was married to a carpenter who was not his natural father.

The Talmud tells us that Jesus went with his family to Egypt, returned to Judea with disciples and performed miracles with sorcery, led Israel astray, was deserted at his trial without any defenders.

Suetonius (75-30 AD), the Roman historian answers this question, "Why were Jews

expelled from Rome in 48 AD? Because of a controversy over a certain Christ.”

Tacitus, another Roman historian, referred to the crucifixion of Jesus under Pontus Pilate: “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.”

Pontus Pilate has become one of the most famous historical figures ever because he is mentioned every Sunday in churches around

the world. God has dated himself, so to speak. Every Sunday in churches around the world many recite the Apostle's creed together, "Suffered under Pontus Pilate."

After years of radical biblical skepticism, the 1978 discovery of the Pilate stone dedicated to Caesar finally confirmed the historicity of Pilate.

Pliny the Younger (110 AD) records that Christians gathered on Sunday to pray to Jesus as to a god.

Christianity is tied to history like no other religion. There is virtually nothing known historically about Buddha, but none of that matters to his teachings. But we cannot separate Jesus from his teachings that He came from the Father to save sinners.

This is where history leads, according to Christianity. He was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. That is a historical argument. Christianity is not about great ideas, but great events.

This is why I make the argument that Christianity is not primarily about the teachings of Jesus, because the teachings of Jesus focus so much on His death and resurrection. As a matter of fact, to say Jesus was only a good moral teacher becomes a ridiculous claim in light of Him saying things like:

John 11:25

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,”

That’s a statement that goes beyond being a good moral teacher.

The record of the Gospels and Acts tell us that the apostles went from being terrified and hiding for their lives, to being bold witnesses and devoting their lives, even giving up their lives for the Gospel, the proclamation that Christ is risen.

They endured years, in some cases, several decades, of extreme hardship and suffering for the sake of the testimony that He is risen. By the world's standards, they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by remaining committed to the testimony that Christ is risen.

Saul of Tarsus, for example, gave up a successful and promising career as a Pharisee, a religious scholar of his day, to become an apostle who was regularly beaten

and imprisoned. Only the resurrection of Christ makes sense of these things.

“If the historical Jesus was only the pale Galilean, itinerant Cynic or sage, purveyor of moral wisdom and esoteric insight or even social revolutionary, how does one explain the first Christian centuries, which are known to have been paradoxical facts: rapid growth and widespread persecution and martyrdom?” (Horton)

“The early Christians wouldn’t have been put to death if they had just presented Jesus as a teacher of new universal spiritual truths. Their Savior would have been accepted in the wider Hellenistic pantheon of gods. Their insistence upon Jesus as the single, particular, historical manifestation of God in the flesh, and his crucifixion and resurrection as therefore the basis for the claim of universal Lordship, was precisely the scandal that brought reproach to the early Christian community.” (Horton)

It's the same scandal today, that you are a sinner by nature and by choice and there is no hope to be freed from the penalty of your sins against God and the reigning power of sin in your life apart from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is hope in no one other than Jesus. That message is still a scandal. It's a scandal because the gospel still appeals to people who know they are moral failures, but offends people who feel they are morally sound.

Galatians 2:16

¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

The gospel is still highly offensive to people who consider themselves relatively good people, because the gospel says the exact opposite about us.

I assume I don't have to give you loads of evidence to confirm the fact that you as a human being have done things in your life that have violated your own conscience. Now, if our conscience is the distant remnant of God's law stamped upon the human soul, then the death of Christ in our place to pay the just penalty for our sins is good news.

The resurrection is the miracle that confirms the authority of Christ's death to wipe away

our sins. And it's the one miracle that is enough.

Jesus says we have enough evidence. As a matter of fact, he says the Bible is enough evidence. (Luke 24:24-27).

Luke 16:31

³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Jesus is saying that the Old Testament prophets who foretold of this coming Messiah can be critically examined and relied upon. Passages such as Psalm 16, Isaiah 25, and Daniel 12 are all fulfilled in Christ's resurrection.

One of the remaining copies of the book of Isaiah dates 200 years before Christ was born. That's a verifiable fact of biblical scholarship. So, Isaiah chapter 54 can be seen to preach the same gospel that the New Testament

preaches. The prophet Isaiah dates 700 years before Christ was born. That's evidence that can be examined.

This is a far cry from the usual complaint of "not enough evidence, God. Not enough evidence."

The question is, "How much evidence is enough?" The problem is that the demand for evidence is an interminable demand.

Essentially though, it's not an issue of evidence alone. It's a spiritual issue.

“If Jesus did rise from the dead, then every human being is confronted with a demand to believe what he said, to acknowledge him as King, and to submit to him as Savior and Lord. And of course, my friend, that includes you.” (Greg Gilbert)

And that's as close to a hard sell as I'll make. But I will leave you with this one word: urgency.

There's a reason that Scripture reminds us that life is like a vapor and that preachers have reminded us through the ages that none of us are promised tomorrow. Because if Christ did rise from the dead, the implications are sobering.

That's why I would urge you to consider the claims of Christ seriously. This is what we do every Sunday. This is why I'm inviting you to come back next Sunday to consider the claims of Christ with us again.

Maybe you've never thought of it like this before, but you don't have to believe before you become part of a community of faith.

I'm inviting you to belong before you believe for two reasons. The first one I've already mentioned — because it will allow you a space to take the claims of Christ seriously every Sunday.

Secondly, you'll never find a group of people who care more for your soul. And I can say

that with all sincerity. When you're around a group of people who believe your soul has eternal value, they are going to treat in that way.

So, that is my simple invitation — come back next Sunday to consider. Belong before you believe.