

**No Doubt About It (Part II)**  
***Greatest Miracle?***  
***(or Greatest Hoax?)***  
**May 23, 2021**

Good morning everyone! Whether you're here on campus or watching us online, I'm very happy you've joined us.

As Shannon said (and as our choice of music has made obvious), today we're beginning part two of our series *No Doubt About It* by considering Christianity's most outrageous claim of all ...

**... which is that 2,000 years ago in  
Jerusalem ...**

- The man, Jesus of Nazareth, was stone-cold-dead after being executed on Friday afternoon in one of the most

torturous and cruel methods in all of history ... crucifixion.

- And then his body was placed in a sealed and guarded tomb.
- And then – amazingly, miraculously, shockingly – he was literally alive *in the flesh* on Sunday, walking around, talking, hugging people, touching people, and eating dinner with people.
- And, in the weeks that followed, he was seen by hundreds of other people before returning to his Father.

And we're beginning our series with this claim not only because it's the most difficult to believe.

**We're beginning with this claim because it's what makes Christianity "Christian."**

It's what sets Christianity apart from and *at odds with* all other religions.

By that, I mean *there's simply no way to reconcile* Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or any other "ism" with Christianity because of the claim that Jesus was literally resurrected from death in his physical body.

It's what makes Christianity "Christian" ... which also means there's really no point in talking about anything else we're going to talk about in this series if it isn't true.

So that's why we're starting with it.

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Of course, some would say "well, I don't know about that, Rick. I think you can be a Christian without believing that Jesus literally came back to life."

“I mean, Jesus was all about *love*, right? So, I think if you just believe in God and love people, that makes you a Christian.”

And I understand why anyone would think that (especially in this culture) because it’s very broad and non-offensive. And now, *more than ever*, we don’t want to offend lest we be canceled.

But the problem is that while Jesus was about loving people (especially those we don’t *want* to love – like those who have hurt us ... and those who are on the other side of the political spectrum) ...

- Jesus *also* claimed to be the Messiah prophesied by the Hebrew prophets ... which was a pretty big deal.
- And Jesus *also* claimed to be the atoning

sacrifice for the sins of the world ...  
which is also a big deal.

And you can't just dismiss those things and, at the same time, say that you're taking Jesus and Christianity seriously.

And the same thing is true of the resurrection. You can be *religious* without believing in it, but you can't really be a *Christian*.

In fact, as I was preparing for this message, I came across an interesting observation about this from the famous atheist Christopher Hitchens.

Someone had asked if he thought there was a difference between what some would call "fundamentalist faith" and a broader, more "progressive" approach (which discounts the miraculous parts of the story like the resurrection).

## **Check out his response.**

“I would say that if you don’t believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, *you’re really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.*”<sup>i</sup>

Even one of the foremost atheists in the world understood that it’s the resurrection that makes Christianity “Christian.”

So that’s why we’re starting out with this particular issue.

## **In Context**

But, before we get into it, I think it would be good to do a very quick review of a couple things we talked about in Part I of this series,

just to put it in context.

First of all, the reason we're doing this series – the reason we even care about addressing whatever doubts we might have about what we're asked to believe – is that ...

**1. We are living in a culture that is becoming more and more jaded and even hostile to “traditional Christianity” and those who believe it and follow it.**

We are living in a culture where it has become fashionable, admirable, and even heroic to question and doubt and then deconstruct Christian faith.

That concerns me for many reasons, the greatest of which is the effect it's having on younger people, especially younger people who grew up in a Christian environment.

For them, it's becoming much harder to

believe and, therefore, easier to walk away from their faith which, I fear, will be disastrous for them and their future families ....

... but, also, for our culture in general because what we're being told is "the answer" to all of our problems will only serve to increase them.

So, my hope is that this series will help all of us – but younger people in particular ...

- To be able to think through some of the objections and criticisms of Christianity that we're constantly hearing ...
- And to be informed and intelligent and confident about what we believe and do.

So that's the first thing I want to point out in terms of context: why we're doing this series and why it matters.



This is not just an “intellectual exercise.” How we deal with doubt has long-term downstream personal and cultural consequences.

The second thing I want to point out – and we made a pretty big deal out of this in the first series – is that contrary to what many of us have been taught ...

**2. It’s OK to doubt and to question because doubt is normal even for people of great faith.**

... which is why the Bible is filled with stories of people who doubted at the very same time they believed!

And we looked at several of those stories in the first week of that series. If you weren’t here, you can check out the message in the media section of our app, website as well as

our podcast.

In that first week, I also showed you a sign that, according to one of my favorite pastor-authors, above the front door of every church in the world.

It says ...

**“DOUBTERS WELCOME.”**

- If you have doubts, come inside!
- If you have questions, come inside!
- If you are uncertain, come inside!
- If you are a skeptic, come inside!
- If you are searching for truth, come inside!

In fact, I think we're actually going to put something like that above *our* door at some point in the near future ...

... because that's the kind of church we are or, at least, the kind of church we're trying to be – where doubters are as welcome as believers ... because most believers are doubters, too!

Now, one other thing I want to add in terms of context – and this is going to be especially important as we get into the topic for the day.

The fact that doubt is normal ... the fact that there will almost always be some level of “nagging uncertainty” about what we believe as Christians ...

... also means that ...

**“Faith” does not require all of our questions**

## **to be answered completely.**

See, a lot of people think of faith as requiring one of two extremes.

- At the one end, some think that faith requires a “blind acceptance” where you just close your eyes and *make* yourself believe.
- At the other, some think that faith requires every question to be answered in full.

But neither of those is correct.

**Instead, “faith” requires having enough evidence to be able to make an ongoing commitment.**

Let’s take this out of “the spiritual realm” for a minute so you can see what I mean.

Just for the sake of illustration (because no one would actually do this) ... let's say I'm trying to decide whether or not I can trust this stool to hold me up.

Before I actually sit on it, I can gather enough data to make a rational decision.

- I can find out what it's made of. Are those legs made of steel? How thick is it?
- I can ask what happened to other people who sat on it previously. Did everyone survive? Did anyone get hurt?
- I can push on it. Does it feel sturdy enough? Does it feel too wobbly?

If I really wanted to, I could do some research and ask even more questions, such as ...

- Who's the manufacturer?

- How long have they been in business?

Of course, at that point, most people would say that's not necessary.

Most people would say that *I already have* enough evidence to believe that this stool *will* hold me ... or that it will *not*.

And if the evidence points to the fact that it *will* then, *in an act of faith I commit myself* and I sit down not just once, but again and again.

"Faith" doesn't require having all the answers. It requires having enough evidence to be able to make an ongoing commitment.

So, the real question when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus ...

- Is not “can you prove it by answering every question?”
- Nor is it “can you just force yourself to believe something you know probably isn’t true?”

Instead, the question is ...

**Is there enough evidence that Jesus rose from the dead to believe in Him and to make a commitment to Him?**

And that’s what we’re going to talk about right now, so, let’s get into it.

Oh, wait, one more thing.

If you’re a person who believes in “atheistic materialism” (that the physical dimension is all there is) no amount of evidence will be “enough” because, obviously, a resurrection is a supernatural event.

And your presupposition is going to lead you to conclude that there has to be some other explanation.

And I'm not trying to belittle that perspective. I understand why people hold to it.

However, I would humbly suggest that the presupposition of a completely naturalistic universe is also a kind of faith.

It requires believing ...

- That living things arose spontaneously from nonliving things ...
- And that conscious things arose from nonconscious things ...

... neither of which anyone has ever witnessed – kind of like no one has ever seen



a resurrection from the dead.

So, while I would not ask you to believe in the resurrection of Jesus based simply on what you hear in the next few minutes ...

I *would* ask you to consider that what Christians have claimed to be true about Jesus might not be as crazy or irrational as it first sounds<sup>ii</sup> - kind of like living things arising from nonliving things.

## **Evidence for Faith**

So here are five pieces of evidence that, in my mind, back up the claim of a resurrection.

Individually, they may not seem like much but, taken together, they're pretty powerful in their implication.

**The first eyewitness to the resurrection was**

**reported to be a *woman* – not a man.**

And that probably doesn't seem like a big deal because of the culture in which we live today.

But, in the *patriarchal culture* of first century Judaism, women were not considered to be trustworthy witnesses about anything.

If you wanted to verify that something really happened, your last resort would be to rely on the testimony of a woman.

Therefore, if you were fabricating a story about something you wanted people in that culture to believe, you would not cast a woman as your star witness.

That is not the story you would tell if you were trying to keep a movement alive.

Yet all four of the gospels do tell us *exactly that*: that a woman saw the resurrected Jesus first, and then told the men.

### **Matthew writes that ...**

*Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb. Matthew 28:1 (NLT)*

And John tells us that it was Mary Magdalene who eventually ran back to the city and told the disciples ...

*"I have seen the Lord!" John 20:18 (NIV)*

... and then gave instructions *from Him* of what they were to do.

Friends, the only reason you would ever tell a story like that – and it was told again and

again ...

And the only reason you would *allow* that story to be told – and the male leaders of the church obviously *did* allow it and even told it themselves ...

The only reason you would report that a woman was the first eyewitness to the resurrection is if it really happened.

Another piece of evidence is that ...

**The Apostles actually *chose* to make the resurrection the central claim and message of Christianity.**

When the early Christian leaders began to go around the world preaching after Jesus' death, their message wasn't some kind of generic ...

- God is there.

- God is love.
- So, let's all try to get along and love one another.

They *did* say we should love one another, but their fundamental message over and over again, undeniably, was that Jesus was dead and then alive again.

In fact, we actually have the manuscript of what was preached in the very first sermon of a Christian evangelist, the Apostle Peter.

Luke tells us in the NT book of Acts that, on the day of Pentecost, thousands of people were gathered in Jerusalem for the festival when Peter stood up and began preaching.

*"Men of Israel, listen to these words:*

*"Jesus the Nazarene, was a man clearly attested to you by God with powerful deeds, wonders, and miraculous signs that God performed among you.*

*As you yourselves know ...*

*"This man, who was handed over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God ...*

*... YOU EXECUTED by nailing him to a cross at the hands of Gentiles.*

*But God raised him up, having released him from the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held in its power. Acts 2:22-24 (NET)*

As the song said, no grave could hold his

body down.

From the very first sermon, Christianity has been about Jesus rising from the dead.

And I know you're thinking, "duh, we know that ... what's the big deal?"

The big deal is that we do not understand how difficult it would have been to start a movement (like Christianity) that was based primarily on the message of a resurrection.

Because you and I live in the 21st Century – we're technological, we're smart and we've figured out all this stuff – we think that the people back then were not only dumb, lacking our superior intelligence ...

We think they were overly superstitious and would believe pretty much anything you told them, like, "oh, Jesus rose from the dead?"

Cool. That's awesome."

But that's not true. In fact, it was just the opposite.

For Gentiles (non-Jews) who had been enculturated in the prevailing Greek mindset of the Roman world, the idea of a literal resurrection from the dead would have been reprehensible and totally *undesirable*.

That's because they believed that ...

- The spirit world was *good* ...
- While the material world (including the human body) was *evil*.

And to them, freedom was when the soul finally escaped the body at death.

And, once achieving that state, no soul would



ever want to resume life in a physical body as Jesus supposedly did!

On the other hand, Jewish people *did* look forward to the physical resurrection of the body.

In their thinking, resurrection was something that was going to happen to *everyone* at the end of time, followed by judgment, followed by the beginning of what they called “the age to come,” or the Kingdom of God in reality on the earth.

So, when Christians went around preaching that it had happened *to just one person* – Jesus of Nazareth – that, too, would have been reprehensible and incredibly bizarre.

And what all this means is that the worst possible messaging you could think of to start a new religion in that part of the world at that

time was exactly the one they chose ...

... which was really, really dumb on their part  
... unless, of course, it was the truth.

Here's another piece of evidence ... and this one is even more out there than the second one.

**Thousands of first-century Jews suddenly started worshipping a human being (Jesus of Nazareth).**

It's easy to forget that Christianity actually started out as an exclusively Jewish movement.

- Jesus was Jewish.
- All the first disciples and initial followers were Jewish.
- And the church in Jerusalem was

primarily made up of Jews. (Gentiles – non-Jews like most of us – didn't get involved in Christianity until much later).

And the most unique characteristic of Jewish theology compared to all other theologies of that day was the belief that there were not many gods (as pretty much everyone else believed), but just *one God* who created everything.

They even had this little saying that they would repeat daily and every time they had a worship service.

They called it the Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one."

Not many but one. That belief is what made them distinctive.

So, the thought of worshipping a *man from*

*Nazareth?*

That would be on the order of blasphemy because that could be perceived as saying that there are *two* gods.

But that's exactly what happened.

Thousands of Jews immediately and radically re-interpreted the core doctrine of "only one God" to mean that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, was identical to that "one God"; that the "one God" had put on flesh and become a human.

You don't do that kind of a thing on a whim.

You don't turn two thousand years of Mosaic and Prophetic tradition upside down on its head without a really good reason.

I can't think of one better than the fact that

Jesus was dead, and then He was alive, and they saw him, they ate with him, they hung out with him.

And then they saw Him leave the dimension of our space and time and enter into eternity with the Father.

Another piece of evidence that the resurrection was a literal historical event is that ...

**The Jesus Movement (i.e., the church) survived and thrived in spite of the fact that its leader had been crucified.**

Several years before Jesus was born, a man named Theudas went around claiming to be the Messiah of Israel<sup>iii</sup> (which most Jews believed would be a political and military savior who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful place in the world).

About four hundred men joined his revolt. They were all killed by the Romans.

He himself was beheaded and his remains paraded around Jerusalem and his movement came to nothing.

Several years later, at almost the *exact same time* when Jesus of Nazareth was born, another man known as "Judas the Galilean" claimed to be the Messiah and led another band of people to rebel.

He, too, was killed by the Romans, and all his followers were scattered.

Point being ... this pattern of messiah/execution/scattering was fairly common in the era in which Jesus lived.

But that's not what happened in his particular case. The movement *did* not die ... because

*his* followers didn't quit.

And neither did they choose "another messiah" from his family (which is what happened in several of the other movements), even though there was an available candidate: James, the half-brother of Jesus.

Though he did eventually become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, no one ever suggested "James should take Jesus' place. Let's worship him as the *messiah*."

Instead, the disciples – including James – remained quite insistent that Jesus, in spite of the fact that he had been crucified, was, indeed, the messiah sent from God.

You don't do that – and the movement doesn't continue – without a really good reason.

And I can't think of a better one than the fact

that they had personally seen Jesus alive again following his execution and burial.<sup>iv</sup>

OK, one more piece of evidence and then we'll be done.

**The disciples were radically transformed from cowards to missionaries willing to die for this story.**

Many of them – and those who believed their message – paid a heavy price for their faith.

- Some were thrown out of the synagogues.
- Others were thrown out of their families
- Some were persecuted with beatings and executions not only at the hands of the Romans but also from the religious leaders of the Jewish community.



- All but one of the apostles died a martyr's death.
- Jesus' half-brother, James, was thrown off the temple in Jerusalem and then clubbed to death for believing and preaching that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

There was nothing good whatsoever for these men to gain by persistently lying about the resurrection of Jesus – it only brought them suffering!

Yet they did not recant their belief or turn around and walk away.

The best explanation for that I can come up with is that they really believed they had seen Jesus. They believed in the resurrection.

## **The Question**

Now, as I said earlier, none of these pieces of evidence on their own are all that significant. But, taken together they are very powerful.

As one historian wrote ...

“Never in so short a time has any other religious faith (or, for that matter, any other set of ideas religious, political or otherwise) ...

- achieved so commanding a position ...
- in such a short time ...
- in such an important society as that of the Roman world
- without the aid of physical force.

“The more one examines the factors which seem to account for the extraordinary victory of Christianity, the more one is driven to search *for a cause underlying them all.*”

“It is clear that, at the very beginning of Christianity, there must have occurred a tremendous burst of energy – virtually unparalleled in history ...

... without which the future course of the religion is inexplicable.”<sup>v</sup>

In other words, the existence and survival of Christianity is so improbable that something explosive had to happen in order for it to overcome the mountain of obstacles.

The question is ... what was that burst of energy?

Is there any other answer that fits the evidence better than what Christians have claimed from the very beginning: *that Jesus really did rise from the dead on that first Easter Sunday morning?*

Of course, that's really not the question that we're considering today.

The real question – the *full* question – was ...

**Is there enough evidence that Jesus rose from the dead *to believe in Him* and *to make a commitment to Him?***

Because that's really the point.

The purpose of investigating the evidence isn't merely to generate a "true" or "false" response.

The purpose of investigating is to determine

whether or not we should *believe in Jesus ...*

- Meaning that we agree that he really is who Christians say He is: God in the flesh who, in an act of mercy and grace, became a man ...
- ... in order to begin the process of redeeming his creation from the curse of sin ...
- ... through his death and his resurrection, as well as through those who believe in Him (otherwise known as "the church").

The purpose of investigating is to determine whether or not we should *make a commitment to Him ...*

- ... meaning that we agree that not only is He "Lord of the Universe"; He is also

Lord of us ...

- ... and we will listen to Him and trust Him and follow Him *even when – and this is so important – even when we have our doubts.*

See, one of the implications of the reality of the resurrection is that many of our doubts begin to shrink in their importance and their impact.

They don't go away entirely but ...

- Because of our confidence that God really did this in Jesus, we know there must be some answer that makes sense, even though we might not be able to comprehend it right now from our limited perspective.
- And there's confidence that, in spite of

how it might look right now, we can believe that God really *can* bring good from evil ...

... that He really can “turn graves into gardens” (as we sang earlier) because *He’s literally done it.*

So, again, is there enough evidence that Jesus rose from the dead *to believe in Him* and *to make a commitment to Him?*

For me, personally, I think there is.

Furthermore, if I *didn’t believe* that there is, I wouldn’t come back next Sunday.

And I would advise *you* not to come back either because this whole thing is the greatest hoax in all of history!

And by the way, that’s not just how I feel about

it.

It's also how the greatest Christian missionary who ever lived, the Apostle Paul, felt about it.

### **He wrote ...**

*If Christ has not been raised,  
our preaching is useless and  
so is your faith.*

*More than that, we are then  
found to be false witnesses  
about God [we've propagated  
a hoax!] ...*

*... for we have testified about  
God that he raised Christ from  
the dead. 1 Corinthians 15:14-  
15 (NIV)*

So, that's where I stand on this.

I think there *is* enough evidence that Jesus



rose from the dead to *believe in Him* and to *make a commitment to Him*.

## **Conclusion**

But what about you? What do you think?

Some of you are probably thinking, "nice try Rick, but I'm still not convinced about this whole thing. After all, so much of this is based what we read in The Gospels."

- "How do we know that they're accurate?"
- "What if they were made up by the early church to gain power?"
- "What if they stole the story of other supposed "gods" and applied it to this guy Jesus after he died?"

- “And what about all the changes made over the years?”
- “And what about the other ‘Gospels’ they suppressed?”

I understand your concerns and I want to assure you that those are reasonable questions ... which is why we’ll talk about them in next week’s message which I’m calling *History, Myth or Propaganda? Can we trust the Gospels?*

And some of you today are thinking, “You know, Rick, I’ve already settled this issue. I believe the resurrection is the explanation that best fits the evidence, so thanks for the reminder. But I’m good.”

If that’s where you are, in just a minute, I’m going to invite you to reaffirm your faith and celebrate the personal implications of that

faith as we sing one more song together.

But some of you are thinking, "Rick, I've never really considered the importance of the resurrection to Christianity. I just thought it was about believing in God and trying to be a good and loving person."

"But today, I'm beginning to see why it matters. And I am ready to believe in and commit myself to Jesus."

And, if that's you, what you need to do is very simple and you can do this in the next song we're going to sing because the lyric kind of lays this out.

- Just admit that you're a sinner who needs a savior and that you can't atone for your offenses to God. In fact, you don't even know what all of them are.

- And then simply say, “Jesus, I believe you are who you say you are and that you died for me and then rose again so that I could be forgiven and set free from the power and penalty of sin.”
- “And I receive you as my savior and I commit to you as Lord – not just of the universe – but of my life.”

So, let’s stand together and sing this song as a prayer. And if you’re not ready for that, you can just listen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> “The Hitchens Transcript,” Portland Monthly, January 2010, <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/news-and-city-life/2009/12/christopher-hitchens> quoted in Childers, Alisa. *Another Gospel?: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (p. 238). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> This idea is from Williams, Peter J.. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* . Crossway. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 5:36,37

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<sup>iv</sup> Wright, pg 71-72

<sup>v</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, quoted by Tim Keller in "Easter Sermon," April '96.

Referenced at <http://www.cccdlaytona.org/mediafiles/questioning-the-resurrection-sermon-text.pdf>