

EMS (Easter Made Simple)

Jesus

March 10, 2013

PRELUDE – Creation Sings
Worship Songs – Jesus Saves / Jesus I
Come

Drama – “Questions, Questions”

Feature – “800lb Jesus”

For anyone attempting to comprehend the meaning and significance of Easter, I suppose it only makes sense to begin with the person at the center of it all – Jesus of Nazareth. I mean, the story *is* predominantly about what happens to *him*.

On a Friday afternoon just outside of Jerusalem, He's crucified on a Roman cross between two common criminals. Then, on Sunday morning (if the claims of his first disciples are to be believed) he is resurrected – literally raised from the dead in an upgraded and enhanced body that somehow can transcend the spiritual/physical boundary and will never again taste death.

And next week and the week after, we'll be talking about those two events specifically but, today, we want to focus on the person at the center of it all, Jesus himself. *Who was he, really? What was so unique about him?*

Even today, over 2000 years removed from his time on earth, there is still much speculation.

- Some claim that Jesus never really existed; that he was just a legendary figure made up by the early church.**
- Others believe he was one of those special (and few) humans who reach their full potential and, because of that, gained incredible influence as a spiritual teacher that impacts the world to this day.**
- For a lot of people, Jesus is the**

sentimental 800-lb statue we just heard about: larger-than-life, nice-to-have-around in a crisis, but probably best kept outside.

- **Still others would say “what difference does it make who Jesus really was? After all, isn’t the *idea* of Jesus what matters most?”**

To that, I would say a resounding “no, not if you want to take seriously what the first disciples claimed about him.”

Their witness – documented more thoroughly and distributed more widely than any other set of historical writings known to man (in the books

we call "The Gospels") – their witness was most definitely *not* of an idea or a legend but of a real person who lived in a real time and a real place. And their witness was not merely of an exceptionally self-actualized person of great influence but of one who they claimed had been conceived in the womb of a virgin through the working of the Holy Spirit; one who they believed to be, quite literally, *God incarnate; God in the flesh*. To them, this, above and beyond everything else amazing about Jesus, is what made him special and unique.

Jesus the Logos

One of Jesus' best friends during his

time on earth, a man by the name of John who followed him closely for three-and-a-half years (and who later wrote "The Gospel of John") ...

... described him like this:

In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. John 1:1-2 (NIV)

"I'm going to tell you the story of Jesus of Nazareth," John begins, "but I'm going to hit you with something really big right up front, and here it is: *he was no ordinary man.* From eternity, from before this world

began, He was with God. In fact, not only was he *with* God, he *was* God; one of the Three – Father, Spirit and Son – who are separate yet one and the same.”

And not only was He part of the Trinity, John says.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. John 1:3 (NIV)

“Jesus is the Creator of the world. He is the life-force behind everything that

lives and the light of reason that allows human beings to think and to understand."

... which, by the way, is why John uses this weird term, "the Word" ... a title that, to us, has no special significance, but to those who first read what John wrote almost 2,000 years ago, this was full of meaning.

See, at the place and time where John lived, people basically fell into one of two philosophical camps. One camp was heavily influenced by Greek thought (think of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle). And those great minds had logically deduced over the centuries that ...

... there had to be a creative, rational (but impersonal) life-force behind the universe. They called this force “the Logos” ...

... which we translate into English as “the Word” (and is also at the root of the word “logic.”)

The other camp was made up of monotheistic Jews who, interestingly enough, *also* believed in something called “the Logos” or “the Word.”

However, *they* defined “the Logos” as the creative and powerful words of YHWH, the mighty and glorious God-person ...

... who had miraculously and repeatedly intervened in history and

delivered them from oppression and appointed them to be His people and a blessing to the world.

It's actually quite remarkable when you think about it: at the precise moment in history when Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the scene, the Greeks had arrived at the idea of a "creative, rational force at work behind the universe" while the Jews had embraced the idea of a "God-person who spoke and it came to pass" ... and both groups used the unusual term "The Word" or "The Logos" to describe their understanding of those realities.

It reminds me a little of what the

Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians:

***When the right time came
[when the world was
where it needed to be;
when the thinking
process of humanity was
where it needed to be,
God sent his Son, born of
a woman.***

Galatians 4:4 (NLT)

By the way, I think it's interesting that, when it comes to understanding the reality of "The Metaphysical" – that which is above and beyond what we can see and touch, these two philosophical camps still exist today.

In one camp are the many who believe

there is a rational (but impersonal) life-force behind everything. "It's not really something you can *know* personally" they would say. "It's more something you have to cooperate with."

Most of the Eastern religions fall into this camp, as well as those who adopted the philosophy of Rhonda Burn's book, *The Secret*. Many agnostics and New Agers would fall into this category.

In the other camp are those who believe that there is a great and glorious Almighty Creator God who rules over everything and to whom one day we will give an account.

Almost everyone who has grown up in a Christian home or a Muslim home or a Jewish home falls into this camp, as well as many people who've never even been to a church or a synagogue or a mosque.

2,000 years later and we're *just like* the Greeks and the Jews to whom John was writing. Things haven't changed that much.

So, when John told the story of his friend Jesus, he started off with a knock-your-socks-off introduction that went straight to the heart of what his listeners/readers already believed

regardless of their philosophical camp.

“You’re right,” John began. “In the beginning there was the Logos, and the power of the Logos created everything. But, I’m going to tell you something that will blow your mind.”

***That Word became flesh
and made his dwelling
among us. John
1:14 (NIV)***

“That which you believe to be somewhere ‘out there’ in metaphysical reality,” John was saying to Jews and Greeks alike, “did the inconceivable and became a human being, born into this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And for a

while, He made his home among human beings. He 'moved into the neighborhood' so to speak."

"And if that's not mind-blowing enough," John continued, "let me tell you something else."

***We have seen his glory,
the glory of the One and
Only, who came from the
Father, full of grace and
truth. John 1:14
(NIV)***

As stunning as it would have been for any of John's readers, Jew or Greek, to think that of the Logos becoming a man, it would have been even more incredible for them to hear that John

and his buddies ran around with the Logos and had gotten so close to him as to see him – literally, with their eyes, because this is not a figurative type of seeing which is what the word means in the original Greek language – this is literally seeing him and his glory.

Why was that so incredible? Well, remember, to the Greeks, the Logos was an impersonal force. It was rational, yes, but it was not knowable in the same way that you and I can know one another. In their thinking, you couldn't have a friend-to-friend personal relationship with the Logos. But John was saying, "Yes, you can. And we did."

On the other hand, the Jews already believed that God was personal, so that wasn't what knocked them for a loop. Instead what blew their minds was John's claim that God's glory had come down to the level of humanity. In their thinking, the glory of God was an overwhelming physical manifestation of the fact that God is so far above us in every way as to be incomprehensible.ⁱ In their understanding, God's glory doesn't invite you closer. *It knocks you over.*

But John said, "No, it didn't do that. In fact, it was really quite winsome and gentle – full of grace as well as truth. We hung out with the

embodiment of God's glory. We had dinner with him. We laughed with him, we cried with him."

Now, that's John's way of describing what it meant for Jesus to be God in the flesh, and if we had time, we could look at how the other Gospel writers explain it in their writings. But let's move on to the major implication of what we've just observed as it relates to our understanding of who Jesus really is.

And what I'm about to tell you in one short sentence is something that Christian pastors and theologians

wrestled with for four centuries before coming to this conclusion. It sounds simple on the surface but it's quite complex in the details.

Here's the sentence: for Jesus of Nazareth to be God in the flesh means that he was (and still is) fully God, fully human and fully both 100% of the time.

Jesus of Nazareth was (and is today) fully God, fully human and fully both 100% of the time. And there's nobody else like that; that's what makes him unique.

Now, let's try to break it down a bit phrase by phrase.

As to "fully God" the Apostle Paul

once explained it like this:

In Christ (Jesus of Nazareth) all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. Colossians 2:9 (NIV)

Now, practically speaking, there is still some fuzziness about what this means in terms of Jesus' self-consciousness. Did Jesus know as a baby that he was fully God? Probably not. He may not have been aware of it until his baptism when the Holy Spirit comes down and says, "this is my Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to what he says."

However, even though Jesus may not

have been fully conscious of that himself, Jesus was fully God from the moment he was conceived. He didn't suddenly achieve godhood status by his wisdom or his good moral life.

Now, what do we mean by "fully human"?

That's a little more straightforward. We mean that Jesus had a real body and real human consciousness just like we do. He wasn't a spirit or apparition who just looked and seemed to be human, as was the case in Greek Mythology.

Leon Morris writes: "Greek mythology abounds in stories of gods who

walked the earth giving the impression that they were men. They looked like men. They acted like men. But when need arose they cast off pretense, put forth their powers, and revealed their identity. They were not really men, but gods in disguise."

That's not who Jesus was and is.

As to the phrase "fully both God and human all the time" ... this is where it gets a little tricky. How does that happen? Some people try to resolve it by making Jesus into sort of a shape-shifter. Some of the time, it was the God coming out of him; some of the time it was the human being coming out of him, and he's kind of doing this

back and forth thing.

But that's not what it meant for "the Word to become flesh." In Jesus, there existed the full nature of God and the full nature of humanity 100% of the time. Even in those moments when Jesus was doing something ordinarily human, like eating breakfast, He was still 100% God. And in those moments when he did something extraordinary and miraculous, he was still 100% human.

Fully Human

Now, I realize that I've just dumped a whole boat load of history, philosophy and theology on you and the big

question – as it always is and should be – is “so what? So what is the point?”

Next week we’re going to talk about some of the practical implications of Jesus being *fully God* especially as He went to the cross. But this morning, I want focus on what it meant for Jesus to be fully human. And to do that, I want us to look at an amazing incident which begins the sequence of events in that fateful week leading up to the cross.

After three and a half years of a “traveling ministry” throughout the land of Palestine, Jesus has gained an incredible following among the

common people. Thousands upon thousands have seen his miracles and heard his teaching and have come to believe that he is the long-awaited Messiah who would finally, at last, usher in the Kingdom of God on Earth – which, to the people, primarily meant freeing Israel from captivity to the Romans and restoring it to its former glory. (Of course, as we know, Jesus had other ideas about what the coming Kingdom of God meant).

Anyway ... up until this point, Jesus himself has done little to encourage their belief. In fact, on the occasions when he's been questioned about his identity, he rarely gives a direct answer. Instead he tries to downplay

what people are saying about him. But, on this day, that will come to an end. On this day, as he enters Jerusalem, Jesus will do something that signals that, yes, "I am indeed the Messiah" and, in so doing, signs his own death warrant.

Let's pick up the story as Matthew's Gospel tells it. Matthew says that when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem ...

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the [palm] trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"

It was such an overwhelming scene that Matthew sums it up like this:

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred. Matthew 21:8-10 (NIV)

It was so stirred, so enthused, that John tells us that the panicked religious leaders said to one another:

“Look how the whole world has gone after him!” John 12:19 (NIV)

Luke and Mark in their Gospels paint a similar picture: thousands upon thousands of jubilant, expectant men and women – all singing the praises of Jesus.

That gives us some idea of what was going on in the hearts and minds of the common people and the religious leaders, but what was going on in the heart and mind of Jesus? What had *he* been thinking and feeling in the days and weeks leading up to this point?

“Well ... if Jesus really was God,” we

might think, "it means that he already knew the end from the beginning. It means that, as he made his way to Jerusalem, his divine foreknowledge and insight told him that a multitude would be waiting. He knew they would throw their coats down before him and wave palm branches. It was a scene that was already set in his mind and all he needed to do was to play his part. Just follow the script and get to the end of it without making any mistakes."

By the way, this perception of Jesus is quite common and has ruled Christianity for the last 18 centuries or so. It's a carryover from those

earliest days of the faith when it was essential to make it crystal clear that Jesus was not just an ordinary man – he was also God in the flesh.

In fact, if you look at much of the medieval artwork depicting Jesus' life, that's why he almost always has a halo. (picture) There was a need to "play up" the divine side of Jesus.

Unfortunately, playing up that side has also had the undesirable consequence of "playing down" the humanity of Jesus, leaving us with an individual who is, at best, static, flat and emotionless – a Jesus who, as N.T. Wright puts it, "wanders round with a faraway look, listening to the music of the angels, remembering the time

when he was sitting up in heaven with the other members of the Trinity having angels bring him bananas on golden dishes.”ⁱⁱ

That’s at best. At worst it leaves us with a Jesus who is simply a divine/human machine, an automaton, if you will; a human body possessed not by demons, but by the power of the divine mind. Minimizing the humanity of Jesus turns him into a humanoid with whom none of us can relate; a hybrid creation with an unfair advantage over us in every way; a Casper-the-Friendly-Ghost kind of being who is totally irrelevant to the life that you and I live every day:

- **Irrelevant because there is no way we can ever live like he did.**
- **Irrelevant because the fix was in for him and not for us.**
- **Irrelevant because there was no possibility of him ever making an error.**
- **Irrelevant because those things are just not true for you and me.**

And I think that's why the Bible again and again takes pains to emphasize that Jesus not only was God but was also a real man – with all of the emotions and concerns and even the temptations of real men like the ones in this auditorium.

The New Testament book of Hebrews,

second chapter, puts it this way:

He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Hebrews 2:17 (NIV)

I think the wording there is so important. I think he's saying for the life and death of Jesus to really matter and to really make a difference in the way God was intending it, He *had* to be made like us in every way. He had to be shaped and formed, enter into the world like

us. He had to limit his divine capabilities, even though he was still fully God.

There had to be:

- **No unfair advantages.**
- **No fixes or special privileges.**
- **No autopilot or going through the motions.**
- **No pretend temptations to which he couldn't fall because, after all, he was God and God is by definition sinless.**
- **No suffering – emotionally or physically – that didn't really hurt, sometimes to the point where he thought about throwing in the towel just like you and I do sometimes.**

All of life to Jesus had to be *real* and *really experienced* just as a real human being would really experience it because Jesus was 100% fully human at the same time as being 100% fully God ... which means that *Jesus is astoundingly relevant* to every man, woman and child who has ever lived. What he said and what he did is relevant to you and relevant to me because he was just like us.

So, when Jesus enters Jerusalem and there is a huge mob of people proclaiming him as Messiah and King what's going on in his mind? I think we can get an idea from something that happens just a few hours

beforehand. Mark (as well as Matthew and Luke) tells us that ...

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethpage and Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them (disciples) on ahead.

"Go into that village over there," he told them, "and as soon as you enter it, you will see a colt tied there that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, 'The Lord needs it and will

return it soon.'"

The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside a house.

And they were questioned, just as Jesus said. And they gave the answer he prescribed and the owners gave them the colt.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it. Mark 11:1-7 (NLT)

And, so, when he entered the city of Jerusalem, he wasn't walking. He was riding on a colt.

And that was *huge!* It spoke volumes, far beyond what mere words could have communicated.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why? Because, in Jesus' day, with all the expectations that God was going to soon send the Messiah to deliver Israel from bondage, people were very aware of the scriptural promises about the Messiah. And one of those promises was from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, who said:

Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem!

Look, your king is coming

***to you. He is righteous
and victorious, yet he is
humble, riding on a
donkey—even on a
donkey's colt.
Zechariah 9:9 (NLT)***

So, when Jesus entered Jerusalem on that day on the back of a colt, he knew exactly how it would be received. He knew exactly what people would think and exactly what they would do and say. He knew they would shout, "Hosanna! (which means, 'God save us'^{iv}). Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And He knew those things not because He was God and had special divine insight no one else had, but because

he knew the political situation and expectations and he knew the people and he knew the scripture.

And he also knew that entering Jerusalem on a colt surrounded by throngs of admirers meant passing the point of no return in his ministry. He'd already predicted his death and this action signed the warrant – both with the religious leadership of Israel and with the Romans. This act was an absolute and total commitment to be the Messiah of God, the Savior – not just of Israel – but of the whole world.

Now, again, if Jesus is simply the automaton God-man – the divine-humanoid – then that's no big deal at

all. It's what the script calls for and he knows that at the end, after his death on the cross, he'll be raised again and get to go back to heaven. No big deal. Just suck it up and play the part while dreaming of those bananas. A god's gotta do what a god's gotta do.

But if Jesus is 100% human like you and me, then deliberately setting this whole thing up (which he did – he had pre-arranged for the colt to be ready)

...

... deliberately setting this up and following through with it has to be the greatest act of faith in his entire life.

And we don't usually think about

Jesus as a person of faith but that's exactly what this is. See, for a human being like you and me to do what Jesus did, it would probably mean thinking something like "I know from the Father's revelations to me, from the scriptures and from the fruit of my life that I am the Messiah. I've known it for some time. But, now, I am at a crossroads because knowing and acting on what I know are two different things."

"I know the promise that the Messiah will be raised in three days after his death

...

"You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." Psalms 16:10

(NIV)

... but do I believe it enough to act on it? To actually let them nail me to a cross? That's an incredible risk to take. If I set this up and I ride this colt into town, this is a done deal. It's sedition to the Romans and blasphemy to the Jews. And I'm dead. My *only* hope is in that promise."

Well, as we read, Jesus did ride. Call it "the ride of faith" – the faith to do what His Father had revealed to him, even though it meant his certain death, even though all he had at the time was *the promise of the scripture* that death would not be the end of the Messiah.

What It Means for Us

And that, friends, is incredibly encouraging to me because that's how you and I, as creatures who are fully human, have to live!

Jesus wasn't some "magic miracle man" who did all the things he did because he was God and that's just what God does. No. Jesus did all the things he did because, as a man, he acted in perfect faith and obedience as all humans have been called to do – and failed to do – since the time of Adam. ^v

That's why the writer of Hebrews

says to us:

***Let us fix our eyes on
Jesus, the author and
perfector of our faith ...
Hebrews 12:2 (NIV)***

**Adam was the failure of faith – Jesus
was the perfecter of it. He's the
example to follow.**

That's why Peter writes:

***Christ suffered for you,
leaving you an example,
that you should follow in
his steps. When they
hurled their insults at
him, he did not retaliate;
when he suffered, he
made no threats.***

Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly. 1 Peter 2:23 (NIV)

That's what faith is – entrusting yourself to the one who has the final say and doing what He has told you to do in spite of your present circumstances, in spite of your fear. That's how Jesus lived. And that's how you and I have to live, as well.

Some of us walked in here today thinking about throwing in the towel on a job or a marriage or a friendship or a diet or a dream or on life itself. Some of us walked in here today

needing some encouragement to just do the right thing – whatever it is – even though it's hard and painful.

And all we have is the promise of God, and what we need is faith to do what God has told us to do – just like Jesus did.

- **God has put that man or woman into your life to be your spouse and you know you need to get married or stay married. And it will take the faith of Jesus to obediently step towards commitment.**
- **Or, God called you to start that business and you know that**

you're supposed to get up tomorrow and keep on slogging if that's what it takes. You need the faith of Jesus to do that.

- **Or, maybe God has told you to change your attitude, or get rid of a habit, or sleep more or sleep less, eat more or eat less – whatever it might be, and you know that's what you're supposed to do. And you need the faith of Jesus to do that.**

And this is what's really cool – not only is Jesus our "savior from sin and death" when we invite him into our lives. He also becomes our power and strength for living – and that includes

giving us the faith to be and do whatever it is we have been called to be and do.

Jesus becomes our friend and guide because the Logos is more than the dark mysterious Force of the Greeks. He's a *person* you can know as you read the gospels. You can know the mind of God. You can know the heart of God. You can start interacting with what you know from the gospels and you can begin to build a friend-to-friend relationship with the living God.

And He is so much more than the knock-you-over glorious Logos of the Jews. You *can* draw close to Him

because He drew close to us in the person of Jesus. As the Apostle John testified, "We touched him. We heard his voice. Yes, God is holy and mighty and his glory is stupendous. But He is not so far above us as to be removed from us. His glory is not so great as to turn us away."

So, wherever you are this morning in your life, you need to bring those situations to Jesus right now and say, "Jesus, you had the faith to walk these things out. I need the faith to walk these things out."

Our band is going to do a song that expresses some of those thoughts and I'm going to ask you to close your

eyes for a minute and think about whether or not there's an issue or a person or a struggle or a challenge. Is there a goal or a dream that God is putting in front of you and you're saying, "I'm afraid," or "I'm having a hard time following through, and I need the faith of Jesus."

I want you to have that song in your mind and then we'll pray.

Feature – "Untitled Hymn"

CLOSING COMMENTS (Rick)

Endnotes

ⁱ See http://www.aish.com/literacy/concepts/Understanding_God.asp

ⁱⁱ www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_JIG.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

^{iv} Barclay's Study Bible

^v **Just to be clear, I'm not saying that Jesus earned the right to be Messiah and that somehow he was elevated to "God status." I'm saying that he played the game by the same rules we're stuck with**