

“Easter Conversation with Joe”

Pastor Dan Erickson

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Dan: Hey Joe, how are things going, my friend?

Joe: I am doing pretty well. Mary sent me over here to Jubilee to pick up a few things. There will be 10 of us for Easter Dinner on Sunday. She’s already started cooking. I suppose this is a busy weekend for you with different things at church.

Dan: Yes, I guess it is. So, do you guys have any plans for Easter besides dinner, Joe?

Joe: Well, not really...Oh! You are wondering if we will be coming to church on Sunday. Subtle! I don’t know. Mary said something about that we maybe should go, but it’s been a few years since I have been there. I would feel kind of weird just coming to church for Easter.

Dan: That wouldn’t be a problem. There will probably be a few folks there I haven’t seen since Christmas Eve. But that doesn’t matter. I am just glad to see people at church whenever they can make it. That includes you.

Joe: Well, I’ll see.

Dan: That’s fine. Hey, let me ask you a question I have been asking people this week. Why do you celebrate Easter?

Joe: Why do I celebrate Easter? Well, it is a really good time for families to get together. We don’t take time to do that enough. & I have good memories of going to church with my mom on Easter Sunday. She always made me wear a tie, even when I was in grade school. I guess the holiday is a nice tradition.

Dan: So, did you go to church often with your mom?

Joe: Pretty much just Easter, and ya, Christmas Eve. I don’t think my dad would have liked it if she would have gone to church more than that.

Dan: So, your dad didn’t profess to be a Christian?

J: No, he always said he was an “agnostic.” He thought most Christians were hypocrites and that churches were always after your money.

Dan: Is that what you think?

Joe: Oh, I don’t think you are a hypocrite and when we have visited your church, I have never heard you ask for money. But I know there are plenty of hypocrites out there, and churches begging for money too.

Dan: What about the agnostic part?

Joe: No, I don’t really go along with that. There must be a God of some kind, a higher power. Somehow, He is behind things. I figure He wants us to treat other people right, so that’s what I try to do. I guess that is pretty much my religion.

Dan: So, what do you think about Jesus?

Joe: Well...I guess He was a good guy. To be honest I don’t really think that much about him.

Time out. Folks, this morning you will witness an important conversation between me and my friend Joe. No, I didn’t actually talk with Joe this week, but this is certainly a conversation that could have been or could be. I have two goals this morning.

#1 If you are like my friend Joe, and don’t really think much about Jesus, I would like you to do some thinking about Him today. Specifically think about His resurrection, which seems like an appropriate topic for Easter Sunday. I would suggest that Jesus is, and His resurrection is, a topic on which you ought to have an opinion, that you need to have an opinion.

#2 Many of you here are believers in Jesus. You don’t just have opinions, but convictions about Jesus and His resurrection. You believe He is the eternal Son of God, who died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead to guarantee your salvation. If that is where you are at, my goal today is to give you an example, a model, of how you might talk to family members and friends about Jesus and His resurrection. I suspect you know someone like Joe who just doesn’t think a lot about Jesus. Maybe you know quite a few someone’s like that.

I hope you have noticed that so far, I have been asking Joes questions. I certainly have not been preaching to him. I have asked him questions like “What are you doing this weekend?” “What did you do when you were growing up?” And then, “What do you think about Jesus?” And I believe those questions were asked in an at least semi-natural way. My point would be that when we want to talk about Jesus with someone who is not a believer, it is usually good to start with questions. Questions about what that person thinks, and questions about why he/she thinks that. Okay, I am going to get back to my conversation with Joe.

Dan: Joe, it seems like there are a lot of people like you who don’t really think much about Jesus. I guess because it’s been almost 2000 years since he was on earth, many folks assume he couldn’t be that relevant for life today.

Joe: Ya, I guess, I kind of think that.

Dan: But Jesus is extremely relevant. He makes some extraordinary claims, including that the eternal destiny of every human being depends on their response to Him. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

Joe: Ok, I have heard some of that before. But it is kind of religious talk. Does it really have anything to do with me?

Dan: It sure does! Jesus claims He can forgive your sins. He, and He alone, is the one who can get rid of the guilt and shame you feel for your mistakes, flaws and failures. He says He loves you and will enable you to find a wholeness and joy in life that you never thought possible. He says your response determines whether you will ultimately experience eternal life or eternal death. Joe, all those things seem quite relevant to your life.

Joe: But...they are just words. I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, but how do I know that those claims are true? How do you know they are true? A lot of people make claims, but how do you know who is telling the truth and who is not?

Dan: Do you want me to answer that question, Joe?

Joe: Ya, sure!

Dan: Jesus’ resurrection on Easter Sunday gives reason us to be confident that His claims are true.

Joe: Huh?

Dan: Oh, there are other arguments I could give to support the veracity of Jesus’ claims, but Christians have long believed that His resurrection is such a spectacular miracle that it confirms Jesus’ identity as the eternal Son of God and gives us good reason to believe that other claims He make are true as well. If you know Jesus truly rose from the dead, it is absurd not to have an opinion about Him.

Joe: Well, I guess that makes sense, but I have never really been sure about the resurrection stuff. Even when I was a kid it seemed a little wild. After all, dead people tend to stay dead.

Dan: That’s exactly right, and that is part of what makes Jesus’ resurrection so spectacular. He is the only person in the history of the planet to actually conquer death.

Joe: Ya, but how do we know it really happened? Can you prove to me that Jesus rose from the dead?

Dan: Not exactly. Historical events can never be proven scientifically, because that requires repeated experiments. But I can point you to substantial evidence that supports the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. I would argue the preponderance of the evidence suggests that conclusion. And I would maintain, like Josh McDowell once said, there is more evidence that Jesus Christ rose from the dead than there is that Julius Caesar ever existed. Really there is more evidence for Jesus’ resurrection than there is for almost any event or person in ancient history or for many in even more modern history.

Joe: Are you serious, Dan? I thought you Christians believed because you have faith.

Dan: Oh yes, we have faith. But that doesn’t mean we just randomly believe things like the moon is made out of cheese. Evidence and reason lead us to our faith conclusions.

Joe: So, what is this evidence you are talking about?

Okay, time out. It took a while to get her, but Joe just asked me to explain to him the reasons I believe in Jesus' resurrection. I emphasized that Jesus said a lot of things and made a lot of claims that are relevant to Joe's life and really to every human being. The obvious question is, "Are Jesus' claims true? Was He telling the truth when He spoke?" My answer to that question is that a big reason why we would believe what Jesus has said is because of His resurrection from the dead. But did that really happen? Well, let's get back to my conversation with Joe...

Dan: Ok, Joe, I want to note four commonly agree upon "facts" that point to Jesus' resurrection really occurring. I think this is strong evidence, but I will let you decide.

#1 Jesus died on a Roman cross in Judea in about 33 A.D. Don't get hung up on the date, we can't be sure about that. The four New Testament gospels, plus both Jewish and Roman accounts, tell us that Jesus was crucified at that time.

Joe: I am not sure I am going to believe something just because the Bible says so.

Dan: You don't have to. But even most secular scholars agree that the gospels are essentially reliable historical accounts. And, as I said, there are other non-Christian sources that corroborate what the Bible says about Jesus' being crucified.

Joe: But haven't some people said Jesus merely fainted on the cross and was revived in the tomb.

Dan: Oh yes, some people have said that. But there is no evidence that is true. We are pretty certain the Romans were very competent executioners. But, if we know Jesus died on the cross, then we bump into that idea that dead people stay dead.

Yet, Fact #2 is that Jesus' tomb was empty within a few days of his death. This is unusual because people put in tombs tend to stay there.

Joe: I know, but how can you say it is a "fact" that Jesus' tomb was empty. Just because the Bible says something, doesn't make it a fact.

Dan: Well, that's your opinion, Joe, which is fine. I would say that before you decide something the Bible says is not accurate you should have a reason for that, but that is another topic. One reason we know Jesus' tomb was empty, however, is because his enemies said it was.

Joe: What??

Dan: Both the Bible (Matthew 28:13) and other sources tell us that Jesus' opponents claimed that His disciples stole His body. Why would that say that if His body was still in the tomb? They wouldn't! In fact, if Jesus' body was still in the tomb both the Jewish and Roman authorities would have likely opened up that tomb to show people it was there and quell the, to them, troublesome reports that Jesus had risen from the dead. If either the Jewish or Roman authorities had taken Jesus' body, or knew where it was, they would have certainly used it to quickly discredit the story of Jesus' resurrection.

Joe: Ok, I admit that makes sense, but how do we know the disciples didn't steal and dispose of the body and then create this magnificent myth that Jesus had risen from the dead. It's a great marketing ploy!

Dan: Well, that brings us to Fact #3. Jesus' disciples really believed He had risen from the dead. If they had taken the body from the tomb, they would not have believed that.

Joe: But, how do you know they really believed Jesus was resurrected? Maybe they were just great con-artists.

Dan: A number of things indicate Jesus' disciples really believed He had conquered death, but the most obvious one is their willingness to suffer and die for that belief. There is evidence that all of the apostles, except John, died a martyr's death. Now, there have been other people over the centuries who have died for their beliefs. But these folks were convinced their beliefs were true. No one dies for a belief he/she knows is false. You can argue that Jesus' disciples were mistaken in their belief, but they clearly were sincere in that belief which means they were not part of or aware of any effort to "fake" a resurrection.

Joe: Ok, you are giving me some things to think about. What is your fourth “fact?”

Dan: Fact #4 is that many people claimed to have seen Jesus alive after He was reportedly resurrected. In 1 Corinthians 15, written by the Apostle Paul about 20 years after Jesus’ death, he says that Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to the apostles and 15:6, “Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive.” Paul is inviting people to interview these folks. Incidentally, individuals can certainly hallucinate, thinking they have seen someone alive who is not. However, groups of 500 don’t have mass hallucinations.

Joe: But all these people really wanted to believe Jesus was alive. Couldn’t wishful thinking be a part of it?

Dan: Perhaps, but two people who didn’t really want to believe also claim they encountered the resurrected Jesus. One was His half-brother, James, who was not a follower of Jesus before Easter Sunday. The other was the Apostle Paul, who hated Jesus and His followers, until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. In fact, it is very difficult to explain Paul’s dramatic conversion unless he really did meet the risen Jesus.

Joe: But what if Paul just pretended to hate Christians and really was part of a plot to get people to believe in Jesus’ resurrection?

Dan: Well, Joe I guess that is possible, but not very likely. There are different conspiracy theories out there that suggest the early Christians fabricated the whole Jesus story in an effort create a new religion. Some of them probably include Paul pretending to hate Christians. Yet, that would mean the apostles and others willingly suffered and died for something they knew was a hoax. That just doesn’t seem plausible, does it.

Joe: Well, maybe not.

Dan: So, keep in mind these four facts. #1 Jesus died on a Roman cross. #2 His tomb was empty within a few days of His death. #3 Jesus’ disciples really believed he has risen from the dead. #4 Many people claimed to have seen Jesus alive after He was reportedly resurrected. Joe, do you disagree with any of these facts?

Joe: Not really, but do you think you have proven that Jesus’ rose from the dead?

Dan: No, I haven’t proven that. But I have given you substantial evidence that this is exactly what happened. Is it convincing and compelling? You are going to have to decide that. I think it is pretty clear that no reasonable person can just ignore Jesus. You must deal with Him and His claims. I suggest you take time to prayerfully ponder the question, what do I believe about Jesus?

Joe: Well, maybe I need to do that. I guess it has been in the back of my mind, but you know how it is. Life is so busy; you just don’t think about stuff like this.

Dan: I know, but I think it’s important. And Joe, one more thing. If you come to church on Sunday, you will be in a room filled with people who are convinced, like me, that Jesus not only rose from the dead, but is alive today, 2000 years later. They believe He hears and answers their prayers. They believe He guides and encourages them along the path of life. They believe He is pleased when they gather to express their adoration and love to Him through worship. You may think we are all just delusional, but I would ask, what evidence do you have that that is the case?

Joe: I guess I’ve got some things to think about. Oh, boy, I just realized what time it is. I need to run. Mary is going to wonder what happened to me. Thanks, Dan. And maybe I will see you on Sunday.

Dan: Sounds good, Joe. It would be great to see you.

Well folks, that’s the conversation. I don’t know if Joe is here today, but I know you are. Some of you may be like Joe and just have not done much thinking about Jesus. Or maybe, until today, you assumed the Easter story was just a fairy tale. For whatever reason, if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you have some things to think about. If you have questions, if you are not sure about some things, I, and any of our pastors, would be delighted to talk to you this morning, this week or whenever. If you are a believer in Jesus, I suspect you do know someone like Joe. I suggest you prayerfully ponder how you might have a conversation with that person about

Jesus. Remember, it is the most important topic in the world. If you have questions about how you should approach that conversation, I, or any of the pastors, would be delighted to talk with you. Folks, Jesus is risen, He is risen indeed! That is the most important truth I know. Let's celebrate that magnificent reality as we conclude our service by singing....