

The Vindication of Jesus

When I was a boy, I was something of a comic reader. And one of the series which came out was a series called 'What If'. And in those 'What if' comics they would take one of their favourite characters, and write a story based on a 'what if' principle, like 'What if Spider-Man had lost his powers' or 'What if this super-hero's secret identity had been revealed? The idea was to describe what the world would be like if such a circumstance had not occurred.

If we were to take the Bible and speculate on what-if scenarios, the biggest and most significant we could manage would be to consider what if Jesus had never risen from the dead?

For many people, Easter Sunday, Resurrection Sunday is nothing more than one of many calendar holidays. It is simply a day, with a Christian origin, like Christmas, but it really doesn't have any more significance than Valentine's Day or Mother's Day, or the like. And if you are not a Christian, then that's fine.

But if you are a Christian, then this day is the hinge on which everything turns. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, then everything changes. In fact, everything collapses. You cannot take out the Resurrection and substitute some other part, as if you're fixing an engine and you find a pirate part that will do just as well. No, take out the Resurrection, and you no longer have Christianity. You might have a religion that uses Christian terms, and Christian forms, but it has become a hollow shell, a kind of re-enactment of something no one actually believes any more.

This morning, I want to explain to you why so much depended on the Resurrection, and why Jesus was vindicated by the Resurrection.

1) Firstly, Jesus Made Some Extraordinary Claims

John 8:56-59 "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." ⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." ⁵⁹ Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

Mark 14:56-62 For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree. ⁵⁷ Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, ⁵⁸ "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.' " ⁵⁹ But not even then did their testimony agree. ⁶⁰ And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" ⁶¹ But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

How do we know that He made those claims? Well, consider what He was accused of:

John 19:6-7 ⁶ Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God."

Matthew 27:40-43 and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You

are the Son of God, come down from the cross." ⁴¹ Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, ⁴² "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. ⁴³ "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.' "

Now consider what we would do if we read of a man who claimed to be God. He claimed to have existed before Abraham, claimed to be the exclusive way to God, claimed to be one with God in a way which no one thinks socially polite or acceptable. Then we read of the man's obituary in the paper. What will that do to his claims?

If there is no Resurrection, Jesus is disgraced as a megalomaniac. The famous quote from C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* goes like this:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

If Jesus does not rise from the dead, then He is disgraced as a liar or a lunatic, and those who accused Him of blasphemy are vindicated.

2) Jesus Made Some Extraordinary Predictions

Mark 8:31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Mark 9:31 ³¹ For He taught His disciples and said to them, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day."

Mark 10:33-34 "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; ³⁴ "and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again."

It is no great thing to predict that you will die. If you have offended enough people, it is no great thing to predict that people will try to kill you. But to say that after your death, in exactly three days, you will rise again, that's very bold. In fact, amongst the arrogant claims of proud men, I don't think I've ever heard that. I've heard of men who claimed they would live forever. I've heard of men who claimed that they would be immortalized by how people would remember them forever. But I have never heard of a sane man who said calmly and clearly, as if He were talking about tomorrow's weather, that He would rise from the dead.

Indeed, in the Law of Moses there was an instruction given to the people of Israel to look for the fulfilment of a prediction made by someone who claims to be speaking for God.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22 ²¹ "And if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' -- ²² "when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you

shall not be afraid of him.

You see, once again, everything comes down to the Sunday after Good Friday. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, He was, and is, according to the Bible, a false prophet. He predicted He would rise, and if He didn't, then He is false. He is not the kind of man you want to teach your children to follow and admire, let alone worship.

3) Jesus Staked His Authenticity on the Resurrection

John 2:13-22 Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers doing business. ¹⁵ When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. ¹⁶ And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" ¹⁷ Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." ¹⁸ So the Jews answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²² Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

Matthew 12:38-40 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." ³⁹ But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Matthew 16:1-4 Matthew 16:1 ¶ Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; ³ "and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. ⁴ "A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

Take note: this is *the* thing which Jesus gives to authenticate His ministry. Not the healing of the sick. Not the casting out of demons. Not feeding the 5000, or calming the storm, or even raising other people from the dead. The ultimate sign that would validate Him, and put the stamp of divine authority on His ministry would be the resurrection.

Picture meeting a man who completely turns the political or business world upside down. He is outrageously popular and unpopular. So the leaders of the day get this man interviewed and they ask him, what are your credentials? And the man says, here are my credentials: after I am dead, I will rise again three days later.

Well, what are you going to do with his credentials if he dies and stays dead? You'll throw them out. If Jesus fails on the one point He gave to back up His own ministry, we have no reason to take Him seriously. We can safely throw Him out. We can say that as far as being someone who leads us to God, this is not the man.

And the scene on Friday doesn't look good actually. You have people around the cross saying that God has forsaken this man. They are looking on is crucifixion as proof that his ministry was not of

God. If He really was an authentic prophet, to say nothing of the Son of God, surely God would not let Him go through this. Surely He could take Himself down from the cross. And worst of all, a few hours later, Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

If Jesus does not rise from the dead, then His ministry was not of God, because the one sign He gave to authenticate it did not happen. He was forsaken by God.

4) Jesus Claimed That His Death Would Be For Others

Mark 10:45 ⁴⁵ "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Now there is a problem with that. According to the Bible, the Bible which Jesus knew, man is under a curse for his sin. That curse is death. "The soul that sins it shall die" "In the day that you eat, thereof, you shall surely die."

The reason human beings die is that God has made it one of the wages of sin. Now what Jesus is saying, is that when he dies, He will not be dying for His own sin, but for the sins of others. It's as if you see a man going into the doors of a prison, and He says, this is not for me, this is a rescue mission for others. The only person who could claim that his death was not for his own sin would be a man who was sinless.

A sinner cannot ransom other sinners with his death.

Psalm 49:7-9 ⁷ None of them can by any means redeem his brother, Nor give to God a ransom for him -- ⁸ For the redemption of their souls is costly, And it shall cease forever -- ⁹ That he should continue to live eternally, And not see the Pit.

1 Corinthians 15:17 ¹⁷ And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!

So if Jesus does not rise from the dead, then He is under the same curse as the rest of Adam's descendants. He dies just like us. He receives the wages of His own sin.

And if he was sinless, death would reject Him, like positive poles repel positive. Death and sin attract, not death and righteousness. Death would spit Jesus out, as one who did not belong.

So this is what it looks like: when Jesus is taken down from the cross on Friday, He has been accused of blasphemy, and of being a traitor to Rome. His death is seen as proof that God was not with Him, and that God had forsaken Him.

* If Jesus does not rise from the dead, His claims about being God are bogus, and He was a blasphemer.

* If Jesus does not rise from the dead, His prediction about rising from the dead did not come true, and He was a false prophet.

* If Jesus does not rise from the dead, the sign He gave to prove Himself did not happen, so we have His own authority to reject Him. God did, in fact, forsake Him.

* If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then His death was His own. He died for his own sins like everyone else.

If Friday goes into Saturday and Saturday into Sunday, and Sunday into Monday, and nothing happens, then Jesus is some or all of the above.

Everything hinges on Sunday. All of Jesus' words and deeds and works come to a head, a point – and it is Sunday. Will it all turn out to be sham? Will it all turn out to be a big hoax or a demonically-empowered deception? If Jesus did not rise, then He is not a moral man. He is not a good example. He is a criminal, who made bold claims about His own nature, which didn't come about. The resurrection of Jesus was either complete vindication, or the lack thereof would be total disgrace.

Well, what did happen?

Let's rather ask it this way: If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, what would we expect? We would expect the Galilean fisherman and tax-collectors to return home and take up their former lives. We would expect the world of Judaism to be satisfied with having squelched what could have been a sect arising within it. We would expect that the tomb of Jesus be watched for a significant time after that. We would expect that if any person started making claims about Jesus having risen from the dead, that the tomb would be opened, Jesus' decaying body produced, and all such stories would be put to rest.

But what do we find instead? Well, here in Acts 2, we find those men do not return to Galilee, but stay in Jerusalem, all claiming to have seen Jesus personally - eye-witness accounts, verified by others. They claim they handled Him. They claim to have eaten with the risen Jesus. The tomb of Jesus is now empty, and the guards were certainly not overpowered by 11 Jewish men, or by a few women. These eyewitnesses start preaching. They start preaching publicly. Later on, these men will be imprisoned. They will be beaten. They will eventually be killed. Why would they do that if this was a hoax? These men are transformed, and they are willing to die for what they say happened.

The Jewish authorities never deny the fact that the tomb is empty. They never claim that the body is gone. This can only be explained if Jesus really did rise from the dead, and in so doing, was vindicated. If Christ was vindicated, then all their hopes in Him were vindicated.

Peter's sermon to the people assembled in Jerusalem, can be summed up in one word: vindication! The resurrection has vindicated Jesus.

I. Jesus is Vindicated of Being an Evildoer

Acts 2:22-23 ²² ¶ "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know -- ²³ "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;
Acts 2:24 "whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

Peter says to his audience, Jesus Christ, the man you knew who did many signs and wonders, you crucified. But this crucifixion was not only an act of sin on your part; it was part of God's plan for Him. In other words, Jesus wasn't caught or trapped.

Peter says death could not hold Him, because He had not done anything worthy of death. Jesus did in fact die for others. His death was not for his own sins. His resurrection vindicated His sinlessness. He really did die as a ransom for others.

II. Jesus is Vindicated of Being a False Prophet

Acts 2:25-32 *"For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the LORD always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. ²⁶ Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. ²⁷ For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. ²⁸ You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.' ²⁹ ¶ "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ "Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, ³¹ "he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. ³² "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.*

Peter says, when David wrote those words in Psalm 16:11, he could not have been speaking about himself. David did die, and was buried, and his tomb is known to us. David, by the Holy Spirit, was speaking about the Messiah. Who has fulfilled this prophecy, Peter asks, David or Jesus?

God predicted the death and resurrection of His Son. Jesus predicted His own resurrection, and it came to pass. He was not a false prophet, but a true prophet. And since His resurrection was given as the ultimate sign of His ministry, the fulfillment of the prediction becomes God's stamp of approval.

You can hear the momentum building in Peter's sermon. Jesus was not the criminal you thought He was. Death spat Him back out. Jesus was not the false prophet you said He was – He fulfilled a Scripture that King David didn't fulfill.

And finally

III. Jesus is Vindicated As God the Son

Acts 2:32-36 *This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. ³³ "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. ³⁴ "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, ³⁵ Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" ' ³⁶ "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

Peter says, Jesus was raised up and exalted. Once again, David's Psalm 111, which says: The LORD said to my Lord, sit at My right hand was not addressed to David, but to the Son of God. Christ's resurrection has led to His coronation over all.

All of those claims Jesus made to be one with the Father, the only way to the Father, the Son of God, pre-existent, the resurrection says, Yes, He is.

So Peter ends his sermon with the climax: *Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

He is no blasphemer. He is no deceiver. He is no false prophet. He is no evildoer. But then what or who is He? There is no middle ground here. So while you may choose to just mark this as one day among many on the calendar, it ought to cause you to ask the most important question: just who was Jesus?

Once again, C.S. Lewis writes: "You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son

of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

In other words, indifference isn't really a sensible option, once you know what Jesus claimed. You either utterly reject, or you humbly accept.

Many of the people, who heard Peter's sermon, did the latter. They asked, men and brothers, what must we do? Peter's answer is the same thing you must do if you haven't yet done so: Repent. Turn away from a life of rejecting Christ as your Lord. Come to Him and yield your life to Him. Receive Him as your new Lord.