

How many of you are familiar with the term “Fake News”? The extraordinary popularity of fake news was one of the big stories coming out of this last presidential election. Fake news is misinformation designed to shape public opinion and, in some cases, generate digital advertising dollars.

In December, a Pew study found that 23% of US adults have shared a made-up news story, either knowingly or not. Another study indicated that fake news stories drew more shares and engagement during the final three months of the presidential campaign than real news stories.

The top fake news story of the last political season was that President Obama had signed an order prohibiting the saying of the “Pledge of Allegiance” in public schools. It was discovered that many of these stories were coming out of Eastern Europe and they were written by 16 and 17-year olds who found that there was a gold mine in generating advertising dollars by writing fake news stories that would be shared through Facebook and social media.

But you’re all bright people! You couldn’t be taken in by fake news. You’re discerning, right? Tell me, is this a fake news story or a real news story?

Man Hospitalized After Being Mugged by Squirrels

It’s a real news story. This man was cleaning his garage when this squirrel went berserk. How about this one?

Target Stores To Discontinue Sales of Holy Bible

This is an actual but fake news story. How about this one?

Nancy Reagan’s Dying Words: “Don’t vote for Trump.”

Or this?

People dressed up in clown outfits, committing crimes all across America

Fake news or real news? Apparently, there may be a kernel of real news. Authorities in Greenville, SC, said that there was a clown sighting there, but then unsubstantiated fake

news reports came from all over the country regarding people dressed up as clowns committing crimes.

What does any of this have to do with Easter? The first challenge to the truth of the real news story that Jesus rose from the dead was the planting of a fake news story. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Roman soldiers who had been guarding Jesus' tomb, were bribed to spread a fake news story.

Here's what we read:

Matthew 28:11-15

¹¹ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Why did they do that? This is a standard political tactic. If you can't refute someone's claim, muddy the waters with fake news stories so that no one knows what's true.

Today, this Easter weekend, in an atmosphere in which there's so many competing stories that many folks have become numb to the truth, I've called my message, "Fake News, Real News, Good News". Let's pray.

John 20:1-9

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Peter and an unnamed disciple, who is almost certainly the gospel writer John, hear a report that the tomb where Jesus' body was placed following his crucifixion was open and the body of Jesus was gone. But they didn't easily believe the second hand report

from Mary Magdalene and, perhaps, from other women. They ran to investigate the reports. After all, the report of the empty tomb could have been fake news. They decided to check things out for themselves. We read that both Peter and John ran to the tomb. John outran Peter, perhaps because he was younger and in better shape. Here's what we read:

John 20:6-7

⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.

Most of you know that the New Testament wasn't written originally in English, it was originally written in Greek. When it says here in the English translation that

He [Peter] saw the strips of linen lying there

The Greek word for saw is

Theorei = to observe evidence, to intently look for an explanation

Here we find Peter and John

Investigating Jesus thoughtfully

Christianity is an evidence-based faith. At the core, what we find in Christianity is not a good idea or good philosophy or even a good teaching. The central truth of the gospel is good *news*. That's what the word gospel means, after all. It means good news. Why good news? The central event of the Christian faith is the story of Jesus rising from the dead, offering people a new life in a new body in a new world. But this claim of good news that Jesus rose from the dead and he offers those who believe in him a new life and a new body in a new world needs to be investigated. The issue regarding this good news is whether it's fake news or real news.

To have a lifelong Christian faith, you need a thoughtful faith. You need a faith that is built on facts and evidence, not just your feelings, because there are so many ups and downs in life. We all go through personal tragedies. No one is immune from hurt. Some of you this Easter weekend are grieving the loss of a loved one in the recent past. Some of you are struggling with sadness over the life choices of a loved one. Some of you are struggling with health challenges, with relational challenges, with financial challenges. If you are going to have a lifelong Christian faith, you need a faith that is not based upon your feelings which may at the moment be quite low. You may feel utterly unnoticed and abandoned by God, but if you are going to have a lifelong Christian faith you need a faith that is not based on your circumstances, your feelings.

You need a thoughtful faith – an intelligent, rational, investigated faith.

It says that Peter looked intently at the grave clothes. He observed the evidence and ran through the possible explanations in his mind. The grave clothes were lying there neatly. If there were grave robbers, they would have taken the spice covered strips of linen because that's what was most valuable. They wouldn't have left the linen strips behind and just taken Jesus' body. And if followers of Jesus would've taken the body, the strips of linen would be tossed all over the place. But it was almost as if, the body passed through the strips. The strips of linen were wrapped neatly and compressed. Peter is reasoning, he's thinking, he's meditating on the evidence.

If you are going to have a lifelong Christian faith, you need to investigate Jesus thoughtfully. Let me tick off for you three reasons why the story of Jesus' resurrection is not just good news, it's real news. The first reason why the resurrection of Jesus is real news is because we have:

Women as eyewitnesses

Now in the 21st century you might ask, "Why is it particularly strange that women are the chief witnesses? How does that fact tilt towards emphasizing the credibility of the report of the resurrection? What's so unusual about this?"

You need to understand that 1st century Israel, indeed the 1st century Near Eastern and the entire Greco Roman world of the 1st century, was not egalitarian. If you were going to make up a fake news story of a man rising from the dead in the 1st century and you wanted to create eye-witnesses to testify to that story, the last people in the world that you would have as eye-witnesses would be women. Women were not permitted to testify in a legal proceeding in Judaism. In fact, an ancient Jewish rabbi said this,

From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and impudence of their sex.

Women were regarded in the same way that we would regard children today – as people who had no legal standing because of their lack of education. Men believed that women were easily deceived. Women were considered unreliable and flighty.

Celsus, the second century critic of Christianity, mocked the idea of Mary Magdalene as an alleged resurrection witness. He referred to her as

"An hysterical female... deluded by... sorcery."

If you wanted to have fake news believed that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, if you wanted to have fake news considered to be real news, the last thing you would do in the first century is have the fake news reported by a woman. It would be like having

an alleged bank robbery suspect identified by a five-year old. But the reason that the reports of Jesus' resurrection were first circulated by women is because that is what actually happened. Jesus first appeared to women because Jesus was thoroughly counter-cultural and thoroughly egalitarian.

If you want to have a lifelong Christian faith, your faith needs to be thoughtful. Here's the second bit of evidence that suggests the New Testament accounts are real and not fake news. The enormous amount of embarrassing material in the New Testament.

Embarrassing material

What do I mean by embarrassing material?

I mean the gospels, the biographical accounts of Jesus, written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, contain a lot of material that if it wasn't true, should never have appeared if someone was just generating fake news stories. A lot of what is in the gospels would have made the spread of Christianity more difficult for the early Christians, not easier. There is a lot of embarrassing material in the gospels that would have inhibited the spread of Christianity.

Like what? Let's start with the crucifixion. Why make up a story about Jesus being crucified, if it didn't happen? Any listener to the gospel either in the Jewish world, or in the Roman world, would have automatically believed that Jesus could never have been the Jewish Messiah, or the King of the world, because he ended up crucified. And we know who gets crucified – criminals.

Why make up the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging God if there was some other way for him to accomplish his mission? If you're going to make up a story, just have Jesus walk courageously to the cross, without fear or agony.

And why have your leader not only crucified, but on the cross asking – "God, why are you abandoning me?" Again, if you are going to make something up, why not put into the mouth of Jesus words like, "I trust in your Father, even while I'm hanging on the cross as I've always trusted in you. My faith remains unwavering." Why have him say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And why would you have the disciples, who were the early church leaders, the people spreading the message, look so – there is no kind way to put it – look so stupid, so utterly unreliable, so disloyal, if you are going to make something up? I mean we're trying to teach people to be loyal to Jesus in the face of pressure and persecution, believe this message and follow through to the end, and what do you report about the leaders?

Well, you report that Peter, who was one of the chief leaders in the early church, denied Jesus when the chips were down. And they really didn't understand the message. And they repeatedly had to be rebuked.

There is just too much unhelpful, embarrassing material in the gospels for this whole thing to be made up. Why believe the story is reliable? Because it reports what happened, not what a propagandist, or a spin doctor, someone generating fake news would claim happened when it really didn't happen.

Here's the third thing: we have to account somehow for the fact that faith in Jesus continued even after Jesus' death.

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The Jesus-Movement endured

Almost certainly, the most thorough examination of the story of the resurrection of Jesus is the 800+ page volume titled *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by the great New Testament scholar and historian of the world of first century, N.T. Wright. Here's what N.T. Wright says in his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

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[There were] many messianic movements between roughly 150 BC and AD 150 that ended with the violent death of the founder. When this happened, there were two options open to any who escaped death: they could give up the movement, or they could find themselves another Messiah. The followers of a dead prophet could of course go on believing that he was a true prophet; that indeed, is what happened with some at least of the followers of John the Baptist. But with a would-be Messiah, who is supposed to be inaugurating the kingdom, it was impossible. Nobody, after all, believed that the Messiah would be raised from the dead; nobody was expecting any such thing. Clinging to the belief that the recently executed person was after all the Messiah was simply not an option.

Somehow, we need to account for the fact that of all of the many would-be messiahs in the centuries before and after Jesus, all these would-be messiahs who were executed by Rome, none of them had people following them as Messiah after their execution. Only Jesus! The Jesus movement actually exploded in growth *after* his execution! What made Jesus so unique? Because only Jesus had the real news reported about him that following his execution on a cross, he rose from the dead.

If you want to have a Christian faith that will last your whole life. You need to have a thoughtful faith, you need an evidence-based faith.

The story of Easter goes beyond us investigating the evidence. Here's what we read:

John 20:11-16

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

We not only investigate Jesus thoughtfully. We meet Jesus graciously.

Meeting Jesus graciously

This story of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene is so full of grace. Jesus comes looking for Mary. Mary thinks she's going to see a dead body. Her expectations regarding Jesus are too small. She has no idea how extraordinary a person Jesus is. She knows she loves Jesus. She knows that Jesus is great, but how great? She never expected that Jesus could overcome death for himself.

Jesus initiates the contact. That's how faith comes. Faith comes to a person by grace at the initiation of God. Christian faith is surprising. Christian faith is unexpected. Many people say, "You know, I'm not the religious type. I'm not the kind of person who would get involved with Christian faith. Christian faith is not just for a certain type of person – the religious type. Christian faith is not primarily us searching for God, it's God coming to us. Jesus initiates, Jesus reveals himself to us. He reveals himself to a woman who comes from a broken background. She doesn't have a lot of moral attainment or religious attainment or educational attainment. Christian faith is a result of God coming to us graciously.

We need to investigate Jesus thoughtfully. We need to meet Jesus graciously. And we find in this story that Mary embraces Jesus personally.

Embracing Jesus personally

John 20:15-16a

¹⁵ He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

Why didn’t Jesus say to Mary, “Mary, it’s me. I am Jesus in my resurrected body.” Why instead did Jesus simply say, “Mary” and call her by name? Because it’s one thing for people to know about Jesus. You can have lots of correct thoughts regarding who Jesus is and what he did. And even with a head full of correct thoughts - the Lord can still feel a million miles away from you and he may have no personal impact on your life. It’s one thing to know about Jesus, it’s quite another thing to come to the stunning realization that Jesus sees you and knows you. So Jesus calls Mary by name – in Hebrew it would have been “Miriam!” Miriam, I see you. I know you.

Here’s the life-altering realization that moves a person to become a Christian. Not only do I know true things about Jesus, but Jesus knows me personally, intimately, he knows me by name.

Mary grabs Jesus and Jesus says, “You don’t need to do that. Don’t keep holding on to me. Don’t cling to me. You’re not going to lose me. I’m going to send my Spirit and you will have me forever.” You can have a Christian faith that lasts a lifetime and never lose it. You don’t have to be afraid that you are going to start and then fail at this Christian thing. Christianity is not you trying as hard as possible to hold on to God for dear life. It’s the Lord coming to you and holding on to you and never letting you go.

Which leads to the last thing. The way the real news of the resurrection becomes good news for you and me is that we need to choose Jesus decisively.

Choosing Jesus decisively

You know, it is possible to have a personal spiritual encounter with Jesus and not do anything with it. Kenneth Clark who is one of Great Britain’s most prominent art historians and authors was the producer of the BBC series “Civilization”. He wrote about a time when he was living in France and visited a little church. I want you to hear this:

I had a religious experience. It took place in the Church of San Lorenzo, but did not seem connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes, my whole being was radiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had ever experienced before. This state of mind lasted for several minutes... but wonderful as it was, [it] posed an awkward problem in terms of action.

My life was far from blameless. I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion, for I was in every way unworthy of such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right. I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course.

I had this experience. A wonderful experience of God, but I didn't do anything with it. So, the real news – a real spiritual encounter with the risen Lord – didn't turn into good news for Kenneth Clark.

Let me contrast this story with a story of a friend here at Vineyard Columbus whose name is Ali. Ali was a Sunni Muslim living in Iraq during the time of the American invasion. Here's what Ali said,

"I never believed that God would speak to me in a dream. I had a lot of hurts growing up and lots of fears. A friend encouraged me to read the Bible. One day I started to read the Gospel of Matthew. That night I went to sleep and it seemed as if I immediately woke up. In the dream, I was in an area that completely reflected the life I had. It was a war zone where there was no peace and a lot of fear. When I saw a mountain I ran toward the mountain and then up to the top. From the top I saw two large crowds of people, each group calling me by name to join them. One group was filled with joy and peace; the other with anger and fighting. Without thinking about it, I immediately ran to the group that was filled with joy and peace. When I arrived they all hugged me and said, "Jesus loves you, Ali!" Then I woke up and felt warmth through my whole body. It was then that I decided to become a follower of Jesus."

In this story, Mary was encountered by Jesus, but she didn't leave it there. She didn't just have a spiritual experience like Kenneth Clark that she could look back on years later and say, "Yes, something wonderful happened to me five years ago or ten years ago but I was too dug into my life to change! So many people have an experience – an answer to prayer, an unexpected feeling of God's love and presence, even a miracle and do nothing with those experiences. Mary made a choice to become a follower of Jesus. So we read:

John 20:18

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

The resurrection of Jesus is real news that can become good news for each of you listening to me if you decide to open up your heart and to decisively choose to become a follower of Jesus.

Let's pray.

Fake News, Real News, Good News

Rich Nathan
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Easter
John 20:1-18

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