

Jesus is Not a Ghost

Rich Nathan

March 26 & 27, 2016

Easter

Luke 24:36-43

Let me read to you the text we will be considering today from the gospel of Luke.

Luke 24:36-43

³⁶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." ⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.

If you were to ask the average person in America, "What do you think of Easter?" You probably would hear positive opinions about the Easter holiday. You might hear something like, "I like Easter, it's so inspiring – it means springtime always follows winter!" Or "Easter means the rebirth of hope after times of disappointment and tragedy." Or "Easter means that life goes on even after death."

Consider these Easter inspirational messages (with pictures)

- "Happy Easter! Wish you an Easter filled with love, peace and joy of springtime!"
- "On Easter I wish your heart is full of every good feeling a Happy Easter can bring!"
- "Happy Easter! Easter is life, Easter is hope, Easter is the renew of those good human values, Easter is Jesus in the heart"

This sounds like English as a second language! Or maybe an inspirational Easter message generated by a computer.

Finally, how about this one:

- “Easter tells us that life is to be interpreted not simply in terms of things, but in terms of ideals”

I don’t even know what this means. It sounds inspirational, but I do like the baby bunny.

Over the centuries, the Easter message about Jesus’ physical, bodily resurrection has morphed into this watered down, inspirational thoughts about spring. It reminds me of the old Saturday Night Live Stuart Smalley Daily Affirmations – I almost expect an Easter card to say something like “Easter means: I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me”

“I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me” and
Picture of Al Franken as Stuart Smalley

Now, in the text we just read from the Gospel of Luke, the very last thing the followers of Christ felt when they encountered the risen Christ was inspired. They didn’t necessarily feel comforted either. Seeing a dead man who had been buried suddenly show up in your living room and talk to you doesn’t make you think about colored eggs or fuzzy bunnies or even baby chicks. And you don’t necessarily think about flowers and butterflies when a formerly dead man walks into your room and touches you and eats a meal in front of you.

Look at the disciples’ reaction to seeing the risen Christ. In the text I read to you:

They were startled and frightened. They were troubled and filled with doubt. Why did they react this way? Because Easter is not a nice spiritual story or an inspiring moral lesson, Easter is about the physical, material resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

His disciples struggled to believe it. They said, “This cannot be happening!” But they saw him and felt him.

Luke 24:39-40

Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

They watched him eat and drink and watched the food disappear.

Luke 24:42-43

42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.

Why does the resurrected Christ's physicality matter? I believe the physical, tangible resurrection of Christ matters for three reasons: For your mind – what you believe; for your will – how you choose to live; and for your heart – how you feel.

I called today's talk "Jesus is not a Ghost". Let's pray.

Why does it matter that the resurrection is not just a spiritual thing, that Jesus is not a ghost? Why does it matter? The Gospel writers along with the Apostle Paul go to great length in speaking about the resurrected Christ in physical, tangible terms. Why does that matter?

Jesus' physical resurrection matters for your mind

Here's what we read

Luke 24:38

He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?

Many people that I talk to ask the question, "Can I have a relationship with God even if I have doubts? Does the fact that I have doubts disqualify me from this Christianity thing altogether? I try to believe, but I still have some reservations. Can I move forward with Jesus?"

Now, I don't know your personal history so I don't know, unless we talk personally, why you may have doubts or why you may have significant reservations about Christianity. I do know there are tons of reasons why people doubt other than intellectual reasons.

Non-intellectual reasons for doubt

One reason we struggle to believe is we have:

Doubts because of family background

I was raised in a family where my parents never ever talked about God. My dad thought that religion was just a money-making racket designed to rip off the gullible. So, it may be that you have doubts because you were raised in family like mine where your family just didn't believe. Obviously, parents play an incredibly significant role in shaping a child's view of God. In fact, one study showed that many of history's most famous atheists, including Sigmund Freud, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, and Albert Camus, had very painful relationships with their fathers. Either their fathers died early or abandoned them at a young age or they just despised their fathers. The studies indicate that a strained or non-existent with our earthly father can create difficulty believing in a heavenly Father.

In fact, next week, we will begin a new sermon series entitled “The Father Loves You”. One of the things we’ll be talking about in this series is the connection that people often draw between their relationship with their earthly father and their relationship with God the Father. Family of origin can shape the ease or difficulty we have in believing.

Another reason we struggle to believe is that we have:

Doubts because of the bad behavior of Christians

Other folks have doubts because of bad behavior of Christians. Maybe you had a past experience with a Christian that left a bad taste in your mouth. Maybe you met someone at work or in your family or at school, who loudly proclaimed that they were Christians and constantly talked about religion and the Bible, but they lived in a way that was totally hypocritical. Maybe you had a Christian dad or mom who abandoned their marriage, or abandoned you as a child. Or they secretly abused you or another family member. They struggled with alcohol or drug abuse or they were utterly deceptive in their business practices. There are so many things that Christians can do that can leave people with a bad taste in their mouths regarding Christianity.

I’ve talked with folks who say, “You know, my mom was crazy. She was always off on some religious crusade, racing around town, but she didn’t know how to love her children or her husband.”

I know of adults who grew up in a church where the message was narrow-minded and judgmental. The messages were always about hellfire or damnation preached almost with a sense of glee. Maybe your former church didn’t seem to have any welcome at all for struggling people who had real problems. There was no acknowledgement in the church of weakness. So, I understand that bad experiences with Christians can turn people off to considering Christianity.

There is much in the larger Christian world with which I would not want to be associated. It wouldn’t take long for any of us to compose our list of things that so-called Christians do that make us cringe. Television evangelists who promise healings and prosperity in return for a large donation. Christian leaders who turn Christianity into a cheering section for one particular political party. People who use the Bible to justify violence or racism or xenophobia.

Here’s a news flash: Every human being whether Christian or non-Christian does a lot of cringe-worthy, cruel and ignorant things and I wouldn’t necessarily want to be associated with them either. You see, the crux of the problem is, if you don’t want to be associated with Christianity because of the bad behavior of Christians, you probably can’t be associated with any group of people, whether it’s a softball team or a company

or a rock-and-roll band or a university because the only way to get rid of ignorant, hypocritical behavior is to get rid of human beings. So, yes, Christians do a lot of stupid things, but so does every other human being including me. Not you, but the person sitting to your left or right.

And we struggle to believe because of:

Doubts because of comparing our faith with the faith of others

Some folks have doubt because they compare their faith with the faith of other people. I talk with people who really struggle because they say, “I meet people at church for whom faith seems to come so easily. They talk about hearing from God. God told me this, God told me that. They have all these experiences that I’ve never had. I try to believe. I read the Bible. I pray. I may even go to a small group. But I don’t have a constant sense of God guiding me. I don’t have all the same feelings that these other people seem to.”

If you think that normal faith means a person has a constant feeling of God’s presence, I’d like to encourage you to read a book that’s right in the middle of the Bible, the book of Psalms. Because the writer of Psalms constantly writes about his feeling of not connecting with God, his feeling of being abandoned or disappointed, of not experiencing God’s blessings, of looking around and seeing everyone else who seems to be doing really well. The biblical book of Psalms tells us that normal faith is not always living on a mountain top. Often faith is lived in the valley or in the desert.

Many of us can identify with the father in the gospel story who was encouraged by Jesus to believe and he said,

“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

It’s normal to feel a mix of faith and doubt. You can still move on in your relationship with God even if you struggle with doubt. In fact, you can ask Jesus to help you with your faith.

Let me switch gears and talk about

Intellectual reasons to believe

This is a huge topic that goes well beyond the scope of what I can do, what I can share in a brief Easter message. If you are a reader and wonder if there’s a good book for you to read or for you to pick up for somebody who struggles with intellectual doubt, let me suggest a few books. We have some of these books available at our Cooper Road campus.

One great book is titled

Did the Resurrection Happen by Gary Habermas and Antony Flew

It's a conversation between a Christian philosopher, Gary Habermas, and Antony Flew, who for years was considered one of the world's foremost philosophical atheists. If you want to see two great minds debating about God and specifically about the resurrection of Christ, the very heart of Christian belief, pick that book up.

A second great book for somebody who has lots of intellectual questions is

The Reason for God by Timothy Keller

It deals with such questions as "How could a good God allow suffering?" and "Hasn't science disproved Christianity?" and "How could you believe the Bible?"

A third really good book is titled

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel

Strobel was a former award-winning journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*. In this book he goes around the country interviewing scholars about different aspects of Jesus' life and whether it's possible to believe what we read in the Bible. I think these three books are of great benefit to those who have lots of questions and for those of us who are trying to share our Christian faith with others.

But if you say, "You know, I struggle to believe in the physical, tangible resurrection of Jesus. What are some reasons to believe?" Let me suggest a few reasons.

What accounts for the story of Christ's physical resurrection?

Tom Wright, who many regard as the world's foremost New Testament scholar, wrote an over 700 page book titled *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. In that book, Tom Wright goes into painstaking detail demonstrating that in all of recorded history before the time of Jesus, we have no story ever in any culture that is like the physical resurrection of Christ in the New Testament. The physical resurrection of Jesus was not just some recycled myth from the ancient world. No one in history ever told such a story before. People living in Jesus' day in the first century were completely disinclined to believe a story of the physical resurrection of someone. The Greeks were not looking forward to a physical resurrection. The Greeks believed that the afterlife meant the soul was liberated from the physical body. It was unthinkable to the Greeks to imagine living forever in a material body.

The Jews did believe in a general resurrection at the end of time, but Jews in Jesus' day who heard his followers speaking about Jesus' resurrection said "That's impossible! The day of resurrection could not have occurred because there's still evil in the world, people are still sick and dying. No Jew in Jesus' day believed in the resurrection of just one man in the middle of history.

If you say, "Pastor Rich, this story grew over time. It started with disciples saying that the spirit of Jesus lived on even if his body was rotting in a grave. Over a couple of generations, this memory of Jesus morphed into a legend into his physical resurrection."

I would suggest to you that it morphed in a direction exactly opposite of what one would predict. We need to remember the Christian church was founded in The Promised Land, among Jews. Jews did believe in a physical resurrection at the end of time. Over the next couple of generations after Jesus, this message was taken outside of Palestine and it spread in Europe and in Asia among people whose view of the afterlife, as I said, was that the soul would be liberated from a physical body. If the story was going to morph over time, it would have morphed from a story about physical resurrection to a story of spiritual resurrection. Not the other way around. Not when the message was spreading among the Greeks.

You say, "What are some reasons that I should believe in a physical, tangible resurrection of Christ?"

What accounts for Women being the first witnesses?

We can't emphasize too often the fact that the New Testament records women as the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Celsus, a Greek philosopher who lived in the second century AD and who was highly antagonistic to Christianity, wrote a number of works listing arguments against Christian faith. One of the arguments that he thought was the strongest went like this:

Christianity can't be true, because the written accounts of the resurrection are based on the testimony of women – and we all know that women are hysterical and they can't be believed.

Many of Celsus' readers agreed. In ancient societies, as you may know, women were marginalized. The testimony of women wasn't even accepted in court because women would tell you anything. You see what this means? It means that if the gospel writers were making these stories up to get their movement off the ground, the last thing they would have done would be to write women in to the story as the first eye witnesses to Jesus' empty tomb. The only possible reason for the presence of women in these

accounts is that what really happened and the women reported what they saw. Jesus was physically, tangibly raised from the dead.

Here's the third thing for those of you who say, "I struggle to believe in the physical, tangible resurrection of Jesus. Did he really rise from the dead?" You might ask yourself this question,

What accounts for the absence of veneration of Jesus' tomb?

You know, it is a historical fact that within a couple of generations of Jesus' resurrection, people lost track of where his tomb was. By the second century, there was debate and discussion about where the tomb of Jesus was located. I know you can go to Jerusalem today and there will be all kinds of tour guides saying that the tomb was exactly here. I know that you can visit one possible site at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but nobody really knows. This is quite remarkable, because in every culture including ancient Judaism, the tombs of the prophets are venerated. People make pilgrimages to the tomb of Muhammad, to the tomb of Confucius, to the burial place for Abraham and Sarah, Mormons visit Joseph Smith's grave. But very quickly, followers of Jesus lost track of his tomb. Why not? There is no record of venerating Jesus' tomb in the first few centuries of the Christian church. What accounts for that?

What's account for it was that they knew Jesus wasn't there. The tomb was empty. I would compare Jesus' tomb to a motel room that somebody stays in for a couple of days. For those of you who are married, imagine your spouse comes home from a business trip after a couple of days, would you say, "Tell me more about your room at Motel 6"? You had your own shower? Wow, and they gave you towels? That's incredible! What highway was it on? Maybe next summer we can all take a road trip and visit the motel. Very quickly this temporary lodging where your spouse stayed would be forgotten. That's what it was like for the tomb of Jesus. It was temporary lodging. It became unimportant.

The early Christians knew he wasn't there so there was no reason for them to visit. As I said, I could pile up the reasons why it makes sense to believe in the physical, tangible resurrection of Christ. But the physical, tangible resurrection of Jesus meets the need of our minds – it gives us reasons to believe. Let me move on and consider

Why Jesus' physical resurrection matters for your will

Why does the fact that Easter is not just a watered down spiritual message about springtime and new hope, why does the fact that Jesus is not just carried in our memories, but that he physically and bodily resurrected – why does that matter for the way we choose to relate to God?

Lots of people like spiritual conversations. The other day I was in a coffee shop working on this message and there was a guy at a nearby table loudly saying, “There are no answers in Christianity, only questions!” Religion is not about finding a certain destination. It’s all about the journey. It’s all about each of us discovering our own pathway. Immediately I thought, “You know, there were people in the first century who felt the way this man felt at the coffee shop.”

A story is told in Acts 17 about the Apostle Paul who went up on Mars Hill in Athens, Greece, where there was a group of philosophers meeting and Paul began to dialogue with them and he said to them, “I believe in one God who doesn’t live in temples made by human hands. I believe in a God who doesn’t need anything from us human beings.” The philosophers thought, “This is great! This foreign message from this Jewish guy is part of the truth and we each have our own way to apprehend the concept of God.” And they were smiling and nodding along until the Apostle Paul said this,

Acts 17:30-31

³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Then the philosophers got up and began to yell at Paul. “No way, we’re not going to listen to this!” It was great when Paul was talking about spiritual things. “Yes, there are no answers,” they thought, “Just questions. No end, just a journey.”

But when Paul talked about the physical, tangible resurrection of Jesus it was like a cup of cold water thrown in their faces. He was saying, “The search is over. The journey has ended. The questions that you have about the meaning of life have answers. God overlooked your ignorance before but now that Jesus is raised from the dead he is Lord. And the only issue is what are you going to do with him?” Are you going to bow the knee and surrender your life to Christ? Or are you going to turn your back and reject him?

You’ve heard the old parable about the blind man and the elephant. These blind men were standing near the elephant trying to describe what he was like. One blind man held the elephant’s tail and said, “Well, the elephant’s like a rope.” Another blind man felt the elephant’s side and said, “The elephant is like a wall.” Another blind man felt the elephant’s leg and said, “Well, the elephant is like a tree.” Another blind man held the elephant’s tusk and said, “The elephant’s like a giant sword.”

This parable is designed to communicate that all of us just have part of the truth. We don’t see the whole. The philosophers in Paul’s day, like the man I overheard in the

coffee shop, would say, “Yes, that’s what I’m talking about! We’re all on a journey. We all have only part of the truth.”

But, you see, that’s not what Jesus said. Jesus didn’t say, “I am part of the truth. I am one truth among many truths.” He didn’t say, “I’m a pointer to the truth.” Jesus said, “I am the truth.” The Apostle Paul is saying the same thing about Jesus. He’s saying, “With the resurrection of Jesus, the journey is over. We’ve reached our destination with the resurrection. The day of questioning is over. We’ve got our answer. The physical, tangible resurrection of Jesus means that each of us are now faced with a choice.”

Believe that he rose from the dead and he’s Lord and submit to him or reject this belief and walk away. But don’t water this Easter message down and turn into some spiritualized hope for new beginnings, rebirth of our dreams. That’s an option the physical resurrection of Jesus doesn’t leave us.

We’ve considered why Jesus’ physical resurrection matters for our minds. We’ve considered why Jesus’ physical resurrection matters for our wills. And now, let’s finish by considering why

Jesus’ physical resurrection matters for your heart

I think the resurrection matters for our hearts because the resurrection deals with our past and the resurrection deals with our future.

The resurrection deals with our past

So many folks live with a sense of disappointment over unrealized dreams. It’s become popular over the last 20 years or so to have a bucket list – things people want to do before they die. You know what the number one thing on people’s bucket lists is? According to surveys, become a millionaire. Number two is travel the world. Number three is see the Northern Lights. Number four is to walk on the Great Wall of China. I don’t know what’s on your bucket list, but all of us have disappointments. All of us carry things in our hearts that we wish that we could have done or we might have experienced. Things that we wish would have been different.

The resurrection of Jesus answers all our disappointments and regrets. You say, “I wish I would have gotten married.” Or “I wish I would’ve had a happy marriage.” Or “I wish my wedding day was different.”

You know, friend, because Jesus was physically raised from the dead you and I are going to have a marriage that goes beyond anything we could ask or imagine. The New Testament teaches that those who have trusted in Christ are heading for a huge

wedding banquet in which the church will somehow become like a bride married to the risen Jesus Christ.

You say, “I wish I would have been able to travel more. I wish I had more money. I wish I lived in a nicer house. I wish... I wish... I wish...”

Let me tell you a story: Joni Eareckson Tada became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident when she was 17. Every week in the church that she attended, the priest would say during the liturgy, “Now, let’s kneel down.” And it drove home the point that she couldn’t get out of her wheelchair. She was once at a Christian convention and the speakers said, “Now, let’s all kneel down and worship.” Everyone in the place did except for Joni. She was locked in her wheelchair. She began to cry, but it wasn’t because she couldn’t move, she said,

“Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick, and do aerobics. And... sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus.”

She concluded her statement saying this,

“Can you imagine the hope the resurrection gives someone who’s spinal cord-injured like me?”

The resurrection promises not just new hopes, new feelings, the resurrection promises us new physical bodies. If you can’t dance and you’ve always wanted to dance, the resurrection says, “One day you will dance more beautifully than the world’s best dancer now.” If you’ve always wanted to sing, but can’t sing - the resurrection promises one day you’ll be able to sing. Get rid of your bucket list! The resurrection deals with our past.

And the resurrection

Deals with your future

You say, “I’m afraid. I’m afraid of getting old. I’m afraid of getting sick. I’m afraid of being alone. I’m afraid of suffering. I’m afraid of dying. I’m afraid of taking risks, of leaving my job, putting it all on the line in order to do something that I think God wants me to do. I’m afraid that if I stay in this marriage I’ll never discover the love that I want to have.” Whatever your anxiety is friend, the physical resurrection of Jesus is the answer for your fear of the future.

One day you'll have a perfect life. A real concrete physical life with Jesus when he raises you from the dead. Who cares what happens to us now or what happens in the future? It's not a permanent state. We can be brave, we can take risks. We can sacrifice. We can deny ourselves immediate gratification. Easter is not just an inspiring philosophy. And Jesus is not a ghost. He was physically, tangibly raised from the dead, and those who choose to believe in him will one day be physically, tangibly raised from the dead along with him.

Let's pray.

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- I. Jesus' Physical Resurrection matters for your mind
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 - 2. Doubts because of the bad behavior of Christians
 - 3. Doubts because of comparing our faith with the faith of others
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 - 2. What accounts for the women being the first witness
 - 3. What accounts for the absence of veneration of Jesus' tomb
- II. Jesus' Physical Resurrection matters for your will
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 - A. Deals with your past
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