

All Authority in Heaven and Earth

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part VII)

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — April 16, 2017 (Resurrection Day)

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Luke 23:55–24:12 ESV

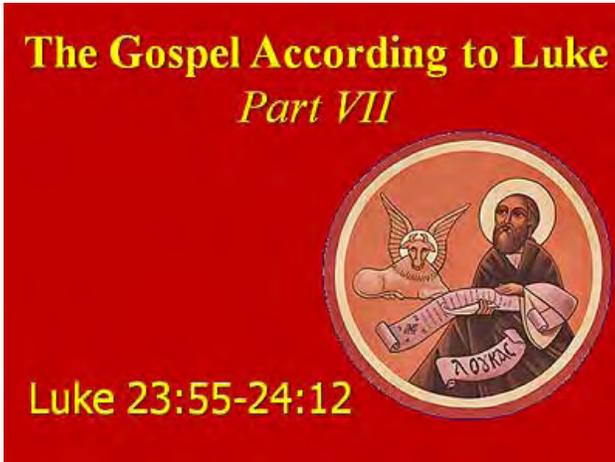
The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”

And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother

of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.



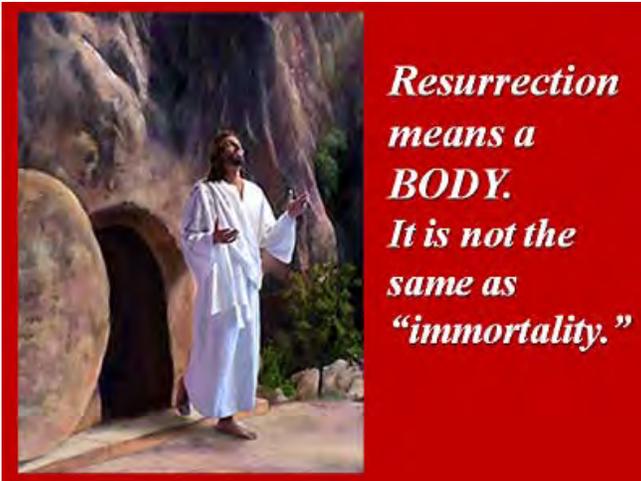
Our final episode on our journey through the Gospel According to Luke brings us to his account of the resurrection of Jesus — the amazing event that we celebrate today and on every Easter Sunday. As you look at your calendars you may wonder why Sunday comes at the beginning of each week, when most people would consider it part of the “weekend.” The Gospels tell us it was on “the first day of the week” that Jesus was raised, and early Christian writers record that Christians chose that day to gather together because the first day was the day of resurrection. Contrary to what people used to call it, Sunday is not the Sabbath, the Jewish “day of rest.” That is the seventh day, what we call Saturday. Sunday is the day of resurrection; in many languages it’s not called Sunday, after that big ball of gas 93 million miles away, but rather it’s called “the Lord’s Day”: *Domingo*, *Dimanche*, *Domenica*, and the like. Indeed, *every Sunday* is supposed to be Easter! (And, in truth, we shouldn’t call it Easter anyway, since the name *Easter* comes from the name of a Germanic goddess. In some languages it’s called *Pascha* or *Pâques*, from the Hebrew word *pesach*, Passover. We should call it “Resurrection Day.”)



On “Resurrection Day” last year I presented a message entitled “An Historian Looks at Easter.” I fully realize most people don’t remember sermons from one *week* to the next, let alone from one *year* to the next. That’s understandable given the way we’re bombarded by media in today’s world. So you probably wouldn’t notice if I simply retitled last year’s message and preached it again. I’m not going to do that, because I’d have to give back my pay for this week! But just let me review a few things I pointed out in that message.

To begin with, let’s be clear what resurrection is. It’s not the same as immortality, as if the soul never dies but passes into some bodiless realm of eternal life. I realize we often speak of eternal life that way, but that’s not the

New Testament way. Resurrection requires *a body* to be raised into, and a body requires a way to manifest that body. So in the Bible the resurrection is “the resurrection on the last day,” when God brings his new creation back to earth and we come with Jesus in our glorified *bodies*. If that idea seem odd to you, read the last two chapters in the Bible, Revelation 21-22. When Jesus is raised in a body — a strange, mysterious body to be sure, but still a body — this is the beginning of God’s new creation, when he restores this earth to what it was supposed to be before Adam and Eve spoiled it with their disobedience. Resurrection isn’t immortality; it’s *new creation*, the city of God come down from heaven.



Jesus was raised in a body and appeared to his disciples. What makes that concept believable today? Several points. First, this universe is a far more mysterious place than scientists believed only a few generations ago. For example, astrophysicists are now suggesting that we can only see or detect about two percent of the universe; 98% of the mass of the universe is what they call “dark matter” and “dark energy,” perhaps in dimensions beyond the four we normally experience. So the universe isn’t the “closed system” the experts thought it was a century or so ago, and things they thought impossible then should not be ruled out today.

Second, skeptics have claimed that the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ resurrection must have been made up

many years after his death. But the biblical evidence doesn’t support such a claim. The earliest witnesses to the resurrection are women; in the ancient world, women weren’t regarded as reliable witnesses, so the church never would have invented such a story if it expected people to believe it. Evidence from Paul, for example, indicates that the resurrection of Jesus was the heart of the Christian message within just a few years of his crucifixion, when people were still around who would have been able to deny it if it hadn’t happened. And would the apostles have made up the story of the risen Lord, a message that got them into a good deal of trouble, even costing them their lives? The way the Gospels tell the story reveals how surprised Jesus’ followers were to learn of his resurrection, and how unbelievable it was to them in spite of what Jesus had told them would happen. If today people think the resurrection of Jesus is unbelievable, it was just as unbelievable in the first century; yet Christians were compelled to tell the story, because they had experienced it at first hand. As Peter declares in Acts 4:20, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

These are just a few of the reasons to have confidence in what the Gospels tell us about the resurrection of Jesus. We used to sing a song that says, “You ask me how I know he lives — he lives within my heart.” Sorry, but we can’t trust our hearts; as Jeremiah says, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). You ask me how I know he lives? Because reliable witnesses saw him and spoke with him, and their testimony is recorded in Scripture. *My heart has nothing to do with it.*

So we’re left with the fact that on the third day after his crucifixion Jesus’ tomb was found to be empty, and he appeared to his astounded followers — and continued to appear to them, the Bible tells us, for forty days teaching them about the kingdom of God. But *what does the resurrection mean?*

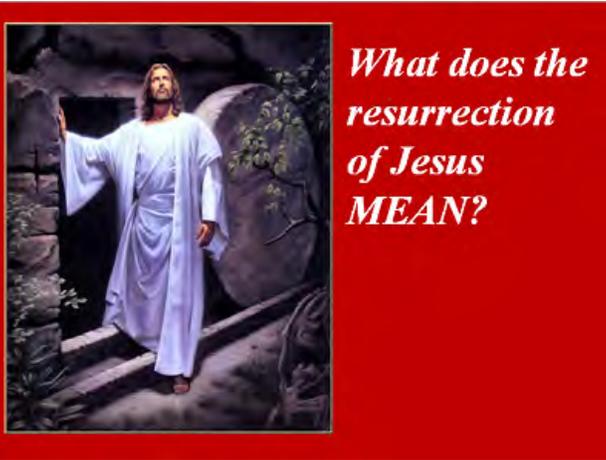
I know what preachers usually say it means; it means that for those who belong to Jesus our death is not the end, but we continue to live with Jesus until the day when God’s new creation is fulfilled. Jesus speaks of

***The New Testament Record
of Jesus’ Resurrection***

- **The first witnesses were women.**
- **The church was preaching the resurrection only a short time after the crucifixion.**
- **The message of the resurrection put the apostles’ lives in danger.**
- **The message was “unbelievable,” yet the apostles had to proclaim it.**

these things, especially in the Gospel of John. "I am the resurrection and the life," he tells Martha. "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). And to his disciples in the upper room he declares, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3). So, to us it seems that Jesus' resurrection holds the promise of life beyond the grave for those who believe in him.

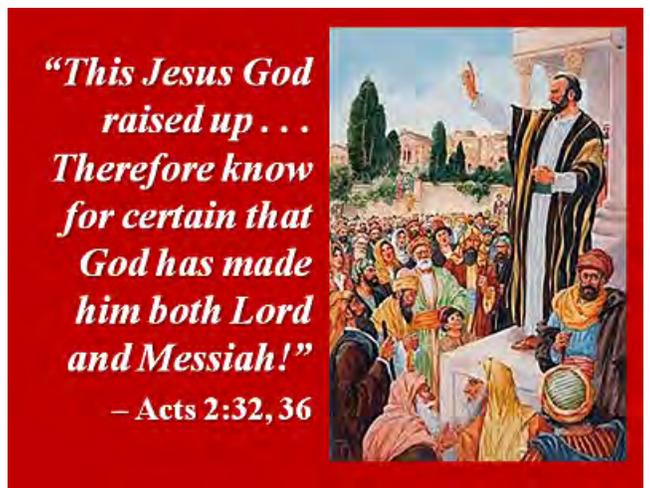
But Jesus says these things while he's still with his followers. The surprising truth is that when the Gospels actually get to telling us about the resurrection they don't connect it with the idea that *we* might live forever, too. There isn't anything in the accounts of the resurrection that suggests that the surprised disciples understood it as the guarantee (if you will) of their own "life after death." The Gospels just tell the story of how the apostles discovered Jesus was alive, and how he met with them after his resurrection. At that point, it seems, they really didn't quite know what to make of it. They didn't yet understand what it meant.



So what did the resurrection of Jesus mean to the earliest Christians, if not the promise of their life beyond the grave? For the answer we have to turn to the record of the earliest preaching of the church, as we find it in the Book of Acts. And there we finally find the apostles preaching the message of the resurrection to their fellow Jews, beginning on the Day of Pentecost. Luke tells us what they said in Acts, chapter 2 where Peter declares, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:32, 36).

For the earliest Christians, then, the resurrection of Jesus means one primary thing: Jesus is the Messiah, the promised deliverer of Israel. By raising Jesus from the dead, God has validated Jesus as the One through whom his plan for the renewal of the world will be accomplished. Paul, preaching to the pagan philosophers at Athens a few decades later, puts it like this: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

In other words, in the earliest witness of the church the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus didn't focus on the idea of life after death. Instead, it focused on the authority of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, and therefore as the Judge of all people through whom God has brought his truth to bear upon the ignorance of those who have no knowledge of God. The resurrection establishes that Jesus is Lord. As the risen Jesus declares to his followers, "All authority *in heaven and on earth* has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). This is totally consistent with what Jesus taught his followers to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus' resurrection, in short, *shows us who's in charge of this world*. It shows us that false authorities cannot command our allegiance, whether the authority of the state, the authority of a warped culture's expectations, or even the authority of our own emotions or self-centered inclinations. God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah, to whom all creation owes its existence and its obedience. The apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, speaks of



the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in [the Messiah] when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:19-23).

It strikes me that this claim — that Jesus has authority as Lord over all creation — is just as radical, just as astounding, as the claim that he has been raised from the dead. Why would anyone believe it today? And for that matter, why would anyone have believed it in the ancient Roman world? For it was into that world that this message was first proclaimed and provoked a response, as people received it and came into the community of those who believed and proclaimed it, namely, the Christian church. I have often asked myself this: Considering the trouble the earliest Christians got into because of their message of the resurrection and the Lordship of Jesus, *why would anyone have become a Christian?* From our standpoint, it didn't seem to make their lives any easier; in fact, to us it seems it made their existence more difficult, more subject to misunderstanding and persecution and even martyrdom.

Historians of the early church have raised this question but, to my knowledge, no one has tried to answer it. It wasn't because of the promise of heaven, or life after death; if you read through the New Testament that idea doesn't really figure in the message the first Christians

proclaimed to the people they went to. Instead, it was the message that because God has raised Jesus from death we know *he is Lord, with authority over all things* in both heaven and earth. But why would anyone put his life on the line for a belief that seemed so radical, so unbelievable, so crazy?

Maybe, just *maybe*, we can get a clue to this mystery if we take a closer look at life in the ancient Roman world. That world was full of gods. There were fertility gods for agriculture, for flocks and herds, for human reproduction. There was a god for every trade and every occupation, or for every activity like travel or the conduct of business. The sea had its gods, as did the mountains, the rivers, the springs of water. Noble families had their own special gods; there was a god at the doorway of a house to protect going out and coming in. Every Roman or Greek city had its patron god or goddess, like Artemis or Diana in the city of Ephesus that we read about in the Book of Acts.

Gods were everywhere, and on top of all these local deities Caesar also demanded his own sacrifices, as a way to bind his far-flung empire together. In the ancient Gentile world it was just assumed that you sacrificed to a multitude of gods as a way of fitting your life into the fabric of society. Even the few people who questioned the reality of all these idols, like some Greek philosophers, still performed the required sacrifices out of custom. In Athens the apostle Paul even found an altar "to the unknown god," a kind of "insurance policy" deity you could offer sacrifice to in order to cover anything you had missed with the other gods! So after taking a tour of the city he declared to the philosophers there, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22).

The ancient world was an overwhelmingly religious world, infested with gods. When we think of "religion," we think of a system of belief that governs our way of life. In the ancient world, "religion" wasn't one particular belief, or loyalty to any special god. Religion was a system of public sacrifices and rituals that



Why would anyone believe such a radical claim? Why would anyone become a Christian?

A World Full of Gods



allowed you to fit into the culture of your city or village or empire, and wherever you went you were expected to offer reverence to whatever gods were established there regardless of what your personal beliefs might be. As we can see, these obligations placed a great burden upon people. Years ago an historian named John Wilson wrote a book entitled *The Burden of Egypt*, showing how the intense concentration on building the great pyramids of the Pharaohs, who claimed to be divine, just sapped all the energy of the people and took up all the resources of the land. Religion in the ancient world was a public burden people had to bear, with a multitude of gods who must be placated at every turn. The only people that got out of this were the Jews, who worshiped only their one God. But everyone knew these fanatics were crazy, and even the Jews had to offer a sacrifice in the Temple on Caesar's behalf. Nobody else got to opt out of the system.

But what if, one day, shackled by this heavy load of religious obligation, you suddenly hear that there is only one God, and that he has revealed himself by raising a man from the dead — a man who now, as the sole representative of the one God, claims *all authority* in heaven and on earth? "You mean all these gods I see around me are *nothing*? You mean if I don't sacrifice to them they won't get after me, and make my life miserable? You mean I can finally live by the truth I've suspected all along, but never dared admit it? I'm going to believe in this one God, and the man he has sent to reveal his truth at last, who now has the real authority over this world! Sure, my family and friends won't like it. I might get into trouble with local

authorities, or even with the Roman government. But really, I'm free! *I don't have to be so religious* any more, sucking up to all these idols and laying out cash to sacrifice to them! I'll take the risk of being misunderstood and even rejected, because it's worth it to me to have this awful burden of religion lifted from my shoulders."

"For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

— 1 Corinthians 8:6



Maybe that's why people responded to the gospel of the resurrection: because it liberated them from the system of religion that had enslaved them. To encourage them in their newfound freedom they could join a "support group," a body of people who understood the truth that God is One, and lived by it. They could be baptized into Jesus — into his death, as Paul says in Romans 6, so they could die to that old system and rise

with Jesus into a new and liberated life. They could become members of the church, the body of Christ in the world. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).

Today the idea of God usually implies that there is only one god, but that's because of the influence of Christianity over 2,000 years. That's not how people thought in ancient times. Gods were so pervasive in ancient cultures that if you claimed there was only *one* god that was equivalent to being an atheist! In fact, early Christians were scorned and reviled *as atheists* because they worshiped only one deity. They had cleared their shelves and reduced their inventory of gods to One, and they were free — because God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Let's bring this question down to the 21st century. What if the resurrection of Jesus means the same thing for us as it did for the Christians of the New Testament? What if the resurrection means that Jesus *has all authority* in heaven and on earth, just as he told his disciples? I understand that the values of our world, and our culture, don't always seem to reflect the authority of Jesus. But the fact is that Christianity has had a major influence on the way most people think today. If you were an ancient pagan, you wouldn't care that hundreds of people in Syria had been gassed to death by a brutal dictator; compassion toward the suffering wasn't part of their value system. But in Western culture today we consider such things to be horrible atrocities. That's only one example of how Christian faith has transformed our culture.

But there are hostile forces out there that threaten these values that come, ultimately, from the influence of Jesus. And when people refuse to acknowledge that Jesus has "all authority," they fall prey to these forces. When a person doesn't accept the gospel of the resurrection, he becomes subject to the tyranny of the false gods and loses his freedom from religious bondage.

For false gods abound today, and people are enslaved by them. I don't need to mention the status of women in Islam, or the ideology that compels its adherents to behead "infidels" or engage in terrorist attacks. Think of the religious rigors of political correctness, so that someone who asserts that *all* lives matter, not just black lives, must be pilloried as a racist bigot. Consider the religious bondage of people who belong to the "church of climate change," who are even compelled to burn the books of scientists that question their faith. But other, seemingly less threatening, "gods" have their hold on people you and I know. Some are slaves to their feelings, which force them to act in ways that destroy their families and personal relationships. Others are slaves to hobbies and recreational interests that absorb their time, taking up their weekends and keeping them away from exposure to the gospel. I could go on. So many people are not free. They are under a severe religious obligation to false beliefs and dysfunctional habits.



How can we help them to become free? How can we bring them face to face with the message that Jesus has been raised from the dead, has been given all authority in heaven and earth, and has therefore exposed the false gods for what they are? I am sure that was the issue for the earliest Christians as well, who saw their pagan neighbors and family members caught up in the oppressive system of religious obligation that dominated their culture. And this is what the apostle Paul said about it: "*for us* there is one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ." God "has put all things under his feet," he says, "and gave him as *head over all things to the church*, which is his body." You and I can't control the choices other people make as to which gods they will serve. What we can do is make sure

that "*for us* there is one God," and conduct our lives in such a way that we testify to his Oneness. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, *we* will be free; *we* will refuse to sacrifice to the idols that enslave so many. And we will pray that our witness to the Lordship of Jesus will have its effect, and those who see how we live in liberty will want the same freedom, and come to Jesus to receive it.

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