

A Case for the Risen Christ
Resurrection Sunday 2018
April 1, 2018

North Korea is ranked as the most oppressive place in the world for Christians. So, let me take you on an imaginary trip this morning to North Korea.

You've been discovered to be a Jesus follower
who refuses to worship the Great Leader over Jesus.

You've been brought before a firing squad and the commander says,
"I will hear you out.

You have one chance to make a case for this resurrected Jesus."
What would you put forth as *THE* most compelling argument?

Would you say, "Christianity has endured the test of time."

It's been around over 2,000 years and counting!

Actually, Hinduism is the oldest religion still practiced,
and Judaism, Buddhism and Jainism also out age Christianity.

Would you say, "You just have to look at all the good the Christian church has brought to the world and down through the centuries in the name of Jesus.

And yes, the life and teaching of Jesus
has inspired some of the greatest art the world has known,
some of the greatest humanitarian efforts
some of the greatest institutions for social justice.

But, your opponents would be quick to point out some of the atrocities done
in the name of Jesus down through the centuries.

There's no denying that there have been seasons of church history
that have been totally indefensible.

Would you say, "Well just look at the sterling example of his followers!"
Yes, there have been saints who wowed the world with their exemplar lives.
But there have been many others whose actions didn't (don't) come close
to matching their professed values.

Would you say, "Here give me a Bible. Let me show you what the Bible says!"
Frankly, if someone not a Christian, the Bible carries no authority.

However, *way before* the New Testament was even written,
before anyone in the church could say,
“Believe in Jesus because the Bible says . . .”
there were thousands and thousands and thousands of Christians
who believed that Jesus rose from the dead,
and were so convinced it was true,
that they died rather than give up their belief.

These were convinced because they had experienced the risen Lord.

So that’s where I would start. I start with a story of an experience.

It’s three years into Jesus’ ministry.

He has attracted a group of devoted followers,
men and women who believe he is the Messiah,
promised by their prophets of old.

His teaching is phenomenal.

Wherever he went people were miraculously healed.

He loved the disenfranchised; he’d stick it to the power hording elite.

Who doesn’t love to see that!

His movement was gaining tremendous momentum.

His followers knew that in short order he would put an end to Roman domination and
make Israel great again.

Jesus was a winner; a man going places; and they were going with him.

Until . . . in the span of just three days, something went terribly wrong.

Luke 23:23, 33, 44-46

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified,
and their shouts prevailed.

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there.

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,
for the sun stopped shining.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice,
“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

When he had said this, he breathed his last.

It was game over

Yes, they expected him to die – someday – everybody does.

But not just 3 years into his movement, as a criminal . . .

Not before he had set up the God's kingdom on earth,
with the disciples leading the parade
(James and John's mother securing a place for her sons on his right and left hand.)
Not until the Law of God became the law of the land.

Die yes, but not now!
"You were doing so well, Jesus, outsmarting the elite,
delighting the common folk."
But then you let your opponents get the best of you.
We thought you were strong enough to go the distance.
but you proved to be too weak.
We thought you were a winner.
but you ended up a loser.
We thought you were the Messiah,
but you fell in defeat . . .
just another wannabe Messiah."
His followers were devastated, disillusioned, even humiliated.

The lament of Cleopas and his traveling companion on the road to Emmaus, after
the crucifixion, captures it perfectly.
They stood still, their faces downcast.
"He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.
²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death,
and they crucified him;
²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.
We had hoped . . . you fill in the blank.
There comes a time for all of us that the Jesus of our own creation, lets us down.
We had *hoped*; but they crucified him.

But wait a minute.
Wouldn't it be enough just to remember Jesus was a great teacher?
He helped us understand that righteousness was way more than skin deep,
That is was about our hearts and our motives.
He took righteousness to a whole new level,
that brought us *all* down to size.
Isn't it enough to just remember him as a great teacher and pass his teachings forward?

Wouldn't it be enough just to remember Jesus him as an enlightened revolutionary,
who turned our understanding of the world upside down,
or rather, showed us how to turn the world right-side up?

The Sermon on the Mount showed a way of peace never yet tried by our world.
He spoke of the elevation the poor, the meek and the merciful,
A way of living together with NO class distinctions.
He spoke of love – for even our enemies
His teaching become like yeast, permeating our consciousness,
forever pulling us back from the brink of our own self-destruction
and propelling us in an arc that bends toward justice.
Isn't it enough just to remember him as an enlightened revolutionary?

Wouldn't it be enough just to remember Jesus as an insightful prophet?
Jesus could zero in on the sin of a person with laser accuracy.
Remember how many times he nailed us on our wrong motives?
Isn't it enough that he was an insightful prophet in the tradition of a Moses and Elijah?

Wouldn't it be enough just to remember Jesus as a mighty worker of miracles?
Just because he died doesn't mean that those miracles didn't really happen.
Isn't it enough for Jesus to be remembered as a great miracle-worker?

Apparently NOT.
Not for the disciples who had walked and talked with Jesus.
For them it was . . . game over.

None of that was enough because he had claimed far too much for himself.
As the religious elite mocked,
“Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, “I am the Son of God!”
“He saved others” they said, “but he can't save himself!
Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”

Perhaps if he hadn't claimed so much for himself.
If he had not blasphemed by saying, “I and the Father are One.”
And “Before Abraham was, I AM.”

Perhaps if he had been more modest in what he claimed,
we could have remembered him as good;
But not now.
There were no Jesus followers after the crucifixion.
It was game over.

The problem is, they had misunderstood the game.
Jesus was playing on an entirely different game board.
For Jesus is was now, GAME ON.

You played your best hand; you dealt me the death card.
Now, it's my turn.

In a composite of the gospel accounts of resurrection morning, we read:

Matthew 28

² After the sabbath there was a violent earthquake,
for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and,
going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.

³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.

⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

¹ After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week,
Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

Luke 24

² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed
like lightning stood beside them.

⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground,

Mark 16 – the women are bewildered

⁶ "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene,
who was crucified.

He has risen! He is not here.

⁸ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.

They were caught completely off guard by crucifixion;
They were in stunned disbelief by the news of a resurrection

Have you had a moment in your life when things are going along fairly predictably,
and then, unexpectedly, a curtain is pulled back
and what you see is so startling, it's almost incomprehensible.

You have no clue what to do with this new information.
Maybe it's best to just put it in a box, safely away in your closet.
Oh, you won't deny it's true, but best not give this truth a life of its own.
There's the terrifying realization that if you embrace this truth,
 nothing can ever be the same again.
The world as you've understood . . . it would be no more.

If you've had such a moment in life – I have, and I know that some of you have;
 then you understand the shock of Resurrection morning.

How did *Jesus*' followers cross over from their assumed reality of what was,
 to the new reality of what is?
 With great difficulty.

Again, from a composite reading of the gospels,
 let me share what seems to be the way each crossed over that line into belief.

We remember the two Mary's who hear the angels say,
 Jesus is not here, he is risen.

Of *course*, if two *angels* told you Jesus had risen, you'd believe, right?
 Apparently not.
 (*We generally don't hear what makes no sense to us.*)

They run to tell Peter and John, saying,
 "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb,
 and we don't know where they have laid him!"

So John (*or the disciples who Jesus loved, if you will*) and Peter run to the tomb.
John gets there first and peaks inside,
 then Peter arrive and rushes in.
Seeing only the grave linens neatly folded but without a body,
 Peter "wondered to himself, "What happened?"

John, however, saw the folded grave clothes, and a light went off in his head –
 As the gospel of John tells us, "He saw and believed."
 Jesus had risen.
 John crossed over.

Apparently, Mary Magdalene had returned to the tomb,
She lingered and was crying when a man, she assumed to be the gardener, asks her,
 “Why are you crying?”
"Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him."
That's when she heard him say her name, Mary!
 She turned, falling at his feet,
 as she crossed over into belief.

Later in the day two travelers are on the road to Emmaus and were joined by a third.
 (who the reader knows to be Jesus, but they don't)
Upon telling the newcomer the events of the last few days,
 The newcomer begins telling them how the Scriptures (the Old Testament to us)
 had predicted all of this.
While their hearts burned within them as they listened,
 it was not enough to convince them to believe.
 The Bible says was not enough.
It wasn't until they sat down to dine with Jesus that, as the writer relates:
Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him,
 and he vanished out of their sight.
And they returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples,
 "The Lord is risen indeed!"
They crossed over the line into belief.

Now we come to Resurrection Sunday evening.
Jesus pays an unexpected visit to the Disciples.
They think he's a ghost.
Despite an empty tomb and despite being told by Mary that she had seen him -- risen,
 they had not yet crossed over.
It's not until Jesus shows them his hands
 and sits down with them for dinner
 they ALL cross over that line into belief.

All, or course, except Thomas who becomes famous for saying,
“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were,
 and put my hand into his side, I will not believe!”
And so earned the name that stuck through history, Doubting Thomas.

Thank God, Jesus didn't say,
"Well if you're going to be that stubborn, just stay in your unbelief!"
No "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.
Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said,
 "Peace be with you!" then he said to Thomas,
 "Put your finger here; see my hands.
 Reach out your hand and put it into my side.
 Stop doubting and believe."
Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

All of these (with difficulty) crossed over into belief
because they *experienced* the risen Lord in a way that for them was
 so undeniable, they would live the rest of their lives loyal to Jesus,
 willing to die a martyr's death rather than renounce the risen Lord.

That's the story I would tell the firing squad.
You can kill me, but the story you've just heard will live on
You see, the Jesus of the story is still showing up and changing lives.

May I share with you a case in point.
If you have been with us for a while, you know our dear brother, Justin,
 who is serving a 9 ½ year sentence in Yardville State Prison.
That would be a tragic story,
 except that the risen Jesus showed up in his prison cell on December 4, 2015
 in such an undeniable way, that Justin has never been the same.

What I want to play for you is a rap that Justin recently wrote.
Now it's just his mom's phone recording it,
 and you'll hear the noises of the prison in the background
 They don't afford prisoners the luxury of a private recording studio.
But I trust it will touch your heart as it has mine.

JUSTIN VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHaCwBTQPUA>

The risen Lord is STILL in the business of changing lives.

Where are you this resurrection morning?

Are you seeking that moment of discovery; of truth revealed.
Seek on for the God of the Bible promises,
 "You will find me when you seek me with your whole heart."

Have you crossed over that line into belief,
but have cautiously put the truth in a box in your closet,
lest it upset your life (your plans, your desires)
lest he take over your whole life.

If Jesus is not Risen we can all discuss him forever.
But . . . if Jesus IS Risen,
then he is King of Kings and Lord of Lord,
and to him every knee must bow,
to the glory of God the Father.

BENEDICTION **Revelation 5**

¹¹ I looked and heard the voice of many angels,
numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand
in a loud voice saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the
earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

¹⁴ The four living creatures said, “Amen,”
and the elders (*and the Saints at New Beginnings*) fell down and worshiped.