

Closing Remarks – Choir – Easter 2019

Pastor Tom Anderst

Thank you to the choir and all involved for the presentation that you have just witnessed. I have been a Christian ever since December 26, 1971. So that's 47+ years as a Christian. It's been interesting to experience the changing ways people respond to me as a Christian. Now I don't go around saying to people – "I'm a Christian. What do you think of me?" But you know when you meet people for the first time, what is the second question that we usually ask? Question 1 is "What's your name?" Question 2 – What do you do? Well I answer "I'm a pastor." When I started as a pastor 30 years ago, people would respond in one of two ways. They would say "Oh that's good." Or "You're too young to be a pastor." I would admit that I was young and just starting out. But my occupation generally received a favorable response back then.

Today, things are much different. So when people find out what I do, I usually get one of three responses. Response #1 is "Hmm." That probably means people are trying to figure if I'm a weirdo or I'm going to start preaching at them or if I'm going to judge them for their tattoo or language. Response #2 is "Oh." That probably means they've concluded I am a weirdo, I will preach at them and I've already judged their language and tattoos. Response #3 is "Pastor? What's that?" At least with that response you get a few moments to try to reset the story before they write their own.

But this change in response to my calling represents part of the sweeping change of beliefs in Canada. There is now a significant group of people who identify as religious nones. Not N U N nuns. But N O N E nones – no religion. In the 2011 Canadian census, 24% or 1 in 4 identified as a religious none. In Alberta, it was higher – 32%. Maybe some of you would honestly align with that designation or you know people who are. People who identify themselves this way would generally not believe many Christian claims especially claims for the miraculous. So Easter weekend with the claim that Jesus rose from the dead is a non-starter for them. They might politely engage in some cultural Christian habits like going to a church on Easter Sunday. But you might also see the resurrection as something like an inspiring story maybe like Cinderella and the theme of release from oppression and the hope of finding true love. Or it belongs beside the myths of the Greek gods who supposedly ruled the sea or the heavens or the thunder. If this kind of belief describes where you're at please know I don't hate you; I don't judge you; I don't look down on you. I would like to explore further how you came to that belief because I find people's stories very fascinating.

Somewhere in our conversation where we could discuss our beliefs with respect, I would ask if you might consider for a moment if it's possible that the resurrection of Jesus is not like a fairy tale or a myth. I might ask you to consider historical evidence that points to the likelihood of an actual resurrection of Jesus.

I might point out it is claimed that after his crucifixion, Jesus was buried in Jerusalem in a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea. Now Jesus' disciples or followers could have just made that up. But if they wanted to create a legend why would they mention a tomb that could be identified and located by people in Jerusalem at that time? Wouldn't legend writers say "Jesus was buried on a mountain top somewhere in the country." Then you could claim that Jesus rose from the dead and no one could check the tomb. But they name the tomb and the tomb owner.

On top of that, if the disciples made this up, it is very unlikely they would have mentioned Joseph of Arimathea as the tomb owner. Why? He was a member of the Sanhedrin or High Jewish Council that arrested Jesus and worked for his execution. So it's unlikely they would use the name of someone from that council showing compassion for Jesus if they made it up.

Then there is the claim that on the Sunday after the crucifixion, some women followers found Jesus' tomb empty. Now if the disciples made up the story of Jesus' resurrection and wanted people in Jerusalem to believe it, they would certainly **not** have relied on female witnesses to back up this claim. Why? Christian Philosopher William Lane Craig, who studied the historical evidence for the resurrection for two years says:

In patriarchal Jewish society the testimony of women was not highly regarded. In fact, the Jewish historian Josephus says that women weren't even permitted to serve as witnesses in a Jewish court of law. Now in light of this fact, it is remarkable that the early church proclaimed that women discovered Jesus' empty tomb. Any later legendary account would certainly have made male disciples like Peter and John discover the empty tomb. The fact that it is women, rather than men, is best explained by the fact that they were the chief witnesses to the empty tomb. So the Gospel writers faithfully record what normally would have been an awkward and embarrassing fact.

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman/>

One other historical reality about the empty tomb comes from hostile witnesses – those who were enemies of Jesus and His disciples. If Jesus’ disciples made up the story of Jesus’ rising from the dead, then the opponents could simply go to Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb to display the body. Then they would prove this whole Christian claim as false. But they didn’t do that. They instead paid off the guards to spread the story that disciples stole the body. Now why would they spread a story like that if the tomb still contained Jesus’ body? They must have checked out the tomb and found it empty so they had to spread a different story.

Now it’s true that none of these historical facts prove the resurrection. But they do beg the question – what’s most reasonable explanation for these facts? There’s much more we could talk about. But I would want to invite you to consider this and then tell me what you thought of in our conversation. So if you don’t believe a lot of what was said or sung about tonight, then I have something for you to take home that I’ll tell you about in a moment. (Case for the Resurrection)

But just before I do that, I want to talk to Christians here tonight. You might very well believe that Jesus rose from the dead. You’re thankful that His resurrection means you get to experience eternal life when you die or when Jesus returns. But might you have slid into a belief that God doesn’t really do miracles anymore? I know that I can sometimes move that way in my belief. I think that one reason I’ve done that is I’ve seen these supposed faith healers who promise that everyone can be healed if they just believe. Then lots of people aren’t healed. So I don’t want to go anywhere near that claim that everyone will be healed if they just have enough faith. So many people have been hurt and had their hopes crushed with that kind of talk.

But might we go so far the other way, that we almost deny that God can intervene in miraculous ways in our lives today? I was convicted about this in my own life a few weeks ago when I listened to the resource that I invite you to take home tonight. It’s called a “the Case for Miracles.” It’s not some preacher blasting away that “you’ve got to believe in miracles.” It’s an investigation into the reliability of miracle claims. I was convicted that sometimes to protect myself and others from disappointment, I would just not even entertain an idea that God does miracles today. But who am I to declare with certainty what God does or does not do today?

The CD entitled “Case for Miracles” explores this more deeply.

It also has a section talking about when God chooses not to heal. The author interviewed a man whose wife was dying of a rare disease. Yet this man's faith in God remained strong even though God chose not to heal in their situation. So I invite Christians who maybe doubt God's ability to do miracles today to pick up a copy of that CD. I invite those of you who don't believe the resurrection could happen to also pick it up or help yourself to the Case for the Resurrection. You can listen to it while you drive around or in about 45 minutes at home. If you do, I would love to hear back from you with your thoughts and impressions.

But for tonight/today, I pray that in some small way you have been encouraged or blessed. I thank you for joining us. So I just want to close by praying for each one of you here.