

"Well This Proves It"

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Acts 2:22-32 • 1 Corinthians 15:1-20

March 4, 2012

OK, this morning is history lesson time. I want you to think for a moment about the most significant events that have happened during your lifetime. Some of you might say it was Neal Armstrong walking on the moon, or perhaps the day President Kennedy was assassinated. Certainly September 11, 2001 was a significant day in history, as was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The last 100 years has been called one of the most important and challenging times in history. The list of important events in the last 50 to 100 years is very long.

What if I asked you to tell me the most important events in the history of the world. This becomes even harder. We would have to include World Wars One and Two and the Holocaust in Germany. But going back in history, think how important the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the writing of our constitution are to world history and how they have shaped our world for over 200 years. What about the invention of the airplane or the printing press or the personal computer? And the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance in Europe are certainly in the top 10 events in world history.

So what if I asked you to choose the *one most important* event in history? Could you pick just one thing from all of human history that is *the most* important? Well let me say that there is one thing above all others that is clearly the most important event in history and

that's Jesus of Nazareth being raised from death.

As we saw last week, Jesus was brutally beaten and tortured, then crucified on a cross where he died. It wasn't that he merely appeared dead, he was really dead. The Romans had lots of experience with crucifixion. They knew whether someone was really dead or not and they knew that Jesus was dead. He was buried in a small cave carved out of the rock and a huge stone was rolled in front of the opening and sealed up. Normally that would be the end of things. But as we find in the Apostles' Creed, we believe that on the third day Jesus rose again from the dead.

I've used this illustration before but it's worth repeating today. John Ortberg tells the story of a woman who wasn't on very good terms with her neighbors. One day she looked out the kitchen window and saw her German Shepherd with the neighbor's rabbit in his mouth, shaking it like a stuffed animal. She grabbed the broom and began to swat the dog until he let go of the rabbit. At this point the rabbit was quite dead and she knew this wasn't going to go over well. So she took the rabbit inside, bathed it, blow-dried and brushed its fur until it looked like a new rabbit. She then snuck over to the neighbors yard and propped the rabbit up in its cage. About an hour later she heard screaming coming from the neighbor's yard and she ran out and asked the neighbor what was wrong. Her neighbor said, "Our rabbit. It died three days ago. We buried it in the back yard and now it's back."

You see, dead rabbits stay dead. They don't come back to life. It's the same for people. When people die and are buried, they stay that way. And yet we profess that Jesus didn't stay that way. On the third day after he died, long enough to confirm that he was really dead, Jesus walked out of that tomb, raised by God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But did it really happen? Did Jesus, who was clearly dead, walk out of the tomb? This is what the Apostle Paul is addressing in our passage from First Corinthians. He tells us clearly that Jesus being raised from the dead is the most important event in history and that if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead then Christianity is a fraud. Scottish theologian William Barclay said, "the claim that Jesus rose from the dead...is either the greatest single fact in history, or, if it is not true, it is the greatest deception in history." Verse 17 goes so far as to say, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."

So what evidence do we have that Jesus really was raised from the dead? Nobody actually saw it happen - the gospel accounts are clear enough about that. If no one saw it, how do we know that Jesus really was raised? First of all we have the testimony of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus alive again. An eyewitness is powerful and hard to dispute. Two or more witnesses make an even stronger case. Beginning in verse 5, Paul says "Jesus appeared to Cephas (that's another name for Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then

to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

What Paul is saying is basically this: "I've seen Jesus alive. But if you don't believe me, go ask any of these other people who saw him. There's more than 500 of them and most of them are still alive and can verify what I'm telling you."

Another strong piece of evidence is the change in Jesus' closest disciples. Remember that when Jesus was arrested Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. After Jesus was buried, his followers were in hiding in locked rooms, afraid for their lives. But then in our reading from Acts we see Peter boldly preaching about Jesus saying, "God raised Jesus up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Barclay asks, "how did the man who had denied that he knew Jesus become the man prepared to be faithful unto death?" The answer is that he had seen and talked and eaten with the risen Christ. Paul, also, had been persecuting Christians until he came face to face with the risen Jesus. That encounter changed him and he spent the rest of his life telling others that Jesus, who was fully God, had been raised from the dead.

The third convincing evidence for the Resurrection is that we worship on Sunday. Observing the Sabbath and keeping it holy is one of the Ten Commandments and so for Jews it was a sacred institution. In Jewish understanding, the Sabbath starts at sundown on Friday evening and runs through sundown on Saturday evening, the seventh day of the week. Much of the Old Testament law deals with rules for keeping the Sabbath. It's a big deal. But then almost

immediately after the follows of Jesus claim to have seen him alive again, Christians begin worshipping on Sunday, the first day of the week. To put this into perspective, think of the controversy that would be created if we tried to simply change the *time* of our worship service to something other than 11 am. Now imagine trying to change the day of something as important as the Sabbath. There had to be a major life-changing event to bring that about, and the Resurrection of Jesus on Sunday was that event.

Christians wanted to worship on the day of the week when Jesus was raised. As I mentioned last week, for us as Christians, every Sunday is Easter Sunday.

Finally, the very existence of the Christian Church is evidence of the resurrection. It seems unlikely to me that something as far-reaching as Christianity would have even gotten started, much less lasted over 2000 years and spread all over the world if it were based on a lie. The Church only exists because Jesus really is raised and he creates and sustains the church.

So what does all of this mean for us today, in 2012? Well it seems to me that the Resurrection of Jesus, as our passage says, is the proof of our faith. We can live our lives knowing that what the Bible tells us about God really is true. He really does love us and through Christ's death and resurrection our sins are forgiven. That very fact should be in the front of our mind in everything we think, say and do. When we come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we can know that we really are coming into the presence of the risen Lord, that he is here with us.

We now have access to the power of God in our lives, in

this life and in the next. As Gordon Fee has said, "the resurrection of Christ has determined our existence for all time and eternity. Christ is the first fruits of those who are his, who will be raised at his

coming. That ought to reform the way we currently live and to reshape our worship into seasons of unbridled rejoicing." So let me ask you, does unbridled rejoicing describe *your* life and *your* worship? Today, let's each make a commitment to worship the risen Lord Jesus with all our heart and all our mind and all our soul and all our strength. In other words, let's give him with everything we've got.

Amen.