

“I Was There: What Jesus Said to Me in His Passion” // John 20:27; Luke 23:43

Good morning, and Happy Resurrection Day! I usually get a little nervous preaching on Easter--there's always a lot of new people here, checking out church for the first time, and so I feel a lot of pressure to really be at my best. I think my wife Veronica noticed this morning that I was a little bit more anxious than normal and so she asked what I was worried about and I said, “What if I'm boring? What if I'm not engaging enough...?” And she said, “Listen: it's going to be fine. Just do what you do every week. Don't try to be funny, or witty, or charming, or cool. Just be yourself.” So, whatever that means.

“**I was there.**” The idea behind that phrase is that the stories we read in the Gospels are not just about people once upon a time in history, they are about us, *now*, in the experience we have w/ the risen Christ. The people in these stories represent us: What Jesus said to them, he says to us too.

So, we're going to look at two statements Jesus made to someone there around the cross--**2 statements that (I would say) deal with 2 of our biggest questions--questions YOU undoubtedly have asked at some point in your life.**

John 20, if you have your Bible and want to follow along with me...

And let me just mention one of the resources we are making available to you today: It's a new book I wrote called *Essential Christianity: The Heart of the Gospel in 10 Words*, which is designed to help you master

the basics of the Christian faith and share it with others. I basically take the 10 most pressing questions of faith and help you answer them. It would be a great thing to get and read for yourself, or with someone you are trying to help introduce to Christianity. It's available at our **Next Steps area** at all campuses--as always, the proceeds from nothing we ever sell or promote here goes back to me or any other pastor. (*Sometimes I joke that...*) These are simply resources we have produced that we hope will be helpful for you.

So, again, 2 statements that deal with 2 of our biggest questions.

The first of those 2 questions is, “How can I know what is true?”

There are so many different religions and so many opinions out there about God and the origin and meaning of life--How are you supposed to know what is true? One of the stories I share in the book is about a conversation I had years ago in a **Waffle House**...

(Hold book) “So there I was,” I say, “sitting in the happiest place on earth, about to feast upon the nectar of the gods: a Waffle House chocolate-chip waffle and a side of hash browns scattered, smothered, covered, chunked, topped, diced, and peppered. (For those of you not from the American Southeast, we consider the Waffle House to be one of our greatest contributions to cultural progress.) So there I was, I say, about to indulge in another culinary masterpiece, when I overheard a conversation between the waitress and the guy in the booth next to me--it was literally the last thing I was expecting to hear at a Waffle House.

The man said, “Yeah, but the most important question in life is who **GOD** is.” He then paused for a minute and said, “The problem, Dee

(the waitress' name), is knowing what to believe about God. There are so many different theories and religions—how are we supposed to know which one is right?”

And there I am, my mouth full of hash browns, thinking, “You people are so in luck. I have my *MASTER of Divinity* degree...” (I have mastered divinity!). And so I waved my hand to interject myself into the conversation but thankfully neither of them noticed me because the next thing Dee, the waitress, said was this:

“Yeah... but you know who I absolutely despise? I hate them ‘born-again’ types. ‘Cause when they come in here and start talking about God, it’s not even a conversation anymore. They don’t care about you; all they care about is shoving their opinion down your throat.” Then she saw my hand raised, and she said, “Can I help you, honey?”

Now, for the record, I am one of them born-again types, and I felt like I was about to fulfill all her stereotypes. So I quickly sized up the situation, took a deep breath, and said... “Yeah, I just needed a refill on my tea.”

Eventually I regrouped and re-entered the discussion on more humble terms, and we ended up having a great conversation, but I do think those two people in that Waffle House expressed something all of us think about: **How can we know what is true?** Even if you are a Christian, you probably have so many doubts and questions. So, that’s the first question.

The second question is: Is it possible for a person to know for sure they will go to heaven? Interestingly, I spoke at a Christian school

chapel not long ago and I asked the students that question: Is it possible for a person to know for sure they will go to heaven, and if so, how can they know that? About half the students said it was possible; the other half said you couldn’t--you just had to do your best and hope for the best.

So, two questions: How can I know what is true, and is it possible for a person to know for sure they will go to heaven: these are two incredibly important questions--arguably two of the most important questions you’ll ever consider, and they are answered by two statements Jesus made to people around the cross.

Here’s the first: **How can I know what is true?**

Let’s transport ourselves to an Upper Room discussion Jesus had with a disciple named Thomas after he’d resurrected from the dead:

John 20:27, “And Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

- Thomas was a disciple full of doubts. Contrary to what a lot of people assume, the Apostles were not dauntless men of faith who immediately started preaching right after Jesus was raised from the dead. On the contrary, the death of Jesus had completely thrown them into a tailspin. Most had genuinely started to believe he was the Messiah (after seeing the miracles and hearing his teaching, they were genuinely convinced he was *the guy*), but then--he was captured, humiliated, tortured, and executed, which was NOT supposed to happen to the Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to conquer and reign. So, the disciples had questions

like, “If Jesus really is God’s Messiah, why would God let that happen? Or, “Why would his ministry end so abruptly when there is so much left to be done--when there are so many hurting people still around; so many people who still need to be healed; so much injustice left in the world?”

- And so, because of questions like these, after the Resurrection the disciples are hiding out in an upper room behind a locked door, confused and afraid.

Chief among the doubters was Thomas. Some of the women disciples were claiming to have seen Jesus, and Peter and John had gone to the tomb and found it empty, so they were starting to lean that way, too, but Thomas said, “No, unless I personally see him, and with my own hands touch the nail scars in his hands and his feet and his side, I will not believe.”

In this scene here John 20, Jesus fulfills Thomas’ request, to the letter--he apparates into the middle of a room with a locked door, and says, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. ***Do not disbelieve, but believe.***” (John 20:27)

Notice, if you will, that Jesus did not answer all of his questions. Or any of them, for that matter. He said, “In light of what you are seeing here in my resurrection, suspend those doubts.”

Many of you have doubts. You’ve asked questions like:

- If God is real, why is there so much injustice and suffering in the world?

- If God is real, why would he let 3 kids and 3 teachers be shot to death at a Christian school last week?
- If God is real, why are there so many different religions?
- If God is real, why did he let my mother die of cancer?
- If God is real, how do we explain evolution? Where did Cain get his wife? Or any other number of things.

It’s not that your questions aren’t important. Thomas’ question was important: Why would Jesus leave this earth when there was so much left to be done? The bottom line, however, was simply: *If Jesus rose from the dead*, then these questions have answers even if we have to wait to find out what those answers are.

I don’t know about you, but when we get to heaven I’m going to have **a lot of things I’d like answers to.** I’m probably going to require some personal office hours with Jesus. In fact, I like to think that the first part of our experience in heaven will be Jesus doing a huge “Ask Me Anything,” and I promise you, I’ll be right there on the front row, going “Ooh, me. Me. Me. Call on me again, Jesus. I’ve got another one.” And I imagine that at some point Jesus will roll his eyes and say, “Anybody **besides** Greear got a question?”

- But the thing is--*if Jesus rose from the dead*, then my questions have answers, and so do yours.

A few weeks after this scene here John 20, some of the disciples got hauled in before the Sanhedrin and commanded to cease preaching about Jesus. The rulers then peppered Peter, their leader, with a bunch of questions he couldn’t answer, and they said, ‘If you can’t answer these questions, then you have no business speaking with any authority,’ and eventually Peter said, Acts 4:20, “Listen, **with all due**

respect--We don't know the answers to all these questions yet. And we freely admit: you guys are WAY smarter than us; when it comes to education, you guys got more degrees hanging on your wall than a thermometer and most of us didn't even graduate from high school. Fishing is not the profession you choose when you are academically gifted. So, you guys got us way beat when it comes to education. But then, on the other hand, there is this guy who rose from the dead. And, no offense to your many years of education, but when you've got the choice between believing the opinions of some educated nerds who got all their information from reading books or from a guy who rose from the dead--you always go with the guy who rose from the dead!

It reminds me of one of my favorite definitions of faith: **Faith is accepting what you cannot understand on the basis of what you can understand.**

- I'm not a Christian because every question of faith I've ever asked has been answered; I'm a Christian because I believe Jesus rose from the dead. Because, see, if Jesus rose from the dead, I can trust him with those questions I don't have answers for yet.

Many of you, like Thomas, have doubts. And those doubts keep you from believing. But here's my question: **Are you willing to doubt your doubts?** If you *knew* that Jesus was resurrected, and he appeared to you like he did to Thomas and told you that he wasn't going to answer all those questions, but he *would* let you touch the wounds in his hands and feet, would you trust him with those questions you couldn't answer? Would you doubt your doubts--and say, "Maybe my doubts don't indicate that God is not there? Most of you would say "yes." You still wouldn't have all your questions answered, but you'd

be willing to doubt your doubts because a man crawled out of a grave on his own volition and told you there were answers for them.

That's what Jesus told Thomas to do. Look carefully at John 20:27.

Jesus didn't tell Thomas to stop doubting. He didn't say, "Thomas, stop having questions." He said, "Don't disbelieve." The word he uses there is not the word for doubt, *distazo*; it's literally the word for 'disbelieve,' *apistos*. Jesus is not saying, "I'm expecting you to not have any more questions or all your doubts to go away." No, he says, "Thomas, I want you to believe *on top* of your doubts. Believe through your doubts because I rose from the dead, and you know that if I rose from the dead there ARE answers to your questions even if you don't know all of them yet."

Again: Faith is accepting what you cannot understand based on what you can understand-- and what you can understand is that Jesus rose from the dead.

Some of you say, "Well, that's the question, then: How can I know Jesus rose from the dead?" You say, "I'd love to be Thomas and have this experience of seeing and touching the resurrected body of Jesus."

This morning is **not the time for me to go into a full-scale defense** of the resurrection. I've done it before, and I do it in (HOLD BOOK) this book--but let me just very quickly say that the Apostles pointed to two pieces of evidence to substantiate their claim. (1) the empty tomb and (2) a significant number of eyewitnesses.

- **Oxford scholar N.T. Wright notes that these two facts together--** the empty tomb and the eyewitnesses--form a compelling case

for the resurrection. If we only had the empty tomb, and no eyewitnesses, we might conclude that the body was stolen. And if there were only eyewitnesses but no empty tomb, we might conclude that the witnesses were deluded. The two together, however, make for compelling evidence.

- You say, “Well, maybe those ‘eyewitnesses’ were just lying. THEY stole the body and then lied about it. After all, lots of people die for lies—for example, lots of Russian soldiers are over in Ukraine right now dying for the lie that Ukraine belongs to Russia. Maybe the Apostles hadn’t actually seen Jesus, but they needed some kind of ‘miracle’ like this to get people to believe in him and so they made it up.”
- But here’s the thing: What would motivate them to propagate the lie that Jesus is Lord? Sure, lots of people throughout history have died for a religious or political myth, but when you propagate something you know to be a lie, you’re always trying to gain something through that lie--money, political power, prestige, or sex, or so on. But the Apostles’ claim—that they had seen the risen Jesus and he was Lord—brought them and their followers none of those things. In fact, their testimony earned them the opposite. Most owned nothing; Paul said they all had to take on a second job of sorts just to support themselves. So it wasn’t about money. They emphasized chastity in deed and thought and pointed to themselves as models--in other words, they weren’t claiming apostolic power to build a harem like other cult leaders throughout history have done. So, it wasn’t about sex. And far from obtaining political power or prestige, their testimony got the opposite: 11 of the 12 were executed for refusal to back down from their testimony, with the 12th (John) being plunged into hot oil and permanently disfigured and then living out the remainder

of his days in isolation in a prison cell. And yet, all went to their deaths joyfully, claiming it was worth it because the risen Jesus was waiting for them.

- Does that sound to you like a group intentionally lying to gain money or prestige? Does it really make sense to think that they all were willing to give up so much, and to be killed, for something that they knew was a lie?

Listen, along with many other scholars, I find the most compelling explanation for how Christianity got started is the one the Apostles themselves gave: ***Jesus actually rose from the dead.***

If you want more about that, check this book out, but here’s the point for this morning--If Jesus actually rose from the dead--then, see, then I can trust what he says about other things I have questions about. I’ll say it again: *I’m not a Christian because I can answer every question about evolution and the origins of the earth. I’m not a Christian because I can explain everything God is doing in the world--or why he does certain things or doesn’t do certain things. I am a Christian because Jesus rose from the dead.* And so I’ll accept what I cannot understand based on what I can understand.

Faith is accepting what you cannot understand based on what you can understand. Faith is when the unexplainable meets the undeniable.

So, the first thing Jesus says *to you* this morning is, “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” (John 20:27)¹

Here’s the **2nd thing that Jesus said that I want to highlight**--this one he said from his cross to a repentant thief dying right beside him.

Luke 23:43, Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, ***today you will be with me in paradise.***”

Two thieves had been crucified with Jesus that day, one on either side. Both had started out the day mocking and taunting him, saying things like, “Yeah... if you really are the Messiah, why don’t you get down off that cross, save yourself--and then save us while you’re at it, miracle boy!” But at some point during the day, one of the thieves--maybe watching Jesus’ patience and hearing the words of forgiveness he gave from the cross--had a change of heart and he started to rebuke the other thief for his mocking. He said, “What are you doing? We are up here dying for our crimes but this man is innocent.” And then he said to Jesus, “**Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.**” (Luke 23:42)

Think with me for a minute about the **audacity** of that statement. Here’s a man who has lived a life of crime; he’s been a public nuisance; brought shame to his parents; destroyed just about every relationship he’s ever had; hasn’t gone to synagogue for years. And yet, he has the audacity to say to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

¹ BTW, some translations say, “Do not doubt.” But that’s not a good translation. Surrendering to Jesus will not erase all your doubts. Jesus says,

And remarkably, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, ***today you will be with me in paradise.***” (23:43)

What had this man done to merit that response? What had he done to make up for his life of crime--to pay back all the people he had stolen from, lied to, betrayed, even murdered?

The only way Jesus could say that was if Jesus was somehow paying for all the bad things the thief had done and undoing all the harm he’d caused. **And that’s exactly what the Old Testament had prophesied the Messiah would do.** It was pictured in all the Old Testament sacrifices.

Every year in Israel each family brought a lamb to the Temple--it had to be a spotless lamb, and the firstborn lamb of the flock. They had to bring it to the priest and lay it on the altar. We tend to think of this in quaint little images now, but this was a bloody and gruesome ordeal. The father would lay that lamb on the altar and then place his hand on the head of the lamb, and as he did, he would confess the sinfulness of the family, and as he did that, the priest would take a knife and slit the throat of the lamb. The picture could not have been clearer: the innocent lamb was bearing the sins of the guilty family; the lamb bled out (& died) so that the family could go free (& live).

When John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he said, “Behold the **Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.**” On the night before he

“Do not disbelieve.” Believing is a choice. Even with my doubts, I choose to believe, because I believe you rose from the dead and I’m willing to trust you with my doubts.

died, Jesus said that he was giving his life as an offering for sin, and that his death would be a “ransom” for many. I’ve always loved that word “ransom:” a ransom is a price you pay to set someone free. If a kidnapper takes someone captive, they ask for a ransom.

There’s a famous story about King Richard the Lionhearted of England--in 1190 A.D. King Richard was sailing back from the Crusades when bad weather forced him to land in the unfriendly territory of Austria. King Richard and his men disguised themselves as the Knights Templar so they could sneak their way back to England, but while passing through Vienna, King Richard was identified by his expensive jewelry and (this is funny) his insistence on eating only roasted chicken for dinner. The Duke of Austria took him captive and demanded a ransom of 150,000 marks--\$3.3 billion in today’s money, and 2–3x the annual revenue of England at the time. It would be like someone today kidnapping our President and demanding our government pay \$4 trillion dollars for his ransom. It took them about a year to raise all that money, but England eventually paid it.

I ask, “Would I ever be worth that to someone?” I’m quite sure the United States would not pay that amount for me. My family might wish to pay that, but of course they never could. And yet here was Jesus, the perfect Son of God; the Mighty God who created everything and needs nothing; the holy God who could have easily and justifiably left me to my sinful choices, discarded me and started over with a brand new creation, paid far more for me than 4 trillion dollars. **We were redeemed, Peter says, with someone far more valuable than trillions of dollars: we are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or spot.** I was far less valuable to Jesus, in a strategic sense, than King Richard was to

England, and yet Jesus paid the fullness of my price without even a second thought--even though the reason I was held captive to death was my sins against him.

One of Jesus’ last words from the cross, which he said in the presence of that thief, was the word “**tetelestai**.” We translate “tetelestai” as “it is finished,” but archaeologists have found that word scrawled on tax receipts after a tax bill had been paid. *Tetelestai*: the debt has been paid. The ransom price has been met.

Jesus could say to the thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” because the price for that thief’s sins had already been paid in full. All the thief had to do was believe and receive it.

Alistair Begg says--imagine what it was like for that thief walking up to the entrance of heaven that very evening... The angel at the front gate said to him: *Who are you? “We’ve been going to the Jewish synagogues for years and we don’t recognize you.”* And the thief says, *“Yeah, I’ve never been to synagogue.”* So they say, *“Well, why should we let you in? Have you ever been to a Bible study?”* And the thief says, *“No.”* *Have you ever been baptized?”* And the thief says, *“No.”* And the angel says, *“Shoot, I mean, just 10 minutes ago you were cussing out the Son of God. What are you doing here?”*

I have to imagine the thief saying, “I don’t really know.” So the angel goes and gets his supervisor. And together they pepper this guy with questions: *“Do you believe in the inerrancy of the Bible? Do you believe in ‘justification by faith’?” “Do you believe in the deity of Christ?”* And the thief is like, “Honestly, guys, I don’t even know what those words mean.”

So they ask again: “Well then why do you think you can come in here?” To which the thief just points and says, “Well ... the Man on that middle cross down there said I could come.”

All he had to do was receive it. Now, if you truly believe it, and you live to see tomorrow, your life will change. Had the thief lived to see the next day, his life would have been different. But the point is that none of those things earned him Paradise--none of those things paid for his life of sin, because he didn't have time to do any of them. Simply seeing the sacrifice of Jesus and believing on him did qualify him for heaven. The dying thief...

What Jesus said to him, he says to you. You may not know the day that you'll die, like the thief did, but you can have the assurance that whenever that day is, that very day you will be with him in Paradise. You can have that assurance. **What Jesus said to the thief he intends for you, too.** But, like the thief, you have to receive it for yourself. Jesus says it to you, but it **does you no good unless you receive it.**

(HOLD BOOK) I tell this story in the book: One of the most bizarre Supreme Court cases of all time took place in 1833—it was called “United States v. Wilson.” The defendant, George Wilson, pled guilty to several counts of robbery and the attempted murder of a mail driver. These crimes were punishable by death, and Wilson was sentenced to die by hanging. President Andrew Jackson, however, for reasons unknown to us, issued George Wilson a full pardon. But then Wilson (also for reasons unknown to us) refused the pardon and demanded to pay for his crimes. The warden told Wilson that he couldn't execute him because he'd been pardoned by the President

of the United States. But Wilson refused the pardon and contested the issue in court. The odd case went all the way to the Supreme Court, and this was their verdict:

“A pardon is an act of grace ... which exempts the individual on whom it is bestowed from the punishment the law inflicts for a crime he has committed ... A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential, and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected ... and if it be rejected, we have discovered no power in a court to force it on him.”

George Wilson was executed with a Presidential pardon sitting on the warden's desk. I'm not sure if Chief Justice John Marshall, who wrote that opinion, was thinking about the Gospels when he issued that ruling, but the Bible teaches the same thing about God's pardon: a pardon is only valid if it's received. God has extended the pardon to you, but you are free, like George Wilson, to reject it. **But friend, why would you?** You can walk out of here today having heard those words Jesus said to the dying thief: “The day that you die, you will be with me in paradise.”

Two things Jesus said to people around the cross that he says to you, 2 statements that deal with two of our biggest questions:

How can I know what is true? “Do not disbelieve, but believe.”
(John 20:27)

Is it possible for a person to know for sure they will go to heaven?
“Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

I was there. He says those things to me. You were there. He says them to you, too. So the question is, **How are you going to respond to them?**

VAMP

Let me close with one final statement made around the cross that was intended for you, too. This one comes from the lips of Pilate, however: "...and what then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22)

Pilate was confused--some were saying Jesus was the Messiah, others were saying he was a fake. And Pilate said, "What do I do with this man? I can't just dismiss him--his claims are too audacious. He either is who he says he is, or he's not."

That's a question intended for each of us. ...What then shall you do with Jesus? (Matt 27:22)

Here are your options: You can **believe** (like Thomas did)--You can say, "I may not have all my questions answered, but Jesus, I believe you rose from the dead and you are who you say you are, and I'm willing to trust you with those unanswered questions; to take your hand and walk forward with you into eternity."

You can receive Jesus' pardon, like the thief on the cross did. You can hear his announcement, "*tetelestai*," that your sins are paid for, and receive that for yourself, and have the assurance that the very day you die, you will be with Jesus.

You can do those things--or, you can attempt to remain indifferent--like Pilate did, washing your hands of it, and putting it off until another day. Which ultimately might be the worst decision of all, because, you see, hesitating to make a decision *is* a decision. You are choosing not to commit your soul to him and not not to receive the ransom he paid for your sin. In Dante's *Inferno*, Dante pictures Pilate in the lowest circle of hell still trying to wash his hands of the decision. His point was, *You can't*. To not make a decision *IS* a decision.

Today, you can decide for Jesus. Listen--this is a pretty amazing thought: It is neither your doubts nor your sins that will keep you from heaven. It's your refusal to believe in Jesus' Lordship, or your refusal to receive the pardon he offered that will. People who go to heaven usually have heads filled with questions and lives scarred with sin--but they go because they have hearts set on Jesus. They recognize that the one who hung on that cross was Savior and the one who got up out of that grave is Lord.

Romans 10:9 says... not might be, but shall be...whosoever calls...

Have you ever simply believed and received and committed yourself fully to him? Do you want to? Bow with me.

I'm going to ask our campus teams to get in place.

PRAYER

Come forward to talk about A) salvation AND b) or baptism. We're NOT baptizing today, we are baptizing next weekend: get that convo started.