

“A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste”

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 ¹

If you've ever worshiped in a traditional Catholic church or been on retreat at a Catholic retreat center, you know that the “Stations of the Cross” are frequently prominent in such settings. Usually fourteen in number, the Stations of the Cross represent the *Via Dolorosa*, or “the Way of Sorrows,” providing opportunities for meditation on Jesus' Journey to the Cross.

Rather than marking the “Stations of the Cross,” we're making our way through “the Stations of the Church,” a circuit of the five key ministry areas around which our fellowship, like many Protestant congregations, is organized: Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Evangelism; or as I like to put them, WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO. Today we come to “second base,” or “DISCIPLESHIP.”

In what we call “the Great Commission,” the resurrected Jesus told His eleven disciples, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age***” (Matthew 28:18-20).

“Discipleship” has to do with growth and maturity. Faith is something into which we grow. Being “born again” (John 3:3) is not a complicated enterprise, but its result is a baby Christian, not a mature one. Maturity requires training and practice. It's not enough merely to believe that the Bible is God's Word to us. If we're going to experience the Bible's transforming power in our lives, we've got to learn how to understand and interpret it. We need to understand the circumstances in which and to which the various books of the Bible were written. We need to understand the major themes and principles of the Bible, and much more.

Serious Bible study is really not optional for persons who are serious about following Jesus. If you don't already have one, I urge you to get one of the better modern translations of the Bible and to join yourself to a group that's serious about studying it, whether on Sunday morning or at some other time during the week. And as you study and discuss, don't be afraid of asking hard questions and then digging to find their answers. Serious mental effort is just as necessary in faith development as it is in learning anything else of value.

But as important as such study may be, Henry Blackaby reminds us that “Discipleship is more than acquiring head knowledge and memorizing Scripture verses. It is learning to give Jesus Christ total access to your life so He will live His life through you. . . . **Christianity is not a set of teachings to understand. It is a Person to follow.**”² Following Jesus is a matter of both head and heart, as Jesus Himself said, [This is the most important of all God's commandments:] “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*” (Mark 12:30).

As we focus on the “head” dimension of our faith this morning, I want to build on just one phrase in the text that Debbie read earlier. Acts 2:42 tells us that those first followers of Jesus “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” It's that teaching on which we focus briefly this morning, after which we, too, will “break bread” at the Lord's Table.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 5, 2012.

² Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Experiencing God Day by Day* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998, 2006), pp. 20, 25.

So what was “*the apostles’ teaching*”? While there are so many dimensions to that teaching that a lifetime of study cannot exhaust them, the core content of that teaching isn’t complex at all. Paul gives us one of the clearest summaries of the apostles’ teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. If you’ll turn to that chapter in your Bibles, I want to read part of what Paul said there, focusing on verses 1-8:

¹ Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

*³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ **died** for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was **buried**, that he was **raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he **appeared** to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

I want to anchor our thoughts about the apostles’ teaching this morning in just four words: **died**, **buried**, **raised**, and **seen**. If you and I are going to truly be disciples of Jesus, we need a firm grip on Truth that is anchored in who Jesus is; and our texts this morning help us in that project.

Jesus’ identity is critical for Christian faith because He is both the object and the anchor of that faith; but there are many these days who use the adjective “Christian” without either knowing or affirming what must be known and affirmed in order for that adjective to apply. There are many today who want to call Jesus “a good man,” “a moral teacher,” or something else—often *anything* else—besides God who *really* became a man, who *really* died, and who *really* rose from death; He who was, who is, and who is to come; the ever-living and Eternal One without whom there is no salvation; and they want to do this while still calling themselves “Christian.”

We live in an age in which people are willing to tolerate virtually anything except the affirmation that “*There is salvation in no one else [but Jesus]! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12).

Given the tenor of the times, sometimes even we who follow Jesus are reluctant to make this claim. But Jesus did not give us the option of calling Him “a good man” or “a moral teacher.” By His clear claim to be the eternal God in human flesh, that claim for which the Jewish leaders had Him killed, Jesus left us only the choices of calling Him crazy, calling Him a liar, or calling Him Lord. If we call Jesus crazy or call Him a liar, then we have no accountability to Him and we can disregard His teaching, which is what people are really trying to do when they call Him merely “good” or “moral.”

But here’s the deal. Jesus told us that “**Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father**” (John 14:9). Jesus said, “**I and the Father are one**” (John 10:30). Jesus said, “**I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me**” (John 14:6). Those claims are crystal clear, whether we like them or not, and the only way to get around them is to either call Jesus crazy or to call Him a liar. Otherwise, those claims stand, and Jesus is the Lord Christ, before whom every knee will bow, whether soon or late (Philippians 2:10-11).

That’s where today’s text comes in. Hear these words once more: *³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ **died** for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was **buried**, that he was **raised** on the third day according to the*

Scriptures,⁵ and that he **appeared** to Cephas, and then to the Twelve (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). This confession of faith—that Jesus **died**, was **buried**, was **raised**, and was **seen**—was the essence of the message of the early church. These four words constituted the core of “the apostles’ teaching,” to which those early disciples devoted themselves.

So who saw Jesus alive again after His crucifixion? Paul lists himself, Peter, all twelve apostles,³ Jesus’ brother, James, and five hundred others. The Gospel accounts include nine different “sightings” of the resurrected Jesus.⁴ Jesus appeared indoors, outdoors, to believers and to skeptics. He materialized and dematerialized at will. He was touchable, and He could eat and drink. These appearances continued for more than a month, with an abrupt and definable ending.

That’s the **eyewitness evidence**. But Lee Strobel, former legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, has observed that while eyewitness evidence “is often compelling, it can sometimes be subject to faded memories, prejudices, and even outright fabrication. In contrast, **circumstantial evidence** is made up of indirect facts from which inferences can be rationally drawn. Its cumulative effect can be every bit as strong—and in many instances even more potent—than eyewitness accounts.”⁵

I’m not suggesting that the eyewitness accounts in the New Testament were defective in any way, but philosopher J.P. Moreland has identified several examples of circumstantial evidence of Jesus’ Resurrection that no one disputes.⁶ Let me mention just three of them.

First, all of the Twelve Apostles except John were executed because of their testimony that Jesus was *alive*. Were they lying about that? People lie for all kinds of reasons, but chiefly in an attempt to make dishonest profit or to stay out of trouble. People change their stories and tell “what really happened” when this becomes the only avenue of escape from unpleasant consequences.

Yet eleven of the Twelve Apostles—and many other early Christians with them—went to their deaths claiming that Jesus was *alive* and that they had *seen* Him and *talked* with Him. And more Christians have been killed in the last one hundred years for claiming that Jesus is alive and that they know Him and have talked with Him than in all of the previous centuries of Christian history. And people don’t choose to die for something that they know is a lie. That’s the first evidence.

Second, powerful skeptics were converted after meeting the risen Christ, including Jesus’ half-brothers, James and Jude, and the famous hyper-legalistic Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus.⁷ When Jesus first began to preach, James and Jude thought their brother was insane; and Saul’s conversion is rather like the prosecution’s chief witness converting to the defendant’s side. But both Paul and James were later killed because of their testimony that Jesus really had returned from death to life, and that they had committed their lives to following Him.

³With Matthias in Judas’ place (Acts 1:26).

⁴(1) Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-18); (2) the other women (Matthew 28:8-10); (3) Cleopas and the other disciple (Luke 24:13-32); (4) eleven disciples and others (Luke 24:33-49); (5) ten apostles and others, without Thomas (John 20:19-23); (6) the apostles with Thomas (John 20:26-30); (7) seven apostles by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14); (8) the disciples again (Matthew 28:16-20); and (9) the apostles and others at Jesus’ Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:4-9).

⁵ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 244-245.

⁶ Strobel, pp. 246-255.

⁷ Jude, another of Jesus’ half-brothers, was also converted.

Third, the Jewish people have been able to keep their sense of national identity for more than three thousand years chiefly because of their fierce commitment to key cultural components of Judaism. Yet within only five weeks of Jesus' crucifixion, more than ten thousand Jews abandoned the Law of Moses. They exchanged the Sabbath for the Lord's Day. Absolute monotheism became the Trinity, and their political Messiah "for Jews only" became the Suffering Servant for the entire world. Why did thousands of Jews so quickly jettison such central religious beliefs? They did so because they had personally met the risen Christ themselves.

The cry of the early church, the apostles' teaching, the clear kernel of the Gospel, was this four-word affirmation, **DIED! BURIED! RAISED! SEEN!** and our own past conversion, our present conviction and our future Hope are anchored in the fact that we, too, know Him. The ancient affirmation that **Jesus is Lord** remains the anchor of our faith today, and it is not optional for any who would call themselves "Christian."

C. S. Lewis wrote that if God *really* became a man, *really* died, and *really* rose from death, then that "was the central event in the history of the Earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about."⁸ The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's validation that everything Jesus said, did, taught, and promised is True, and that you can confidently build your life upon these things.

Dr. Duane Litfin was President of Wheaton College when he wrote that "From a biblical standpoint, human language can scarcely craft a more profound declaration than this one: **Jesus Christ is Lord.** . . . What do we mean by the Lordship of Christ? We mean that He is the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things, the Goal of all things, the Redeemer of all things, and the Judge of all things.

"This is an outrageous claim—unless it is true. But if it is true, as Christians do affirm, then it means that the person of Jesus is utterly central to all that humans can know or experience. There is nothing imaginable that is irrelevant to him or to which he is irrelevant. There is no quarter of human learning in which he is not the central figure."⁹ If Jesus is Lord," Dr. Litfin wrote, then He is "the unifying key to all that humans can know or understand, such that in the end nothing can be adequately grasped apart from him."¹⁰

"Jesus Christ is a scandalous stone of stumbling to the world," Litfin wrote. "The all-encompassing nature of the Bible's claims for Jesus renders him unique. He is not merely one Lord, one Savior, among many; he is the singular Sovereign of the universe, the only-begotten Son of the Father, the once-for-all-God-man. If he is truly the universe's Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, the very Goal of all things, then there can be no other."¹¹

So here's the bottom line: Jesus is **ALIVE!** Jesus is **HERE!** Jesus is **LORD!** Jesus is **COMING AGAIN!** These four affirmations anchor our lives as disciples of Jesus, and it is because we are so anchored that He invites us now to His Table, to the Table of our Lord.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 112.

⁹ Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 38-44.

¹⁰ Litfin, p. 37.

¹¹ Litfin, p. 81.