

# “What IS Truth?”

“Then you will know **the truth**, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).  
Mark 15:1-15 <sup>1</sup>

As I mentioned last week, I’m saving most of Mark’s account of Jesus’ Passion Week for our own Holy Week services. This morning’s text records Jesus’ conversations with Pilate during his “trial,” and those conversations obviously took place during that week, but I’ve included them today for another reason.

John’s account of Jesus’ conversations with Pilate includes an interaction that the other Gospel writers did not record, and I had selected that interaction for Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend . . . but the snow pushed things back a week. So here we are. Mark’s account of Jesus and Pilate forms the backdrop for this morning’s message, but John’s account is really our focus.

But before we look at John, we have to back up just a bit. Any serious study of the Gospels requires that we compare the four accounts with one another and piece the accounts together as best we can; and Matthew and Mark recorded a crucial scene that preceded these conversations with Pilate, a scene that neither Luke nor John recorded in the same way. This crucial scene is Jesus’ arraignment before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court, at some point during the night between Jesus’ arrest and His being taken to Pilate. Here’s that crucial piece:

*Then the high priest stood up before them all and questioned Jesus, “Don’t you have an answer to what these men are testifying against you?” But he kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest questioned him, “**Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?**”*

*“**I am,**” said Jesus, “**and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.**”<sup>2</sup>*

*Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What is your decision?” They all condemned him as deserving death (Mark 14:60-64).*

Using biblical language with which they were all quite familiar, Jesus responded to the High Priest’s pointed question by affirming that He was indeed God’s Messiah, the Son of God, our Redeemer and our Judge. Such a claim would indeed be blasphemous and would carry the death penalty . . . unless it happened to be true, something that this court never considered for an instant.

The Sanhedrin intended to do away with Jesus, come what may; but their problem was that as an occupied nation under Roman control, they did not have the right to carry out the death penalty. The Romans reserved that for themselves. So now it was necessary to persuade Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, that such a sentence needed to be carried out.<sup>3</sup>

To make matters worse, Pilate wasn’t interested in this at all. He viewed the problem as one of petty religious bickering that was of no concern to Rome, and Mark tells us that Pilate could easily see that it was really jealousy and envy that caused the religious leaders to want Jesus out of their way (Mark 15:10).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 20, 2019. Parallel passages are Matthew 27:11-26; Luke 23:2-3, 18-25; John 18:29-19:16.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 110:1; Daniel 7:13.

<sup>3</sup> Passing Jesus to Pilate was also necessary in order to fulfill prophecy. Jewish execution was by stoning, but Roman execution would be by crucifixion (see Deuteronomy 21:22-23; John 3:14, 12:32-33; Galatians 3:13).

I don't know how he got the information, but John recorded much more detail about the conversations between Jesus and Pilate than the other Gospel writers did. It's clear in all four accounts that Pilate really wanted to release Jesus, but John noted that the religious leaders had a trump card, and they played it. Here was that card, as John recorded it:

*"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Anyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar!"* (John 19:12).

With this statement, the religious leaders were making a not-so-veiled threat to report Pilate to Caesar as disloyal, and this was a very dangerous charge. Like many autocratic leaders across the centuries, Tiberius Caesar demanded absolute loyalty, and failures usually cost the offenders their lives.

And, as happened recently with the heavy-handed squashing of revolt in Turkey, Tiberius was even at that moment passing out deadly retribution after a failed takeover attempt of his throne. And as the religious leaders knew it would, this very real threat and this clear and present danger quickly rendered Jesus expendable in Pilate's eyes.

The ironies here are overwhelming. The religious leaders hated Rome, but they chastised the governor for being insufficiently loyal to Rome. And in their self-serving shout, *"We have no king but Caesar!"* (John 19:15), they themselves committed blasphemy.<sup>4</sup>

But the greatest irony of all was this: **in conniving to have Jesus crucified, they were really sending Him to His coronation.** Jesus had repeatedly told His disciples, *"No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again"* (John 10:18). *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness,<sup>5</sup> so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life"* (John 3:14-15). *"As for me," Jesus said, "if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself"* (John 12:32).

This scene was not the tragedy that it first appears to be. This hour did not belong to Pilate or to the religious leaders. It belonged to Jesus. Jesus was not so much being crucified as being "lifted up," and nothing took Him by surprise. He was not a victim, but a king assuming His throne, transforming death into a divinely-provided passage Home to God.

That's what's *really* going on here, and that brings us back to the aspect of this story on which I wish to focus this morning. In order to do that, we have to back up to John's record of Jesus' first encounter with Pilate:

*"My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus. "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."*

*"You are a king then?" Pilate asked.*

*"You say that I am a king," Jesus replied. "I was born for this, and I have come into the world for this: to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."*

**"What is truth?"** said Pilate (John 18:36-38).

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<sup>4</sup> This is a story about collusion, about secret agreements with fraudulent purpose, about conniving and conspiring. This is a story about the betrayal of leadership, as these religious leaders abandoned all pretense of devotion to God in order to conspire with Rome to destroy Jesus. The whole thing sounds uncomfortably familiar.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 21:8-9

**What IS Truth?** is a question whose time has come. We live in a 24/7 world of always-on programming that purports to be “news,” and of which a significant portion is verifiably false. Even worse, we live in an age in which many people no longer believe that something called “Truth” even exists. Postmodern philosophy has been so successful in destroying belief in Truth that is always and everywhere true that it’s not at all uncommon to hear people talking about “my truth” and “your truth” as though such things actually existed.

Many people these days believe that “truth” is “whatever works for you,” especially in the area of morals, behavior, and religion. Of course, these same people would never, ever say such a thing about other areas of their lives, such as driving a car, flying an airplane, or doing surgery.

The fact of the matter is that those who resist the idea of absolute Truth have no way to explain such incredible things as DNA except by appeal to mindless, purposeless, random sequences of events, sequences that by definition cannot be depended upon to be repeated. And it’s important to note that **persons who take such positions are not foolish enough to try to live in such a fashion in any area of their lives except moral judgment.**

We all know that there is indeed Truth that is always and everywhere true, or else our planes would not fly, our medicines would not work, our cars would not run, and our buildings would fall down. If there were no Truths that are true always and everywhere, NASA would never have been able to land the *Insight* probe on Mars last November, and similar examples could be multiplied without end.

Dictionary definitions of “truth” usually include some variation of “corresponding to what is actually the case,” and “*corresponding to what actually is the case*” is a crucial point. Philip K. Dick, a best-selling science fiction author, pointed out that Truth, or in his term, “Reality,” “is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”<sup>6</sup> And so it is that our Creator is persistently and pervasively THERE, no matter what we may think or believe.

The night before He was lifted up, Jesus told His disciples, “*I am the way, **the truth**, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.*”

“Lord,” said Philip, “*show us the Father, and that’s enough for us.*”

Jesus said to him, “*Have I been among you all this time and you do not know me, Philip? **The one who has seen me has seen the Father***” (John 14:6-9).

Now that statement is truly amazing: ***The one who has seen me has seen the Father.*** **So here’s the Truth: God is like Jesus. God is exactly like Jesus. And God has always been exactly like Jesus. If we have seen Jesus, we have seen the Father. If we know Jesus, we know the Father.** But there’s more.

When we say, with the New Testament and with the saints of all the ages, that “*Jesus Christ is Lord,*” (Philippians 2:11), **we’re claiming that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly central to all that humans can know or experience.** We’re saying that there is nothing imaginable that is irrelevant to Him or to which He is irrelevant. We are saying that there is no area of human learning in which He is not actually the central figure.<sup>7</sup>

Christian faith begins and ends with the claim that Jesus of Nazareth stands at the very core of all we can know, and it insists that nothing can be rightly and truly understood apart

<sup>6</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Anchorage Daily News*, 2.23.02.

<sup>7</sup> Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 44.

from Him.<sup>8</sup> When we say that “*Jesus Christ is Lord*,” we affirm that He is the **Creator** of all things, the **Sustainer** of all things, the **Redeemer** of all things, the **Goal** of all things, and the **Judge** of all things. We are affirming that everything that exists is contingent upon Him at every point and in every moment.<sup>9</sup>

**To say that “*Jesus Christ is Lord*” is to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is Truth in every conceivable way.** The affirmation that “*Jesus is Lord*” means that God is at work, right now, right here, creating a new kind of person, persons who are allowing God to so shape their character that they are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him; persons who are choosing to join themselves together in a new kind of spiritual community that only God can build; persons who have been granted the ability to understand where God is at work and who have discovered the glad truth that nothing else in life really matters except to be a part of that work.

Oh, my friends, there is nothing more awesome, nothing more exciting, nothing more rewarding than the awareness that the Lord of the Universe is at work pushing back the Darkness and bringing in the Kingdom of Light, *in real time, through our lives*. We have to experience it to even begin to understand it, and the most wonderful parts of the Story still lie in front of us.

To those worldviews that reject absolute Truth, affirming only endless cycles of meaningless activity descending slowly into an abyss of emptiness, the affirmation, “**Jesus is Lord**,” responds with the Good News that what Jesus has done for us has rewritten the end of all of our stories, and that what we do now—*today*—makes a real difference, both in time and in eternity.

My friend, if you’re still trying to say to yourself that Jesus was “a good example” or “a wise teacher,” then no matter what else you may say, you’re still left in the end with a life, a world, and a cosmos that is the result of nothing more than the random fluctuations of chance atoms. And those random atoms have left you morally adrift, with no anchor, compass, guide, or rule by which to evaluate trustworthy science, successful parenting, academic excellence, political candidates, or moral virtue.

If you’re still living in the fantasy world of “your truth” and “my truth,” then you’re flying your life upside down, and sooner or later you’re going to fly your life into the ground. **There IS a Truth that is always and everywhere TRUE, and His Name is Jesus.**

But there’s more, still. If Jesus’ crucifixion was really His coronation, *and it was*, and if God can accomplish redemption and reveal eternal glory in situations that look for all the world like defeat and disaster, *and God can*, then this is Good News for every one of us as we sit here this morning. It’s *really* Good News.

*My friends, the Truth is that anything God has ever done, God can still do. Anything God has ever done anywhere, God can do here. And if God could transform Jesus’ crucifixion into a coronation, then God can transform and redeem whatever you’re going through, too.*

**And that’s the Truth.**

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<sup>8</sup> Litfin, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Litfin, p. 39. See Colossians 1:15-17; Psalm 33:6.