Hope and the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:16-19; Matthew 28:1-9

Pastor Bryan Clark

Video:

> *Our ears have heard but our eyes have not seen—a mystery so improbable. A man who claimed to be God's son had died...but three days later His grave was found empty. He was alive! More than improbable, this story seems impossible. Did it really happen? Doubt sets in. Our hope hinges on the premise that the resurrection exists. But what if it's not true? What if it's just a myth? With child-like faith we look to the unknown. But if the resurrection is a lie, we're holding on to false hope. With a faith lacking the power necessary to illuminate, we step into the clutches of darkness' ominous embrace. If Jesus stayed buried, then so will we. With Jesus in the tomb, our faith unravels beneath our feet. The foundation collapses—the illusion revealed. The truth we once held tightly was just smoke and mirrors. Lost! Our fingers grasp a hollow light...but it's powerless. A Savior in the grave is a Savior who failed. And so we wander, its light insufficient for these unseen paths. Searching...but the darkness overcomes. There's nowhere left to go because no resurrection means no hope! When our hearts cease beating, our story ends. With no resurrection, the darkness wins.*

The message of the gospel is a message filled with hope, not only for ourselves, but for those we have loved, who have died in Christ. At the center of the message of the gospel is a belief in the historical death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul gets right to the point in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 16-19, summarized:

> **If Jesus did not rise from the dead, we as Christians have nothing. We are still in our sins. Our loved ones have merely perished, and we are simply a people to be pitied.**

That's a pretty bold statement roughly thirty years after the resurrection of Jesus. So how do we know that Jesus rose from the dead? Is it merely wishful thinking? Are we just simple-minded and naïve? Or is there something more?

Some people would say, "Well, you just have to have faith," to which I would say, "I don't recommend that kind of reckless, uninformed faith." We are claiming a historical event. It can be investigated and weighed—and that's what I would like us to do together this morning. For those of us that believe, hopefully it just affirms that there are credible reasons why we believe Jesus rose from the dead. For those among us this morning that are unconvinced, first of all we are very happy you're with us. All I would ask is that you at least respectfully listen, and that you have the intellectual honesty to at least consider what I have to say. Do your own research and arrive at your own conclusions.

To start with, we have to think about: Well, what's the proper way to pursue this? What is the right measurement? So sometimes I'm talking to people and they will say something to the effect, "Well you know, I'm of science, so I cannot believe Jesus rose from the dead." What's implied in that is that science has demonstrated that no one could rise from the dead, to which I would say, "That's absolutely not true. Science cannot prove or disprove the resurrection. It's beyond the realm of science." This weekend we will have some of the finest scientific minds in Nebraska present among us, who believe with all their hearts that Jesus rose from the dead. There's no conflict

between the resurrection and science—but science can't prove it one way or the other. It's much more like a courtroom where the evidence is presented and weighed, and the jury makes a decision. So I guess, in a sense I'm seeking to make the case. You're the jury; you arrive at your own conclusions. So with this in mind, I want to start with what I would refer to as the historical records. I want to read from Matthew, Chapter 28. The resurrection is recorded in the four Gospels —Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I'm just reading from Matthew 28, verse 1:

> **Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.** (*NASB Matthew 28:1-9)

So that seems relatively clear to me. The crucified Jesus—risen from the dead—appeared to eye witnesses who are identified in the record. Now some people would say, "First of all, the Bible is a 2000 year old book; I don't think it has relevance today." Well, let's start there. We as Christians are claiming that Jesus was an actual person in history—that He was actually crucified, that He was buried, and that He rose again. So if we are going to study eye-witness accounts of the resurrection, those would have to be 2000 year old records.

We move on from there to people who would say, "But that's just the Bible." Maybe some of you this morning, as I was reading, are thinking, "Well, that's just the Bible. What does that mean?" Are not the four Gospels historical records? Why, because they're part of the Bible, would they just be discredited or summarily dismissed? By every criteria to assess a historical record, the Gospels come forth as highly credible. When scholars are seeking to identify the accuracy and the reliability of a historical record, they look at two things: they look at the number of manuscript copies, understanding everything from history are copies of copies of copies. We don't possess the original of any of this. So how many copies we have helps us compare and get a sense of reliability and accuracy.

The second thing scholars look at is the date of the oldest copy and how much time has elapsed between the oldest copy and the original? Less time in between means less chance for error. So, for example, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote *The Annals* of Rome. Historians today believe them to be accurate, reliable, historical records of Rome. How many manuscript copies do we have? One. And what is the gap between that copy and the original? Roughly nine hundred years. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote *The Jewish Wars*. Historians today believe them to be accurate, reliable records of history. How many copies do we have? Nine. And what is the time gap between the oldest copy and the original document? Roughly one thousand years.

So what about the Gospels? How many copies do we have? Over five thousand copies! And what is the time gap between the oldest copy and the original document? Roughly between one hundred

and one hundred and fifty years. There are virtually no documents from history that have more support for accuracy and reliability than the documents of the Gospels. As a matter of fact, scholars tell us that in ninety-nine and one half percent of those five thousand copies, there are virtually no variances. They are identical. In one-half of one percent there are some variances. In the world of history that is virtually unheard of. As one scholar said, "To dismiss the Gospels as invalid documents of history would mean we would have to dismiss everything that we have from history."

So there is no credible reason to simply dismiss these documents, simply because they appear in the Bible. So going to the documents themselves—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—some critics would say, "Well wait a minute, what is the deal with Matthew, Mark, and Luke? So John was an apostle; that makes sense. But the other three? Matthew was a hated Jewish tax collector; Mark and Luke weren't even apostles. So on the basis of that, some people think they're not credible. Let's stop and think about that. If you are going to formulate some sort of a hoax, would you name these Gospels after a hated Jewish tax collector and two relatively unknowns? What sense does that make? As a matter of fact, a hundred-plus years later, there's a whole series of fake gospels. They were called the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Mary, the gospel of Peter, the gospel of Philip. We know they were written long after those people were dead, but they did exactly what we would expect: they took the marquee names from the New Testament and attached them to these gospels, hoping that would give them credibility. If someone was going to somehow create a hoax or fake a document, you certainly wouldn't name it after a hated tax collector and two relatively unknown authors. So the only conclusion would be: those must be the people that actually wrote these documents.

Now people will say, "How do we know they are true; how do we know they are accurate; how do we know they're not embellished? First of all, they're not anonymous documents. It is the Gospel according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke. These were real people who could be examined and cross-examined for what they have recorded. But it also goes to the date of the Gospels. Now there are some liberal scholars that do what we refer to as "late dating the gospels". Virtually the only reason for that is because the Gospels perfectly predict the fall of Rome in AD 70. Their conclusion is there's no way these Gospels could have accurately predicted that; therefore they had to have been written after the fact. But we know that the Bible is full of predictive prophecies that have been perfectly fulfilled. The overwhelming evidence of the manuscripts is that they were written roughly somewhere between the late 40's all the way up to probably the 90's with the Gospel of John. If you take the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—most scholars believe they were written sometime before AD 62. So you're talking about roughly twenty to thirty years after the events themselves.

So think about this: These Gospels were widely circulated, well within the lifetimes of the people who are recorded in these Gospels. The Gospels are unique in that they are unimaginably specific: This happened in this town...at this time...to this person...and this is exactly what transpired. Now we know for a fact, in the first century there were powerful enemies of Christianity that were willing to do anything to stop this movement, even to the degree of arresting, imprisoning, and executing Christians. So if they were determined to stop the movement, simply take the documents, go back to these towns; talk to these people, and discredit the claims in the documents. What we know from history is the exact opposite happened. Because these Gospels so accurately recorded the events of history, they could not be discredited and instead started a movement that spread like wildfire. The idea that they could somehow be faked or embellished and the people would not have discredited them, is very hard to process.

In addition to the idea of the date, some people pick at what we call variations. The idea of variations is, for example, around the resurrection. It's recorded in all four Gospels and people read the four stories and say, "Wait a minute! The details aren't all exactly alike. Therefore they seem to contradict one another; therefore they cannot be trusted." But the rules of evidence put forth in a court of law identify that eyewitness testimony will have a degree of variance, to such a degree that if four witnesses gave you the exact same story with the exact same details the same way, it would be clear evidence that there was collaboration and a conspiracy that they had compared notes, put together their story and were merely reciting the script. Now think about it: if you had four witnesses on four street corners at 70th and Highway 2, and there was a multiple car accident and each witness gave testimony of what he or she saw, there would be a degree of variance. It's not a contradiction; it's just a different perspective in the details of what he or she saw. Experts in the law would say that is necessary for there to be credibility.

A little over a hundred years ago there was a brilliant law professor named Simon Greenleaf. He was a professor of law at Harvard Law School. His field of expertise was the rules of evidence. He decided to apply his science to the four Gospels. If these four Gospels claim to be eye witnesses to these events, then let's put them through the rules of evidence and see how they fare. After a considerable amount of time, he concluded that they were extremely credible. As a matter of fact, he went so far as to say, based on his study, he had personally come to believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead. As a matter of fact, he was so convinced he wrote it in a book. The book is called ***The Testimonies of the Evangelists***, subtitle: *The Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence.* The book was written over a hundred years ago and is still in print today. The argument is so strong and credible—over a hundred years later—it's still in print because the argument has never been discredited!

If the 1st century writers were going to embellish or fake or start some sort of a hoax, would you present yourself, the apostles, as a group of confused, muddling, despairing cowards? How does that start a movement? Or if you were writing some sort of a fake document in the 1st century, would you identify the first and primary witnesses to the resurrection as women? The document we read from Matthew identifies the women as the first and primary witnesses. In a 1st century Roman culture, women were considered to be unreliable witnesses to such a degree they were forbidden to testify in a court of law. So if you're fabricating a story, would you include the women as the first and primary witnesses of this resurrection? The reason it's written that way is because that's actually what happened.

Now over the years, the evidence for the resurrection has been so strong that there have been a number of theories to somehow try to explain it away. One of those is referred to as the "swoon theory". It's a belief that Jesus merely passed out, was put in the tomb, revived in the tomb, single-handedly moved the stone, single-handedly overpowered the guards, and walked away. A second theory is that the disciples stole the body. This kind of muddled, fledgling group of cowards somehow got the courage to overpower the Roman guards, to move the stone, and they stole the body. Another theory is that they simply went to the wrong tomb and everyone was confused because it was the wrong tomb. Now these are all theories that at one time were put forth with seriousness but most scholars today, including the skeptics, do not hold these theories anymore. They consider them actually, relatively silly.

One other approach that you hear sometimes today is the idea that the resurrection of Jesus was a legend that just simply grew over time. So it started with this little movement; things got embellished; things got exaggerated over time, and the next thing you know you have a resurrected Jesus. But actually the idea of a legend is virtually impossible to sustain. We know that the Gospels

were written well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, claiming a resurrected Christ. Experts tell us it takes hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years for a legend to grow—in other words multiple generations removed from the events themselves before a legend starts to take on a life of its own. So, for example, Alexander the Great: The first biography on Alexander the Great was written four hundred years after his death. Historians today believe it to be accurate and reliable. It wasn't until five hundred plus years where some sort of legendary stories about Alexander the Great started to emerge. Experts tell us that's about typical in terms of the timeline. So we know the Gospels were written within twenty to thirty years of the resurrection of Christ, declaring a resurrected Messiah. We know from 1 Corinthians 15 that that chapter opens with a church creed that identifies the crucifixion, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus. That creed was given to Paul somewhere in the neighborhood of two to five years after the resurrection. So we know within a time span of two to five years after the resurrection, the church was already declaring a resurrected Messiah. More than that, fifty days after the resurrection, at the Feast of Pentecost, the birth of the Church, Peter was declaring a message of a resurrected Messiah he and the others had been eyewitnesses to. Throughout the Book of Acts, the apostles declare a resurrected Messiah, and claim to be eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ. So it is virtually impossible that some sort of legend grew that eventually declared Jesus to be resurrected. It has been part of the message from the beginning of the movement of the Church.

One other issue that comes up with people is if all this is true, why wouldn't there be other historical references to Jesus and His death and the resurrection? Why is it only contained in the Bible? To which I would say, "Well, that's actually not a true statement. Gary Habermas in his book *The Verdict of History* identifies thirty-nine extra-biblical citations referencing roughly one hundred facts on the life, teaching, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Without opening one page of the New Testament, you can put together the life, the teaching, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The evidence begins to mount and becomes more and more overwhelming in favor of the resurrection of Jesus.

Now I will grant you, you can go home today and you can Google the internet and find virtually anything you want to hear. If you are simply determined not to believe, you can find whatever you want on the internet. I did a little surfing myself this week and it's shocking the level of misinformation and outright lies on the internet related to this subject. But one thing that might be helpful to you is that everything I have shared with you this morning has been offered in public debates on university and college campuses, both friendly and hostile, around the world for decades —and it has never been discredited or demonstrated to be untrue. It's one thing for someone to sit down and write their little blog with a bunch of misinformation, but in front of thousands of people debating an expert who is going to ask you to defend and support your conclusions, that's where the real truth comes out—and everything that I have shared with you has been presented in debates for decades.

I want to close with five facts from history that are virtually undisputed. What I mean by that is whether you are an atheist, agnostic, or Christian historian, no one is disputing these facts. The only thing that's disputed is what might be the reason why this occurred.

Fact number1: We know it is a historical fact that this group of discouraged, cowardly, confused, despairing group of apostles virtually overnight became courageous, zealous, dynamic leaders that started a movement that changed the world. Not over time...virtually overnight! How does one explain that? I would suggest they encountered the resurrected Christ. We know that as a historical fact.

Number 2. The enemies and skeptics of Jesus basically overnight became followers of Jesus; many of them ultimately dying for their faith. Pharisees, priests, religious leaders that were enemies, in a moment's time became followers. Two in particular: one would be Saul of Tarsus, the Christian killer, who basically overnight changed his mind and became a missionary of the Gospel, proclaiming a message of the resurrected Christ, and was ultimately executed because of his commitment to that message. The second would be James, the half-brother of Jesus. We know that James was a skeptic; he wasn't buying it, and yet we know virtually overnight James became a follower of Jesus. He became the leader of the Jerusalem church and he was ultimately executed because of his declaration of a resurrected Messiah. How does one explain that? I would suggest to you they encountered the resurrected Christ.

Third fact from history: We know that thousands of Jews, who for over a thousand years had held tightly, passionately to the religious and social structures in order to sustain them as a nation, virtually overnight abandoned those traditions to identify themselves as followers of Christ. They were from Jerusalem, the place where Jesus was crucified. What would possibly compel them to give up the Temple, to give up the sacrificial system, to give up the Sabbath, to give up the Law, and to declare themselves as followers of Jesus? I would suggest to you the only reasonable explanation is they believed in the credible resurrection of Jesus.

Fourth: We know as a historical fact that in Jerusalem, the very place where the resurrection occurred, thousands and thousands and thousands of people in a few short months declared themselves to be followers of Jesus, starting a movement that changed the world—within months over ten thousand people in Jerusalem alone. We know that as a historical fact. The only question is what is the reason? I would suggest to you the credibility of the resurrected Jesus. At some point the evidence becomes so overwhelming that I would suggest it actually takes more faith to reject the resurrection than it does to believe the resurrection.

The last and final historical fact is that for two thousand years this message of a resurrected Christ has radically transformed lives around the world from China to India to Africa to South America to Central America to North America—lives radically transformed by this message. Now some would say, "Now wait a minute, other religions have done the same," to which I would say, "No, actually they have not!" None of the world religions have really moved much beyond the geographical center where that religion was birthed. They cannot claim the same degree of life transformation all around the world. I would suggest religions can gain a following and people can adopt a religious culture, but that is not the same as what we're claiming in Christianity. We are claiming life transformation all around the world, based on a message of a resurrected Messiah.

So how does one explain that? For those of us that believe, the resurrection of Jesus is the power of the Gospel. We believe with all of our hearts, based on the evidence: Jesus was crucified for sin. He was buried and He rose again. It is a message filled with hope. We believe our sins are forgiven. We believe our loved ones who have died in Christ will join us in the *New Heaven* and the *New Earth*—a place with no more tears and no more sorrow. And we believe that no matter what happens in this world, we as the people of God have every reason for hope. To that we say:

Hallelujah! He "is" Risen!!

Our Father, we celebrate this morning this amazing story of the resurrected Messiah. Lord, we believe the evidence of history is overwhelmingly in support of our belief that Jesus rose from the dead. Lord, we gather this morning to celebrate, hearts filled with hope. Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Life Story Video:

"*I was probably nine or ten years old when I realized what I wanted to do with my life. The first time I put a shield on my chest as a police officer, you would have thought I had just won the lottery. In the early part of my career, when I was a patrol officer, I responded to a call for service of a domestic violence situation and it involved a young lady with a small child that I'd guess was maybe five or six years old. I still remember the look of desperation in her eyes and fear in her voice when she said, "What am I going to do? Where am I going to go? Who's going to help me?" I wanted to be there if you were at your worst possible moment. I wanted you to be able to turn around and see there was going to be someone that would help you.*

I became a police chief at a very early age. That was a tremendous accomplishment for me. That led into an opportunity to become a federal police officer. Those led into positions where I worked as a member of the Nebraska Crime Commission for a number of years. I really felt like I had reached the pinnacle—everything that I was striving for, everything that I had worked so hard from the age of nine or ten.

I remember very distinctly there was a strong sense of unidentifiable loneliness and emptiness, and I was perplexed by it because I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. But I knew there was something still missing and that was such a conflict for me because everything else had come together, and I had made the steps and the motions and done what I needed to do. But, boy, I just couldn't quite get that last thing. I knew it was out there; I just couldn't quite identify it.

My first marriage was at the age of about twenty-four and she was a very devout follower of God. I was in a church for a number of years but kind of attended because I had to. I got involved in some things in the church like the choir, etc., but it never really took for me and, ironically, I fought her tooth and nail throughout the course of the relationship.

My youngest brother called me one night and announced to me that he had been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Everything just stopped and the air just left the room. I became an immediate caretaker, pouring everything that I had into getting him through a day to day situation—and we ended up losing my younger brother at the age of thirty-eight.

Approximately a year or two after he died, I lost my father. And then about a year after that, I lost my mother. It took a toll on me physically like I'd never thought I could go through, and even today, twenty-plus years later, it's difficult to even speak about. I struggled with still trying to identify where I was going to find some peace. How is this going to resolve that inner nagging of having somewhere to go? And I can still remember it. I was at home; it was a Tuesday evening—early in the evening—and this just all came crashing down at once. The culmination of the years of the back-to-back deaths, the loss of a marriage—and it truly, literally, just drove me to my knees—and I was in tears. And I remember reaching out and grabbing my cell phone off the coffee table and dialing up an old friend that I knew was a true-believer and I said, "I can't do this anymore. You've got to come get me." And, thankfully, he did, and that started a journey with him saying, "Here's a place you can go. You don't have to be the guy that fixes everything."

(Excerpt from a message by Pastor Bryan): *"Jesus died on the cross for your sins. He was buried and He rose again and He offers you salvation. He offers you the forgiveness of sin*

and eternal life. He waits like the father of the prodigal son who keeps looking to the horizon, wondering if this might be the day that my son finally comes home to me?"

"I need to be willing to humble myself, go to God and say, "Please forgive me because I know I am a sinful man." I was willing to drop to my knees and ask God to come into my life and make that difference; and that's really what did it. Because up until then, I had been kidding myself, and I had been rationalizing or somehow pushing it off that, "I can do this." No, I can't.

I spent a career training myself how to save someone when they needed help the most, but ironically, I was forgetting about myself. I understand what Jesus did that day on the cross. He came to save me. He said, 'I'll take all of this; you don't have to suffer like that anymore, and I'm willing to do that for you.' And I give God all the praise for that, that He worked through the concrete above my shoulders and finally placed into my heart what this is all about. And I'm so thankful that while I'm still on this earth that I get to be able to say that."

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