

Is Jesus the Only Way?

John 14:5-10

Several years ago on Easter Sunday, Parade Magazine asked six religious leaders from a variety of backgrounds to answer the question, "What is the biggest problem in the religious world today?" The only Christian in the group was a Baptist, and he said the biggest problem was violence in the name of religion. The other five all said the biggest problem was exclusivity. They all said it in their own way, but they were agreeing that the biggest problem in religion today is that people believe that their religion is the only true way. That seems to be a pretty common way to think these days. In fact, several years ago, US News and World Report asked American Christians how many agreed with the statement, "The religion I practice is the only true religion." Only 19% agreed. The rising sentiment seems to be that those five religious leaders were right. If all the different religions would just stop arguing and admit that all religions lead to the same place, we wouldn't have terrorism and hatred.

There's an old parable that talks about this. Five blind men walk up to an elephant one day. The first blind man feels its tail and says, "Whatever this thing is, it's like a broom." Another one touches its side and says, "No, it's like a wall." Another one feels its ear and says, "No, it's like a fan." Another feels its trunk and says, "No, it's like a hose." The final one feels its tusk and says, "You're all wrong. It's like a spear." The point of the parable is that all religions are worshipping essentially the same God, but they're so blinded by their pride that they can't see this. If they would just work together and learn from each other, they would together discover who God really is. This parable is seen as being very tolerant and humble, and it certainly seems that way when you first hear it. Two problems: One, it is anything but humble...it's arrogant. The person telling the parable is asserting that, whereas all the foolish religious people in the world are blind and limited, only he can see God as he really is. Only he can see the elephant. So the teller of the parable is guilty of the same prideful narrow-mindedness that he accuses religion of. Two, it is incredibly disrespectful of all religion. It's anything but tolerant. It's basically saying, "I know that Muslims believe there is only one god and that the Hindus believe there are thousands of gods and Buddhists believe there is no personal god, and that Jews believe they're the chosen people, but they're all wrong. If they'd just forget all that stuff and focus on what they all have in common, we'd be getting somewhere." That's not tolerance, it's disrespect.

So I wouldn't agree with the five religious leaders in that article. The only way to take exclusivity out of religion would be to do away with the fundamental tenets of each faith and just agree on a few ethical guidelines. If you ask me what the biggest problem in American religion today is, I would say it's the desire to customize God. Everyone, it seems, wants to make God in his or her own image, instead of the other way around. That includes many Christians I know, as well as people who are spiritual but not religious. It includes liberals and conservatives. Everyone, it seems, thinks they get to define god in their own terms. Let me explain the problem with that. Imagine a young man approached a young woman and said, "I love you. I want to marry you, have kids with you, and grow old with you. I just need you to be blonde and about three inches shorter. Also, your voice sort of grates on my nerves, so work on speaking in a lower register. Then, drop about twenty pounds, take some cooking classes, go a little easier on the eyeliner, and get rid of those nutjobs you call parents. Then you'll be just fine." Only a fool (a short-lived fool) would ever treat a woman that way. Yet that's exactly what we do to God when we want to customize what we believe about Him. God says, "Take me as I am or don't take me at all."

So who is God? As Christians, we say that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. What did Jesus say about Himself? In our text, He says two things that make it very clear. First is in v. 6, *No one comes to the Father except through me.* Then in v. 9, He says *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.* Philip wanted to see God, and Jesus said, “You’re looking at Him.” This is hardly the only place Jesus made these kinds of claims. In John 11, just before raising Lazarus from the dead, He said, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.* The morning He was crucified, He predicted His own second coming. Standing before Caiaphas, the man who would stage-manage His crucifixion, He said, *In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.* Essentially, He was saying, “This isn’t the last you’ll see of me...I’ll be the one you meet face to face on your Judgment.” Those who knew Him were so convinced of His deity, they began to say, *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven given to men by which we may be saved.*

As C S Lewis famously said, Jesus was one of three things: Either He was a liar, a con man of the worst sort, to be counted along with Jim Jones and David Koresh; or He was a lunatic on the order of a man who claims to be from Mars; or He was exactly what He said He was. More recently, the Catholic scholar Gary Wills has put it this way: “Either Jesus was God or He was a standing blasphemy against God.” The one thing He could not have been is simply a good man, a wise and courageous teacher. Good people don’t say the kinds of things about themselves that He did...unless it was true. So yes, we as Christians believe in absolute, exclusive truth. There are points of agreement with most other major religions, and as Americans, we celebrate their right to practice their faith. But we believe Jesus is the only way to salvation. To believe anything else is to call Him a liar or a lunatic.

That brings up a two very serious questions: First, what about those who don’t believe in Jesus? Second, why should we believe Him when He says He’s the only way? As to the first question, the short answer is that it’s not for us to know. The Bible never, ever says, “Here’s the criteria you can use to determine whether someone is going to Heaven when they die.” The Bible does say that there is a real place called Heaven. It does say, “Here’s how you can know Jesus, and if you know Him, you know Heaven is your destiny.” It also says, “Now that you know Him, it’s your job to tell as many people about Him as possible, so they can know Him, too.” We do get hints of how God feels about this question. Ezekiel 18:32 says, *For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.* Peter 3:9 says, *He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Since God is always just and fair, and because He loves all people, we know that He’ll do the right thing. In the meantime, it’s not our job to speculate on the eternal fate of this person or that person, it’s our job to share Christ’s love with them. I like the way Jim Denison puts it: **“The Bible doesn’t equip us to solve that problem with our theology, but we are called to solve it with our witness.”**

So that brings us to the other, even more important question: Why should we believe in Jesus? After all, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, Joseph Smith, and many others have claimed to have a special link to the divine, have claimed to know exclusive truth. Why should we believe that an obscure, uneducated, blue-collar Jewish guy who lived 2000 years ago and was executed as an enemy of the state is the only one who is right? Easter is the answer. The main thing that separates Jesus from all those others is the resurrection. Think about it: Christianity is the only religion that is based on an historical claim. For example, you don’t have to believe that Buddha ever really existed in order to practice

Buddhism. You just need to obey the teachings. Christianity alone says, "It's not about following Christ's teachings. It's about knowing Him." Jesus didn't say, "My philosophy of life is the way to God." He said, *I am the way, the truth and the life*. If the resurrection never happened; if Jesus is dead and in the ground, then He can be rejected out of hand. If, on the other hand, He did rise, then He is everything He said He was...He is indeed the way, the truth and the life. So how do we know He rose?

There are dozens of reasons to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I want to focus on the three that are, for me, the most convincing.

1. The eyewitnesses. Some skeptics are convinced that the story of the resurrection was a legend that grew up in the Christian church several generations after Jesus. So the early Christians made it up in the same way we have embraced the legend that George Washington chopped down the cherry tree or that Babe Ruth pointed to left field before he hit a home run in the World Series. Sometimes stories get told so many times, eventually people start believing them, even though there's no evidence they actually happened. But there are problems with the legend theory of the resurrection. First of all, most New Testament scholars will tell you that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written while there were still people alive who remembered Jesus. And Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, in which he says he personally knows of 500 people who saw the risen Jesus, in AD 55, about 25 years after Easter Sunday. How many people here can remember the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion? That's about how long after Jesus that Paul was writing. If someone wrote an article stating that the Challenger astronauts had all survived the explosion, don't you think there would be a public uproar? There wasn't time for a legend to develop, because if Paul and the other writers had been writing down folk tales, people would have called them on it. But for me, the most convincing eyewitness was not an apostle, it was Mary Magdalene. All four Gospels agree she was the first person to see the risen Christ. Now think about it. In that culture, women were not seen as equal to men. A woman's testimony was inadmissible in a trial, unless it was corroborated by a man. So if the church had been making up a story about Jesus being risen, why would make a woman the first eyewitness? The answer is that they didn't.

2. The change in the apostles. In addition, you have to look at what happened to the apostles themselves. They were uneducated, fearful men, by their own accounts in the Gospels. Yet they became the kind of men who changed history. Something obviously happened to them. And then look at Jesus' brothers, James and Jude. According to the Gospels, they didn't believe in Jesus when He was alive. In fact, they made fun of Him. But after He died, they became leaders of His movement. James became the head of the Jerusalem church and was martyred for his faith. They both wrote books of the NT and called themselves the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have a brother who I love dearly, but I wouldn't call myself his servant if he paid me to do so. Why would they believe in Him when He was dead, if they hadn't believed while He was still alive? These faithful Jews began worshipping together on Sunday, when their tradition had always been to worship on the Jewish Sabbath, a Saturday. Why did they make this change? Then look at what happened to their little movement. 120 people become more than 3000. Then within a generation, they were known in the Middle East as "These men who have turned the world upside down. Something must have happened after the death of Jesus that changed everything for His followers and His brothers. It had to have been something life-changing, and a resurrection would certainly fit the bill.

3. The testimony of martyrs. Let's say all the people in this room decided to start a new religion. We could sneak into a cemetery where a good friend was buried, we could dig up his body in the middle of the night, and we could start telling everyone he rose from the dead. We could make up a bunch of stuff about how he had told everyone he was the Son of God, and predicted that he would rise from the grave. Now we would have to be really good salesmen, because there are a lot of religions in this world, and what we are saying is going to be pretty hard to believe. Do think we could pull it off? I mean, people are going to treat us like freaks. Can you stick with the story if your family disowns you, and you lose your job, and folks start making fun of you? And then the police will come and arrest us for robbing a grave. They'll ask each one of us to tell what really happened to the body. They'll say, "Tell us the truth, and we won't prosecute you. But when one of your friends tells us the truth first, you're going to jail for a long time..." We all know that it wouldn't be an hour before the first person in this room said, "Okay, we made it up. Don't send me to jail!" See, the conspiracy theory sounds great, until you realize that almost all of the people who claimed to see the risen Jesus died a martyr's death. They didn't just go to jail, they died. The Jews or the Romans said, "Renounce Christ or die!" and they died, confessing the resurrection with their dying breaths. And we know that's the case, because if even one of them had given in, had revealed that it was all a conspiracy, then the authorities would have published that story, would have displayed the body of Jesus, and there would be no Christianity today.-

Now you may say, "Big deal. People are always dying for their faith. Every other day, we see people blowing themselves up in the name of Islam." But there is a difference. An Islamic militant believes that when he blows himself up, he is going to heaven. He believes this because he has been told this by people he trusts, his imams and others. It does make one wonder why the young Muslim doesn't ask his leader, "If you believe in this so strongly, why don't you blow yourself up?" But at any rate, the young man is willing to die for what he believes to be true. But these original Christians knew the truth. No one had told them Jesus was risen. They either saw it happen, or they had made up the story themselves. And while many people will die for what they believe to be true, no one dies for what he knows is a lie.

Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg put it this way, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live." Do you believe that Jesus rose again? If so, then He is everything He said He was. If not, which category do you fall into? If you disbelieve because it is hard for you to accept that a man could rise from the dead, I can understand that. But consider the evidence. What else accounts for the explosive growth of the early church, and for the martyrdom of most of the apostles? If it is that second reason that bothers you, that you would have to change the way you live if Christ is truly Lord, then I appreciate your honesty. But I urge you to consider the fact that Jesus being Lord of your life would be the best thing that ever happened to you.

Frederica Matthews-Greene was raised in a Catholic home, but when she was a young teenager, she became convinced that the Gospel story was preposterous, something no sane, educated person could ever believe in. She toyed with atheism, she studied other religions. She was most intrigued with Hinduism because it was so different from what she was brought up with, but the one religion she was not interested in was Christianity. She married a man who was a confirmed atheist, but on their honeymoon, as they were hitchhiking through Europe, he told her he had been reading the Gospels as part of a class assignment. He said, "There's something about Jesus. I've never encountered anyone like this before. I

know that he's speaking the truth. I'm an atheist. But if Jesus says there's a God, there must be a God." That was very scary news for Frederica; the last thing in the world she wanted was for her husband to become a Christian. Later in the same trip, while they were touring a church in Dublin, she suddenly found herself kneeling before a statue of Jesus. A voice inside of her said, "I am your life. You thought that your life was your history, your name, your personality. You thought that your life was the fact that your heart beats. But that is not your life. I am your life. I am the foundation of everything else in your life." Frederica started reading the Bible at that point, and found that disagreed with much of what she was reading. Yet she couldn't stop reading the life and teachings of this man, Jesus. Months later, a friend asked the two of them, "Have you asked Jesus to be your Lord?" Their response was classic: "We're not Southern Baptists." He said, "Actually, Jesus wants to be Lord for everyone." They objected, "But we're in grad school." He replied, "No, even for you." There in that friend's apartment, Frederica and her husband prayed and invited Jesus to take control of their lives. Today, she is a highly-regarded Christian writer and he is a minister.

So what do you believe about Jesus? Give Him a chance, and He'll change your life forever.