

Introduction:

The last two years have been tough. Am I right? I've learned a lot of things the last two years. Not all have been pleasant. Right at the top of my list is the reminder I live in a world where death is the rule. People die all the time. People die every day. Everybody dies. I'm going to die. You're going to die. We're all going to die. Maybe when we're young or maybe when we're old. Maybe after a lingering illness or maybe in a sudden accident. We're all trying to get out of it, but none will. Oh, I may quit eating bacon or sugar, take up cardio and weightlifting, start taking the supplements du jour and postpone death by 5, 10, 20 years, but do you know what will happen at the end of those extra 5, 10, 20 years? I'm going to die. As bumper sticker writers tell us, "Life: No one gets out of here alive." None of us will escape death. BUT...what if I told you, you can defeat death? I know that because it has been done before. 2000 years ago, Jesus of Nazareth, who is called Messiah and Christ, died on a cross. On the third day, He rose from the grave, conquering death. You, if you give your allegiance to Jesus Christ, will defeat death in Him. Yes, you will go through death, but you, like Him, will be resurrected to abundant life in His eternal kingdom never to die again.

Here's the struggle. Fewer and fewer people believe that. Left and right we hear about people turning away from Jesus. That used to be called falling away or apostasy, now it is called deconversion or deconstructing. Deconstruction of faith usually happens as a person finds something about Christianity unpalatable. Perhaps a particular doctrine no longer seems to work in the present culture. Maybe they find something in the Bible hard to understand or believe. Maybe they see something of God in the Bible they don't like. Sometimes it happens because people experience Christians not acting the way Christians should. There are, after all, hypocrites in the church. In any event, they deconstruct. "I don't like that bit, let me pull it out, examine it, discard it." Then they find another and another until they've finally pulled so much out and tossed so much aside, their entire faith is lying in pieces on the floor. That is not an entirely bad thing. We should examine our faith. What we believe may need to be tweaked; it may need to be entirely transformed. My question, however, is now that you've broken your faith all to bits, what are you going to do with the pieces? Now that your faith has been deconstructed, how will you construct a faith that works? This morning, I want to see if we can find a starting place for reconstruction, a ground zero, a foundation, a beginning of our faith. Once we have taken everything apart, can we get back to a place or a principle on which we all can agree? And having a beginning for our faith, can we start to reconstruct our faith.

I am going to use the Bible in this presentation. However, as shocking as this may sound, I'm not going to use it as the inspired Word of God. Today, I will not ask you to believe anything simply because the Bible says so. Rather, I'm using the Bible as a collection of historical documents the same way we would read the Annals of Tacitus, the Lives of Plutarch, the Gallic Wars of Julius Caesar. We don't all agree the Bible, made up of Old and New Testaments, represents the only reliable record of God's Word. However, we can agree it is record of what people living in those times reported, and it can be considered historical testimony about which we can make logical judgments and draw reasonable conclusions. I'm doing that instead of bringing in all kinds of other evidence and testimony because we all have easy access to a Bible. If you don't own a Bible, we'd be happy for you to take one of our copies that you can find there in your pew.

Discussion:

I. Something happened.

- A. I want to begin with a question for the parents in the room. Imagine you are at home working in some room by yourself. Suddenly you hear kids screaming, something bouncing against walls, and glass shattering. You run into the room where all the noise is. You find one kid bleeding and crying, a mirror shattered on the floor, a ball spinning in the corner, and another kid standing wide-eyed looking at the entire scene. What question comes tumbling out of your mouth? "What happened?!" And if one of the kids looked at you and said, "Nothing." What would you say? Well, what comes next might be different for each of us, but it would be a bit like, "Don't tell me nothing happened. Something happened. What was it?" Is that a logical conclusion? Is it a logical conclusion to see the state of the room and declare something happened? When you see consequences, you know something caused them. Once you investigate, you may find out it isn't what you first suspected. It may be something you never would have guessed. But it was something. Something happened. Right?

- B. That's where I'd like to begin. We all live in a world with consequences we all see. There was a time when none of the consequences were there and then, on a historical scale practically overnight, the consequences were there. It is as if we walked into a room with a kid bleeding and screaming, a mirror shattered on the floor, a ball spinning in the corner, and another kid standing their wide-eyed. You know something happened.
- C. Let me see if I can demonstrate what I mean for you. An ancient historian who had been a physician provides a historical record of a riot that took place in the city of Thessalonica somewhere between 50-52AD in his work entitled "The Acts of the Apostles." He tells us about a trip two Christian evangelists named Paul and Silas made into Thessalonica and about a mob started by those opposing them. Luke records what some of those opponents to Paul and Silas said about why they were so upset and starting a riot: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (**Acts 17:6-7**, ESV). Do you hear their claim? It is like they walked into a room full of destruction. They look around at their world and said, "It is turned upside down." Now, what is a good question when you walk in somewhere and find it turned upside down: "What happened?" Because what do you know for sure? Something happened.
- D. The movement known as Christianity, which became and continues to be the largest religion in the world, didn't come from nothing happening. The Bible, written as the Scriptures upon which this religion is based is the bestselling book of all time. Not only that, it is the bestselling book of the year every year. That didn't come from nothing happening. And the man on whom that religion is based, Jesus of Nazareth, celebrates the greatest reputation of just about anyone in history and is considered arguably the most influential and impactful single human in all of history. That kind of reputation doesn't come from nothing happening. There was a time when none of this was true, then the world was turned upside down, and it was all true. As we survey these consequences, we find a beginning for our faith. It is very simply this: Something Happened.
- E. We need to figure out what that something is. It could be any number of things. But here is what we can all agree on, in fact we all have to agree on: Something Happened. Now, let's see if we can narrow that down. Considering the consequences of that something, what kind of something was it?

II. Something historical happened.

- A. My favorite movie series is "The Lord of The Rings." In the very beginning of it, the character Galadriel talks about the history of that fictional realm: "Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it." Moments later she adds, "History became legend; legend became myth." Some people think that the something that happened causing Christianity is that kind of something. Something legendary. Something mythical. I can understand that thinking. After all, none of us alive today were around when Jesus or the apostles lived. That was 2000 years ago. For us, it feels like "none now live who remember it." When we think from 2000 years later it is easy to think the stories about Jesus might be legend or myth. Like the stories of Horus, Zeus, Hercules. However, there is a huge difference between those mythic stories and the story of Jesus. Those stories even when they were first told were told as "once upon a time." Even as they began, they were told as something distantly past that no one living witnessed.
- B. The story of Jesus is very different. In fact, listen to the testimony of Paul the apostle in a letter he wrote to Christians in Corinth in about 57AD. Paul said Jesus "appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep" (**1 Corinthians 15:5-6**, ESV).
- C. Paul wasn't writing about the distant past. He wasn't writing about a time "none now live who remember it." Paul said there were 500 people these Corinthians could find who would tell them what they themselves witnessed about Jesus Christ. They could take you to where they saw it. In fact, please recognize that Paul, writing in the late 50s about events happening in the early 30s would be a lot like someone today writing a letter about events that occurred in the 1990s. It would be like someone writing a letter to us about Jim Henson, Roald Dahl, or Sammy Davis, Jr. Does that sound legendary or mythical? Something happened. What kind of something? Not something legendary. Not something mythical. Something historical happened.

III. Something unique happened.

- A. The world is full of religions. In fact, with so many of them, you can start to see patterns in how those religions form. Somebody claimed to have special knowledge; some people believed them. They raised up kids to have this supposed special knowledge. Sometimes they grew their religion at the end of the sword, forcing folks to accept their special knowledge. For some, respected people in the community made up mythical stories to explain their special knowledge, folks accepted it, then passed it on to the next generation. For some, a ruling class developed mythical stories to control the masses, forcing them to accept the practices and passing them

on. These kinds of things happened repeatedly. Therefore, we are not surprised some people want to dismiss Christianity because it is just another religion and probably started like so many others.

- B. That simply isn't true for Christianity. There is something completely different about how the religion of Christianity started. Allow me to explain. You see, Christianity didn't start with someone claiming to have special knowledge. Christianity started with someone who claimed to be a special person. And not just any special person. Christianity started because Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. With this in mind, please be aware this makes Jesus the only person in human history to be on two distinct lists of people. The one list is important people who impacted history and are still impacting history. On that list, we put people like Moses, Muhammed, Joseph Smith, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Mohandas Gandhi. The other list is people who claimed to be divine. Some ancient emperors made those claims, but for the most part, we have no idea who is on that list because when they died, they were forgotten. There is only one person on both lists: Jesus of Nazareth.
- C. With this in mind, consider another historical record Luke provides for us in his "Acts of the Apostles." In **Acts 5:33-39**, the fledgling movement of Christianity was hanging by a thread. The handful of leaders were all taken into custody by the Jewish council. Most of the council wanted to kill them all. However, Luke records the advice given by Gamaliel, a Pharisee, that stopped them from doing so. He told of multiple men who had taken a similar approach as Jesus. They had claimed to be someone special. They had started a movement and gathered followers. But then their movements came to a shattering halt. Do you know what killed their movements? Their own deaths. You see, Muhammed can claim to know something special, convince others of it, then die, and the others carry on with the supposed special knowledge. But when someone's new movement is anchored in being someone special, in being a Messiah, a Christ, a Savior, a God in the flesh, when they die, their movement is crushed. However, that isn't what happened with Jesus. Jesus is the only person in history who claimed to be someone special, claimed to be God, whose movement grew larger when He died. What kind of something would it take to cause that? When we say something happened, we realize something unique happened. Not something rare, mind you. Something unique. You have to deal with this. It hasn't happened like this for anyone else in all history. If what happened with Jesus and Christianity is so natural and normal, why hasn't it happened again.? Not just anything happened. Something unique happened.

IV. Something unexpected happened.

- A. Today, when people try to explain away what happened, they tell us early Christians borrowed from ancient and already established superstitions and religions. You may hear people mention Horus or Mithras. Then they will tell you things about their stories that are similar to Jesus's story, claiming the reason Christianity took off was because the pagans were already doing those things and Christians just hoodwinked them or perhaps forced them to overlay Jesus on their already established religions. In other words, Christianity was nothing special. It was just religious business as usual with a bit of a Jewish overlay and a slight nuance.
- B. However, in about 57AD, when Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, he complained to them about one of the most difficult aspects of getting people to follow Jesus. Listen to what he claimed in **1 Corinthians 1:22-24**: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (ESV). The message Paul preached was not religion as usual and expected among either the Jews or the Gentiles. If Paul had been borrowing from their religions, they wouldn't have thought it foolish or scandalous at all. In fact, Paul is essentially saying if he were going to make up a religion to try to get followers from among either Jews or Gentiles, this is about the last thing he'd make up. It is so different from anything they wanted, knew, or expected. However, some people from both the Jews and the Gentiles did follow. What kind of thing do you think would get them to follow along even though it didn't just go along with their own forms of religion?
- C. Understand this. When we say something happened, we mean something unexpected happened.

V. Something inescapable happened.

- A. No doubt something happened. As we try to figure out what that something was, there is an interesting vignette in the story of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection as recorded by one of Jesus's 12 disciples, the former tax collector, Matthew. Even if you believe Matthew is completely making up this story of Jesus's resurrection, you have to ask why Matthew included this part.
- B. In **Matthew 27:62-66**, Matthew records Pilate allowed the Jews to seal the tomb of Jesus and set a guard over it. In **Matthew 28:2-4**, Matthew claims an angel rolled the stone from the front of the tomb and sat on

it with an appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow. He also tells us the guards fainted dead away. The truly significant part for us is found in **Matthew 28:11-15**. Here, Matthew reports the guards told the priests what they had seen. The priests bribed them not to tell anyone about the angel but to claim the disciples stole the body while the guards had fallen asleep at their posts. The priests also said they would keep the guards from getting in trouble with the governor if he learned of this supposed dereliction of duty.

- C. Why would Matthew include this story? He didn't have to. The other three didn't. Why? Surely, men who are making up stories to gain a following are not in the habit of handing their audience a ready-made counter narrative to explain away the story they want folks to believe. The key to why Matthew would include this is in that last verse. "And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day." Matthew wasn't making up a counter narrative. He was responding to one that was already circulating.
- D. Have you ever asked why there is a counter narrative? Why was this story circulating among the Jews? Please, recognize, the reason this story was circulating among the Jews even 30+ years later is because something inescapable happened. There are a million things that happened yesterday that no one is trying to explain. Why? Because they do not matter. They can be ignored and dismissed. They don't matter. If I told you my barber prophesied who would win the last presidential election, that would raise barely even a comment from most people. Why? Because it doesn't matter. It's innocuous, meaningless. You could dismiss it. You wouldn't bribe someone to tell a counter narrative that would last for more than 30 years (actually 2000). But...whatever happened on that Sunday nearly 2000 years ago is inescapable. Something Happened. Something so incredible it cannot be dismissed. Something so significant it cannot be ignored. The enemies and opponents had to deal with it. And, in fact, it is so significant and inescapable, opponents today continue to feel the need to explain it away. They have to come up with theories.
- E. Perhaps you will come up with a counter narrative. However, be aware, it needs to be a better explanation than this theft-by-disciples theory. Really? We're supposed to believe the soldiers fell asleep on their post despite the trouble that would get them in? We're supposed to believe they wouldn't be awakened by the disciples rolling the stone away? We're supposed to believe a rag tag group of fishermen and tax collectors were going to take on trained soldiers and win? We're supposed to believe these disciples went on to start a religion based on the resurrection of Jesus, then faced persecution, poverty, struggle, turmoil, and even their own executions all while they knew Jesus's body was in the basement? Yeah, I can't imagine that is the something that happened either. But I can tell you one thing. Something inescapable happened.

VI. Something convincing happened.

- A. We started our presentation today by talking about deconversion and deconstruction. These are terms thrown about by people who used to believe Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, but they've given up on it. They used to be devoted to Him and now they've abandoned Him. You want to talk about a deconversion? You want to see a deconstruction of faith? You haven't seen anything until you hear about Thomas.
- B. One of Jesus's earliest disciples named John, toward the end of the first century, wrote an account of Jesus. In it, he told about another disciple named Thomas also called Didymus or "the Twin." Like John, he was one of Jesus's 12 apostles. Let me tell you how intensely dedicated to Jesus Thomas was. In **John 11**, Jesus was going to travel into Bethany, near Jerusalem in Judea because a friend of His named Lazarus had died. But the disciples balked at this decision because, they declared, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (**John 11:8**, ESV). Thomas was the one who convinced his fellow disciples to follow Jesus back into Judea by saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (**John 11:16**, ESV). That is how convinced, convicted, and dedicated Thomas was.
- C. However, Jesus was eventually betrayed, captured, tried, and executed on a cross. Overnight, Thomas deconverted. His faith was completely deconstructed, lying on the floor in shattered pieces. Listen to what John reports. In **John 20:19-23**, he claims Jesus appeared to the disciples after He had been killed. However, Thomas was not there (**John 20:24**). The disciples found Thomas and told him, "We have seen the Lord." Here is how deconstructed Thomas's faith in Jesus was. He said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (**John 20:25**, ESV). Ten men testified to Thomas they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. These ten men are arguably Thomas's ten best friends. They have walked side by side, learning together from Jesus for three years. Thomas's faith is so shot, when these men, and the women who corroborated their story, tell him what they have seen, Thomas tells them he'll never believe it.
- D. However, eight days later, the disciples are inside together again and Thomas is with them. Jesus appears to them again and displays His hands and His side to Thomas. And Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God!"

- E. This same thing happened with all the apostles. They didn't believe when they first heard. They had to see with their own eyes. Thomas is presented as a special case to drive this home for us. These were not superstitious people, who were so willing to believe in resurrection they accepted at the first word. They were like us. They knew people don't come back from the dead. Their best friends told them He had come back, but they didn't believe. Similarly, we could talk about James, the biological half-brother of Jesus who thought Jesus was out of His mind when He was traveling around teaching (see **Mark 3:21, 31**), but became one of the leaders of Christ's church (see **Galatians 1:19**). Of course, we could talk about Saul who persecuted the church of Christ (see **Acts 8:3**) but became the apostle Paul who did more than anyone else to grow the fledgling church (see **Galatians 1:23**). What would cause this many people who didn't expect resurrection, didn't believe resurrection when they were told about it, thought it was crazy, scandalous, blasphemous, foolish to believe in resurrection of a crucified Messiah, to actually believe in it? It would have to be something pretty incredible wouldn't it? They were not a superstitious lot. They had to be convinced.
- F. You see, when we say Something Happened, we mean something convincing happened. In fact, it was so convincing they staked their lives and their eternities on it. They gave up money, family, comfort, prestige, safety. They traveled and faced dangers, being thrown in prison, and each of them eventually were executed for their faith except John who died an old man in exile for his faith. Yeah, it would have to be something pretty convincing to do all that.

Conclusion:

Something Happened 2000 years ago. When I say that, I don't mean just anything happened. I mean something historical, something unique, something unexpected, something inescapable happened. It was so profound in these ways, we can also say something convincing happened. Let me ask you. What kind of thing would it take to convince people a man executed on a cross was actually the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord who will save our souls and give us eternal victory? What kind of thing would it take to convince you if you were in their shoes? I mean, I guess you could explain it away as the disciples stole the body. You have to come up with some explanation. After all, Something Happened. And that Something changed the World as we know it, turning it upside down, or maybe turning it right-side up. What if the something that happened really is what they claimed it was. What if it really was resurrection? I mean, seeing Jesus resurrected after watching Him die on a cross would be pretty convincing. That would fit. Can you think of something else that would fit quite as well?

I can tell you where I am. Not just anything happened. Resurrection happened. When Jesus convinced Thomas, He said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (**John 20:29**, ESV). That is us. Frankly, I understand the struggle you may have to believe since you have not seen. However, those who believe without seeing are blessed.

2000 years ago, Jesus of Nazareth, called Messiah, Christ, Lord, Son of God by His followers, was executed on a cross. Then He was buried. Even He did not escape death. However, on the third day, He defeated death. He is the only one who has done so. Further, He is the only means by which you can do so. Will you give Jesus your allegiance today as Messiah, as Christ, as King, as Lord?