

## Luke 24:36-49

### Introduction

In 2019, Steve Thomson was working as a self-employed builder a few miles away in West Sussex. He ran a small home improvement firm, specialising in fitting windows and conservatories. He and his wife Lenka lived in a three-bedroom terraced house, in which their three children shared a single bedroom. They weren't poor but they needed to watch their finances carefully. Two years later, in 2021, Steve and his family moved into a sprawling £4.5 million estate in the Kent countryside, with a swimming pool, tennis court and stables. Each of the children now has their own bedroom and, if they want, they can go for daily walks around the two lakes in the grounds. It's a dramatic change of circumstances. What could account for it?

Well, if I told you that on Tuesday the 19th of November 2019 Steve won £105 million on the National Lottery, what would you think? The odds against landing such a win are huge. 140 million to 1. It's equivalent to flipping a coin and having it come up 'Heads' 27 times in a row. It's more likely that he would be hit by lightning than to win the lottery. But despite the odds, the explanation makes sense. We can believe it. It fits the bill perfectly. A dramatic change of circumstances needs something big to account for it. And in case you're wondering, it *is* a true story.

And the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave has the same explanatory power when it comes to the dramatically changed lives of the first disciples.

When it comes to the disciples claims about the resurrection, we're dealing with something that has no natural explanation. Dead people don't return to life. It doesn't happen. Yet despite the odds, over the last two weeks, we've seen compelling historical evidence in support of the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus, of the discovery of his empty tomb, and the claims of the first disciples that he had risen from the grave. This morning, we're going to think about the changed lives of those who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. We'll think about the *apostles*, who went from hiding away in fear to boldly proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. We'll consider *the apostle Paul*, who was transformed from being a persecutor of the early church to becoming one of its most famous preachers and church planters. And we'll consider *James* the brother of Jesus, who was changed from being a sceptical unbeliever to becoming one of the first leaders of the church in Jerusalem. In all cases, when we ask what could account for such dramatic changes, the resurrection of Jesus Christ fits the bill perfectly. It explains them. The dramatic transformation that we see in each of their lives is further compelling evidence of the truth of the resurrection. When we take *their* stories into account, the evidence that we've been considering over the past few weeks becomes overwhelming.

So, let's begin, then, with the apostles themselves.

## The transformation of the apostles

In the reading we had earlier, we were told that the Eleven, as they were then, were assembled with others in a certain place. John's Gospel adds more details. John tells us that **...the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders...** (John 20:19) At Jesus' arrest, the disciples had denied and abandoned Jesus. And now, following his execution, they are hiding away in fear. Their leader had been arrested and executed as a revolutionary. No doubt, they feared they would be next. It's an understandable fear. We would probably have done the same.

In 2020, Pastor Lawan Andimi was abducted by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria, forced into a vehicle and driven away. When he refused to renounce his faith, he was executed by his captors. When news reached his village, the reaction was sheer terror. Fearing that they were next, thousands of Christians fled their homes and spent weeks hiding in caves and thickets. People who were there recounted how mothers would hold their hands over their babies' mouths for hours to prevent them from crying and giving away their position.

That's the kind of fear the disciples must have experienced after Jesus' crucifixion. Yet days later, their lives were transformed to the point that they would willingly endure persecution and death for the sake of Jesus. They willingly put their lives in danger by proclaiming publicly that he had risen from the grave.

That fact is well attested. In the book of Acts, we read how the first disciples were arrested, imprisoned and flogged for their message about Jesus. We read of the killing of Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr, and of James the brother of John.

Outside of the Bible, Clement of Rome, who had known the apostles, writes of the martyrdoms of both Peter and Paul. Polycarp, who had been trained by the apostles, writes of their willingness to suffer for their faith in the resurrection. Ignatius, a friend of Polycarp, said that having seen and handled the risen Jesus, the disciples were so encouraged that they despised death. In other words, they were so convinced of the resurrection that they preached the gospel with little concern for their own lives. Tertullian, writing just prior to 200 A.D., says that Peter was crucified and Paul was beheaded under Nero. He says that the information was available in the public records of Rome. The Roman historian, Tacitus, confirms that Nero brutally murdered numerous Christians after the burning of Rome. Origen, writing about 50 years later, writes that the disciples were so persuaded of the truth of the resurrection that, 'they show to all men by their sufferings how they are able to laugh at all the troubles of life, beholding the life eternal and the resurrection clearly demonstrated to them both in word and deed.' He states that Peter was crucified upside down, a Roman practice that is confirmed by both Seneca and Josephus.

All these sources, and more, confirm that the first disciples were willing to suffer and die for their faith in the resurrection. At the very least, they believed that Jesus really had risen

from the grave. They can't have been lying about the appearances of the risen Jesus. As one writer has observed, liars make poor martyrs.

Virtually all scholars agree that the idea of the disciples stealing the body of Jesus and making up a story about his resurrection is impossible. There is no way that they would be willing to die for something they knew to be untrue. But their transformation from fearful hideaways into courageous proclaimers of the resurrection makes complete sense if they really had seen the risen Jesus. That's exactly what Luke describes in verse 39. As the disciples talk together about the appearances of Jesus, he comes and stands among them. They think they're seeing a ghost. And he says to them: **'...Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'**

**When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.**

What explains the transformation in the lives of the disciples? Surely, it's this! It's an explanation that fits the bill perfectly. The case for that being true is only strengthened when we consider the stories of Paul, and of James the brother of Jesus.

So, let's think about the conversion of Paul.

### **The conversion of Paul**

It's an amazing story. It's been portrayed in works of art by Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Rubens, Blake and many others. Anthony Hopkins has played the role of Paul in film. People often talk of having a Damascus Road experience to refer to a sudden and radical change in beliefs like Paul's.

His *was* a sudden and radical change in beliefs. He describes his previous way of life in his own words in the book of Acts. In chapter 22, verses 3 to 5, speaking to the crowd in Jerusalem, he says this: **'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.'**

In chapter 26, on trial before King Agrippa, he says this: **'I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to**

**blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.'**

Given his hatred of Jesus, how is it possible that *this* man could become a promoter of the Christian faith and one of its most famous evangelists? And what can explain the extent to which he was willing to suffer for his newfound faith? In 2 Corinthians he says that he was imprisoned, flogged, five times received the forty lashes minus one, three times was beaten with rods, was pelted with stones, shipwrecked on three separate occasions and lived in constant danger from bandits, Jews, Gentiles, and false believers. And all for the sake of Jesus, whom he had hated with a passion! What could have happened to bring about such a dramatic change? Again, the account of his conversion explains it perfectly.

This is how Paul himself describes what happened as he addresses the crowd in Jerusalem. Before his conversion he was known as Saul. And he says this: **'About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?"'**

**' "Who are you, Lord?" I asked.**

**' "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting," he replied.**

What is particularly striking about Paul's story is that he was an enemy at the time he claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. He wasn't a friend of Jesus, who was filled with grief over his death and longed to see him again. He was a foe, who had no desire to see Jesus at all. This wasn't a grief hallucination, that we thought about last week. Nor could this transformation have been brought about simply by hearing a story about an empty tomb. Before his conversion, Paul would have had no time at all for the story of the empty tomb. He would have dismissed it immediately and put it down to foul play. There is only one explanation that accounts for his conversion: only one explanation that accounts for his willingness to suffer, even to die, for sake of the gospel. And that's his own personal experience of seeing the risen Jesus.

And finally, we have the conversion of James, Jesus' brother.

### **The conversion of James**

If you have a brother, how would you respond to the claim that he is God in person? If your brother came to visit and claimed to be the Son of God, would your immediate response be to fall on your knees and worship him, or to reach for the phone and call the men in white suits?

Perhaps you can understand how James might have felt. If you were James, it would take an awful lot to convince you that your brother was the Son of God and the long-awaited Messiah. And that's what we find as we read the Gospels.

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus had at least four brothers. They were James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. He also had sisters. The Jewish historian Josephus specifically mentions James and identifies him as the brother of Jesus, called Christ. And as we read the Gospels, we find that Jesus' brothers, including James, were unbelievers prior to his crucifixion. John tells us plainly that **even his own brothers did not believe in him.** (John 7:5) Mark tells us they thought Jesus was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). And you probably *would* think that if your brother went around claiming to be the Son of God.

You may remember David Icke, the former goalkeeper and sports presenter. He was famously interviewed on *Wogan* and claimed that he was a 'Son of the Godhead', a claim he clearly believed. He became a figure of national ridicule and his two brothers struggled to make sense of it. They distanced themselves from him publicly, saying that they didn't recognise the man he had become, and that he had thrown away a brilliant career for a delusion.

From the evidence of the New Testament, James and his brothers thought something similar about their own brother. Yet, after the crucifixion, James is identified in the book of Acts as a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul describes him as a 'pillar' of the church, along with Peter and John. We even have a letter written by him in our Bibles. And not only did he become a Christian and get appointed as a leader of the church, but his faith in Jesus was so strong that he was even willing to die for it. His death is recorded by Josephus, Hegesippus and Clement of Alexandria, in other words, by both Christian and non-Christian sources. How do you explain that?

There are two things here that we need to explain. Firstly, how did James go from being a sceptical unbeliever to being willing to die for his faith in Jesus? And secondly, how did he go from being a sceptical unbeliever to being recognised by the early church as its leader and pastor? It's got to be something big. In fact, it's got to be huge. Seeing the risen Jesus with your own eyes would certainly do it. Once again, it fits the bill perfectly.

And it's exactly what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15, where we find that early teaching that Paul had received and passed on. He tells us that the risen Jesus appeared to Peter, **and then to the Twelve. 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. Then he appeared to James...**

The appearance of the risen Jesus to James explains perfectly the changed life of his brother. It makes sense as an explanation. It doesn't *prove* the resurrection. But it *is* strong evidence in support of it.

## Conclusion

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, how would *you* explain these transformed lives?

We're not just talking about the transformed lives of Jesus' disciples, although their transformation from hiding away in fear to boldly proclaiming that Jesus had risen is remarkable. We're also talking about a sworn enemy of Jesus, a foe who considered him cursed by God, who yet spent his life joyfully proclaiming the resurrection to the world. And we're talking about a sceptical brother, who wasn't a believer during Jesus' lifetime, but became a leader of the church after his death. All of them suffered for their faith and even died. How do you explain all of that? Can you see that, in each case, an encounter with the risen Jesus explains it perfectly?

At the very least, doesn't it make you want to find out more about Jesus? If someone has risen from the grave, appeared to numerous witnesses, and made the claim that he can get *you* through the grave too, don't you want to know about it?

And if you're already a believer, then be encouraged that the God you worship is a God who transforms people's lives. People you know and love may be living as enemies of Jesus, opposed to him with every fibre in their bodies. They may be sceptics, who dismiss the message of the resurrection as silly nonsense. You may think there's no way that they could ever come to faith. But God transformed the lives of James and Paul and the disciples. And he can transform their lives too.

Keep praying and don't give up.

Let's pray now.

Heavenly Father, you are in the business of changing lives, and we praise you for it. Thank you for the work you've done in us, to transform our lives through faith in Jesus. And we long for you to do the same in the lives of those we know and love. So, please help us to speak with them about the resurrection of Jesus. And please be at work in them, by your Spirit, to bring them new life in Christ through faith. We ask it in his name. Amen.