

Acts 1:1-8

The global church

Introduction

On the 18th of November 2020, a helicopter crew from the Utah Department of Public Safety was flying over a remote portion of desert. They were assisting the Division of Wildlife Resources by counting bighorn sheep. Suddenly, one of the team spotted something shiny reflecting from the floor of a canyon and yelled for the pilot to turn around. They landed to discover a 10-foot-tall silver pillar standing by itself in a red-rock canyon. It was such an unexpected discovery that the team posted a video to the internet. It's similarity to an alien monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* immediately prompted speculation about alien visitors.

However, the Utah Monolith was soon shown to be the work of human hands. It was professionally built from stainless steel. It was held together with rivets and silicone caulking and had a hollow centre. But, nonetheless, no one could work out how it had got there or where it had come from. Historic satellite images showed it had sat in that location, undisturbed, for over four years before it had been discovered. The best guess is that it was the work of a professional artist. But how it got to be there is still a mystery to this day.

For secular historians, the existence of the global church presents a similar mystery. Today, in England, we're very familiar with the presence of the church. We aren't surprised to find numerous church buildings in any town or village we might visit. If we ask Google to tell us the names of churches in a particular town, we aren't surprised to find there are many. But for the secular historian, the existence of the global church is something of a mystery. Of course, they know where it came from. It came from Jerusalem roughly 2000 years ago. But what isn't clear to them is why it exists at all.

The sceptic, Edward Gibbon, who, in 1776, authored the book *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote that: 'The progress of Christianity... is the most remarkable event in the history of the world.'

Tom Holland, a secular historian and author of the bestselling book *Dominion*, writes: 'The victory of Christianity... was the most improbable of all. That it should have emerged from a corner of the Roman Empire, and then have conquered the masters of that empire... is the most extraordinary of all historical revolutions.'

It's the existence of the church that is our final piece of evidence for the truth of the resurrection. And the first thing we need to consider is the lack of interest shown by the early church in the tomb of Jesus.

That's our first heading: The lack of interest in the tomb of Jesus.

The lack of interest in the tomb of Jesus

From the very beginning, Christianity has been a missionary movement. We saw that in the reading we just had. In Acts chapter 1, the risen Jesus speaks to his disciples while they share a meal. And he tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit. He says to them, in verse 8: **'...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'**

From the start, Christianity has been about sharing a message with the world. In contrast with all other religions and cults, Christianity has shown little interest in the tomb of its founder.

Abraham died sometime in the second millennium BC. His body is believed to be buried in the Cave of the Patriarchs in the heart of the Old City of Hebron. It's considered to be the second holiest site in Judaism after the Temple Mount. Muhammad died in 632 AD and is known to be buried in The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Buddha died in the fifth century BC. His ashes are enshrined in various places across India and around the world. Confucius died at about the same time, in 479 BC, and is known to be buried in the Cemetery of Kong Lin in China. In contrast, there is no certainty about the location of the tomb of Jesus. A couple of sites have been *suggested* for visitors to Jerusalem. But there is no mention of its location in the New Testament. And there is no mention of it in any of the early Christian writings.

Peter draws a striking comparison in Acts chapter 2. In a sermon to his fellow Israelites in Jerusalem, he says this: **'Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.'** (Acts 2:29-32)

To the Jews, it was vitally important to preserve the tombs of their leaders. Peter could speak confidently of the tomb of their great King David. Its location was known. But, although the first Christians were Jews, there is no evidence of any attempt by the early church to preserve the tomb of Jesus. And Peter tells us why. It was because the tomb was empty. God had raised Jesus to life.

The tomb was of no interest to the early church. Once it was found to be empty and the disciples started reporting the appearances of the risen Jesus, there was no reason to pay any further attention to it. The first disciples weren't interested in preserving a tomb. They

were devoted to the task of proclaiming the message of a risen King. That's what was important.

The *lack* of interest shown by the church in a tomb fits perfectly with the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. And the priority of proclaiming the resurrection provides a compelling explanation for the rapid spread of Christianity.

That's our next heading: The rapid spread of Christianity.

The rapid spread of Christianity

The book of Acts tells the story of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. From Rome it would go to the whole world, or **'to the ends of the earth'** as Jesus put it in Acts 1, verse 8.

Today, it's estimated that roughly a third of the world's population would describe themselves as Christian. That's roughly two-and-a-half billion people. Most of those are in Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and Europe.

Unlike pretty much every other cult or religion, Christianity didn't grow significantly while its founder was alive. Yet from its simple beginnings among a handful of fishermen and oddballs, in a relatively obscure province of the Roman Empire, it has spread with extraordinary speed.

The first believers were Jews. Judaism isn't known for its enthusiasm for making converts. Yet the Christian faith spread rapidly to the non-Jewish world. Unlike other global movements, it wasn't accompanied by any military conquest or territorial claims or political agenda. It happened despite meeting with prejudice and persecution nearly every step of the way. And it grew across all social divides. Historians sometimes point to the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 AD as the *beginning* of the growth of the church, but in fact the church had become widespread at least a century before that.

Henry Chadwick, one of the leading historians of the early church, wrote this: 'The faith of a handful of ill-educated fishermen had spread with astonishing rapidity to reach from India to Mauretania, from the Caspian to the utterly barbarous tribes of Britain. The agents of this diffusion had not been great orators or subtle reasoners, and they had had to meet the opposition of prejudiced and angry mobs and of a hostile government. Nevertheless, the churches had expanded with extraordinary and embarrassing speed.'

All of that needs to be explained, and the New Testament gives an explanation. The risen Jesus sent his disciples out to the world to be his witnesses. And the book of Acts is insistent that the reason the church grew was because the message about him was preached. The church grew because a message was proclaimed. And at the heart of that message was the resurrection.

What's surprising, perhaps, is that the primary concern of the disciples was not to pass on the wisdom or the ethical teaching of Jesus. They knew very well what Jesus had taught and how he had lived. They had followed him for three years, learning from him. And they *did* pass on his teaching. Yet that wasn't their primary focus. As we read through the numerous sermons preserved for us in the book of Acts and compare them to the content of the apostle Paul's letters, what's striking is that it is his death and resurrection that stands at the centre of their message. The resurrection wasn't an afterthought or a minor issue; it was the very heart of the message they proclaimed.

Paul sums it up in Romans chapter 10, verse 9. He writes this: **If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**

It was the preaching of *that* message and not the desire for military conquest or claims over geographical territories that produced the rapid growth of the church. And that couldn't have happened if that message was obviously a lie or a fraud.

Without the resurrection, there might just about have been a Jesus of Nazareth Appreciation Society somewhere in the world, but there wouldn't be a global church. Historians need a reason to explain the existence of the global church today. And the resurrection of Jesus is a perfect fit.

The Cambridge New Testament scholar, C. F. D. Moule, said this (and when he mentions the Nazarenes, he means Christians): 'If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church...remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself.'

The explanation offered by the church is that when the message of the resurrection is proclaimed, God is at work through that message to build his church and change people's lives. And that brings us to our final piece of evidence, which is the testimony of believers.

The testimony of believers

John Lennox is emeritus professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford. He teaches mathematics and the philosophy of science. He's a scientist. And he speaks of the incredulity of some of his fellow academics that he should believe in things like the resurrection. Like him, they are scientists. In science you conduct experiments to test your hypotheses. But they object that Christianity is not testable. That's why they say that, as scientists, they can't accept its claims.

But John Lennox challenges that statement. He points out that if it *is* true that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then he is still alive today and it's possible to meet him. And, he says, that means you can do an experiment.

In the New Testament, the risen Jesus tells us that if we are prepared to trust him, repent of our old godless way of life, and receive him as Lord, then he will give us forgiveness, new life and a new power. And John Lennox points out that this can be tested. You can test it by listening to the testimonies of Christians you meet. You can test it by observing the lives of Christians you know. And, he says, if you ask them, they will tell you that they have discovered a peace with God that they never possessed before. They will tell you that they have a genuine sense of the presence of the risen Jesus with them each day. They will tell you that their lives have been transformed as a result.

And this is what John Lennox says, and I'm quoting him directly: 'When you see that in life again, and again, and again, and again. When you see people with narcotic or alcohol dependence and they've no food to put on the table in front of their children. And you meet them then a year later and something has happened, and you say, 'What's happened to you?' And they say something like, 'Well, I met Jesus,' or 'I became a Christian,' or they put it different ways. When you see that again and again, you add two and two and you get four.'

Christians can testify that Jesus is risen because we experience his presence and power every single day as we follow him. God created us to have the greatest friendship we can ever have, friendship with the risen Jesus. Christians around the world can testify that that friendship is real. If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, please don't dismiss that as evidence.

Conclusion

Over the last four weeks, we've looked at a lot of evidence. We started with the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus. We've considered the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances of Jesus. We've thought about the changed lives of his disciples, especially the changed lives of his enemy, Paul, and his own brother, James. We've finished with the growth of the global church and the reality of our own experience. It's a lot of evidence.

I started by saying that I'm not trying to prove the resurrection with 100% certainty, because that's an impossible task. My aim has been to show that belief in the resurrection of Jesus as a fact of history is a reasonable belief to hold. And I hope I've shown that there is compelling evidence in support. It's cumulative evidence. It's taken us step by step to the staggering conclusion that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, having considered the evidence with us over the last four weeks, can I urge you to do what John Lennox suggests, and put the claims about Jesus to the test. Speak with believers you know and ask them what impact Jesus has had

on their lives. Ask them how their lives have changed since coming to know Jesus. And add that to the other evidence we have considered over the past weeks. Ask yourself whether there is any better explanation for the empty tomb, the appearances of Jesus, the changed lives of his disciples, and the existence of the global church today, than the resurrection of Jesus.

And if you *are* a believer, then consider what this means for your faith. If Jesus truly has risen from the dead, as we profess, then he demands more than mere lip service. He demands the worship of our whole lives.

And if you *are* a believer, then take confidence to speak of your own experience of the risen Jesus with others. We can all tell others about Jesus because we all have our own story to tell. We don't need to know all the answers to every question. We just need to speak about the difference that Jesus has made to our own lives. And when we do that, we ourselves are evidence for the resurrection.

Well, I've thoroughly enjoyed looking at the historical evidence for the resurrection over the last four weeks. I hope you've found it helpful, whether you're new to the faith, a seasoned believer, or still investigating. And I hope you'll find it useful to share some of this evidence with others as you speak to them about Jesus.

Next week, we'll start to think about the consequences of the resurrection as we consider the ascension of the risen Jesus, when he returned to heaven. Please do join us.

Let's pray.

Loving heavenly Father, thank you for the good news of the resurrection. Thank you for all the evidence that we've considered over the last four weeks. And thank you for the evidence that is all around us today in the global church. Please give us confidence to speak of the resurrection with others and to help them come to Jesus as their risen Saviour and Lord. And we ask that in his name and for his glory. Amen.