

Sermon Title: **God's Not Dead**

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Scripture Text: Acts 1: 1-3

Do you know what today is? It's an important Jewish holiday. It's called the *Feast of the Sheaf of the Firstfruits*. It occurred during Passover week on the day after the Jewish Sabbath (Sunday). Early in the morning some men were sent to the harvest to take a sheaf and they brought it to the priest. The priest therefore on Sunday morning of Passover week would stand and 'wave' this sheaf before the Lord so the people would be accepted. This always occurred on the Sunday after Passover. A single sheaf was waved before the Lord. The word 'wave' could be translated 'lift up' or 'elevate': Sheaf of the First fruits.

Paul says this: "*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*" That is an amazing type. On the first day of the week, before the harvest was gathered, a single sheaf of the first fruits was elevated before the Lord so that Israel could be accepted. So also, on the Sunday morning following Passover two thousand years ago, God raised Jesus, the first fruits of those who sleep, guaranteeing that an entire harvest would follow. That sheaf was raised so that we might be accepted before the Lord.

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

Acts 1:1-3 NIV

One of the most popular films this year is *God's Not Dead*. It is the story of Shane Harper, a young college student who enrolls in a college philosophy class. Unbeknownst to him, his professor is an avowed atheist and in the first class of the semester he makes every student write on a piece of paper the sentence "*God is Dead.*" and sign it if they want to pass his class. That presents a problem for Shane because he is a Christian and can't sign off on "God is Dead".

As a result, the professor insists that Shane debate him and defend his belief in God. Shane does, and in the end, uncovers the real reason for the professor's atheism—the untimely death of his own mother. On one level this film is popular because it is the classic 'David and Goliath' story—young, helpless college kid being attacked by a philosophical giant and overcomes. But there is another reason for the popularity of this film; *movie deals with the need for certainty when it comes to faith*. Shane Harper an innocent young Christian is forced to think through the implications of his faith. He learns to dispel the myth that some really smart people (smarter than us) have examined the faith and proven that it's all wrong and that Christianity therefore is a hoax. On the contrary, Shane Harper learns that faith in God is both reasonable and rational.

Sadly, *when we in the Church think of faith today most of us don't think of it in rational and reasonable terms*. The word 'faith' itself has become one of the vaguest and most confusing terms in our vocabulary. We sometimes refer to it by the adjective 'blind' faith. In other words, we really don't have any reason to believe what we believe, but we just choose to lay aside our minds and believe it anyway.

I looked up the definition of faith at about.com and it defined it this way: “*firm belief in something for which there may be no tangible proof.*” But that is not at all the way Scripture defines what faith is. Faith is not an ‘*irrational leap in the dark*’ but is a *firm reliance or trust based on facts that are both reasonable and rational.* In fact, in our text this morning, Luke tells us that after Jesus suffered, He gave many convincing proofs to his apostles that He was alive. There is a reason for this. Of all the doctrines we are asked to believe, this one is the most important. Chapter 10 of the book of Romans tells us that in order to be saved we must “confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead.” Since believing this one simple truth (that God raised Jesus from the dead) is paramount to the faith, it shouldn’t be surprising that God went out of his way to furnish us with many proofs that such a stupendous event actually occurred. And this, my friends, separates Christianity from any other religion or belief system.

One time I travelled on a plane leaving Minneapolis. This flight was full of cultists. They all wore buttons and so that is how I knew for sure that this particular flight was filled with members of this one particular cult. I was the only one on board not wearing the button. I had brought a Christian book to read and as soon as I opened it, a passenger seated in my row interrupted: “I see you have religious material.”

“I am a Christian,” I replied. A conversation then ensued in which I drew him in by explaining what all religions have in common. They all begin with a great teacher, who has a message believed by followers. Often when the teacher dies, the followers write a book to carry on his teachings, build awareness of the teaching and continue to draw new followers. I could sense his delight in my recognition that all religions are alike. But then I offered, but there is one difference in Christianity. I had piqued his curiosity. I said my leader is not dead, He is alive! This is the same gospel message that has been shared by the followers of Christ since his resurrection.

Luke uses the term “*many convincing proofs*” to describe the many ways he appeared to the eleven disciples over a forty day period proving to them that they were alive! While no one actually saw the moment of the resurrection, many people testified that they saw Him after He was raised, and that fact changed their lives. Let me quickly show you seven proofs that the New Testament sets forth that Jesus of Nazareth indeed was raised from the dead:

1) *The Empty Tomb*

This might be the mightiest testimony to the truth of the resurrection. Two theories have been raised by unbelievers to explain the empty tomb. The one I grew up with and is recorded at the end of Matthew is that his disciples stole his body from the tomb. The problem with that is that the disciples are presented as too cowardly to have done that not to mention the Roman guard. The other view is that the women went to the wrong tomb. Even if they did go to the wrong tomb the Sanhedrin could have produced the body from the right tomb to stop the resurrection stories (but they never did).

2) *The Women’s Testimony*

The New Testament tells us the first people he appeared to were Mary Magdelene and other women. If this account was fictitious the writers would have never made up this account of his appearing first to women. Women were second-class citizens in that world (their testimony was not allowed in court). Even the apostles did not accept Mary Magdelene’s testimony at first. But Jesus honored these women by appearing to them at first. The apostles had no other choice than to present the fact that Jesus first appeared to women.

3) *The Apostles’ New-Found Courage*

Before the resurrection, the apostles were cowards, hiding behind closed doors. But something happened that turned these men from timid, fearful cowards to bold witnesses for the Lord Jesus. They exhibited such confidence that Jesus was risen,

they were willing to face anything (including death) to confront the world with the reality of his resurrection. They now quit hiding and faced certain death in their testimony. Something happened to these men to change them. It is hard to believe that they knew that this was a hoax but gave up their lives and faced death for a lie. And the fact is, all but one were martyred for their faith in the resurrection. It is possible that they made it up and that they all decided to die for a lie. But it is highly unlikely that you could get men who were so timid before to all decide to die for a lie. The more likely explanation is that something happened!

4) *Testimony of James (The Lord's Brother)*

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus had a brother named James who did not believe in his brother (Jn. 7:5). But the apostle Paul tells us that the risen Lord appeared to his brother. We know what happened. He became a devoted follower of his brother as His Lord and eventually ended up leading the church in Jerusalem. James was so devoted to his brother that he was eventually stoned to death for his faith. Something changed James from unbelief to faith, (He saw his brother risen from the dead). Not to mention that something has changed the lives of countless millions through the corridors of time. Whenever men and women have put their faith in the resurrected Lord their lives are totally and completely changed forever. What accounts for that if the resurrection of Jesus is a big hoax?

5) *A Large Crowd of Eyewitnesses (I Cor. 15:6)*

The apostle Paul who told us that the Lord appeared to his brother James also tells us that he appeared to more than five hundred brothers. He stated that most of them were still alive when Paul wrote this epistle 25 years after the event. You can debunk the testimony of two or three people but when you have hundreds of people saying they saw him, that's a different story. Even psychologists would say that it is impossible that a large group of people all had the same hallucination at once. Yet they all testified that they saw the same thing. In the case of the apostles, they testified to seeing him, touching him, talking with him and eating with him. And get this: after the ascension (or their testimony of it) all of the sightings of Jesus stopped. How do you account for that? In other words, the only reports floating around of his resurrection are in the forty days after his resurrection.

6) *The Conversion of Paul*

The greatest conversion in all of history was that of the apostle Paul. That's because Paul was a persecutor, an antagonist to the Christian faith. He hated the faith and did everything in his power to destroy it. But he testified that on his way to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him (as one untimely born). Even the church had a problem with this one. We know that Paul indeed made this turn and became the greatest missionary the Church has known. He endured five floggings, three beatings, three shipwrecks, a stoning, poverty and ridicule all for a lie. And even the Jewish people who opposed didn't deny that he was now promoting the faith he once tried to destroy.

7) *The Martyrs*

How do we account for the fact that thousands upon thousands of people have died for their faith in the resurrection? One church father said it this way: "*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*" Men, women, even children willingly gave up their lives for the Gospel. Throughout history people have demonstrated that they would rather be tortured or die than give up their faith that Jesus is risen. Why? If it was a myth do you think that thousands upon thousands would gladly give up their lives?

Here is the thesis of this sermon: *The Christian faith is built on rational and reasonable proofs that three days after he died, God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. The reality is, this changes everything!*

The New Testament never presents this fact (that Jesus is alive) as just religious information (oh, by the way, Jesus is alive). Rather, it presents it as a fact that is meant to disturb us so that we are transformed by it. Each area of our existence, *mind*, *will*, and *emotions* is to be affected by the reality of his resurrection. In fact, Christian conversion, (the turning from sin to God through repentance and faith in the Gospel) requires each area of our existence (mind, will, emotions) to be radically altered because he is alive. Let me demonstrate using two groups and a person:

The *mind*:

He is risen....change your *mind*! Change your mind! This lies at the heart of what Christian repentance is. It's not first an emotional response but a response based on a new awareness. The reality is, God has furnished proof that he has raised his Son from the dead. What am I supposed to do with that fact? You can't see that and yawn! *Change your mind*.....you are living life for yourself rather than the risen Lord.

Now you must change your mind and turn from self to God. Paul says it this way: "*And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*" Conversion is a change of mind where I now see it as the ultimate act of criminality that I am living life to please myself rather than my Creator. When you're converted, one of the evidences of that is your attitude towards this book. *Jesus opened the minds of the apostles in the Upper Room to understand the Scriptures.* This book becomes open and alive when you meet the resurrected Christ. It's no longer a dull, dead book but a book that comes alive and you can't stay out of it. As a Jew, I did not enjoy Scripture. My mind was totally changed towards God's Word so that I can say with the Psalmist, "*In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.*" David says God's Word is sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

The *will*:

My favorite example of this is Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul). One glimpse of Jesus of Nazareth and he is captivated forever. You can see this in the two questions Paul asks when he sees the Lord: ('Who are you, Lord') and ('What shall I do?'). You have to start with answering the question, "Who are you?" But once you answer that, you then ask "What shall I do?" We have this saying that people need to "Make Jesus Lord." You can't 'make Him Lord'; God made him Lord! You've either seen that or else you're still living for self. It says of sinners in II Timothy that they are captured by the devil to do his will. Salvation is nothing less than your will being released from the bondage to the devil and now captivated to do the will of Jesus Christ. This is what the Christian life is. It's not this game of giving Jesus some rooms of your heart or making bargains or vows.

He is Lord.....my life is over. It belongs to another forever! It's like marriage...once you are married all your fulfillment, all your joy is now fulfilled in one person forever. Paul describes himself in several of his letters as a '*doulos*'— bondservant; this is the Greek word used to translate the Old Testament word for a servant who serves his master out of love.

The *emotions*:

My favorite example of this is the two on the road to Emmaus. The risen Lord draws near as they're talking and they don't know who it is. They start pouring out their hearts to Him about their disappointment about the ministry of Jesus and the way it ended. Jesus then began to take them through a glorified Bible study. He didn't tell them what was in the Old Testament (they knew that). What they didn't know is how the Old Testament revealed the Messiah. After they took him home and he broke bread they recognized him. Suddenly, he vanished from their sight.

You know what they said? "*Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?*" (Luke 24:32). The burning heart is always evidence that one has met the risen Lord. There are some people

who say that emotion shouldn't be displayed in religion. That we should talk about the risen Lord in intellectual terms but not get excited. But when your mind is illuminated to know that Jesus is alive and you are captivated by Him to do his will it should call up the depths of our emotions. We are talking about feeling the depths of love for the One who purchased us. Could you imagine marriage without emotion...just our minds being involved? Christianity was meant to be felt not just believed. *"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."* (1 Peter 1:8).

How should you respond? Repent and turn to God. Be sorry for the fact that you have spurned the glorious Son of God. Put your trust in the Gospel. Why was Jesus raised? He died for sins and was raised as evidence that his blood was fully and completely accepted by God for your salvation. Then, as evidence that you have repented and put your trust in the Gospel, be baptized. That is the place where you are to publicly confess the Lord Jesus. Perhaps you are here today and the Gospel is awakening your heart. There are people that would like to talk with you and give you counsel.

The questions which follow are provided to use during House Church Group Discussions.

- 1) Although it wasn't discussed in the message, what Jewish holiday is celebrated Easter Sunday?
- 2) How do many people in the modern world today view "faith".
- 3) Why did God give so many "convincing proofs" that Jesus was alive. Name some of them.
- 4) How does the resurrection of Jesus change everything?
- 5) How should the reality of the resurrection affect our minds?
- 6) How should the reality of the resurrection affect our wills?
- 7) How should the reality of the resurrection affect our emotions?