

Sermon About the Resurrection of Jesus - 2

Hey, Sanctus Church, good morning.

I'm so glad that you're joining us, either for the first time or all over again, whether you're at one of our physical locations or watching online, watching on demand, or listening on a podcast. You may be watching this in Toronto or across Canada, somewhere in North America, maybe South America; you might be joining from Australia, Rwanda—we have people from all around the world joining us. No matter who you are, what your background, where you are in a faith journey, you're really welcome.

This is week seven in an extended series where we as a local church have been slowing down to walk through unbelief, scepticism, doubt, deconstruction, reconstruction, and the Christian faith. And our goal has always been to help others find those signposts either to start the journey, to continue the journey well, to make sure not to shipwreck or break down in the middle of the journey, and also to help others do the same.

Last week, we were wrestling with the question: Did Jesus actually live, die, and physically rise from the dead? In other words, is Christianity the greatest misunderstanding in history? Is this the worst form of that old-school game called “telephone”? Is this wishful thinking, or is this an intentional conspiracy? Is there proof for any of this?

Let me again start where I did last week: In the Christian worldview, faith is not crossing your fingers, closing your eyes, leaping into the dark, and hoping this is true. Faith means informed, factual, trust. In other words, you need experience, and you need facts to find truth.

Some of you who are not Christians and some of you who are Christians are deeply suspicious. Honestly, what's at the heart of your suspicion is that “this is what we see and do on

Instagram all the time.” You’ve got your favourite meal in front of you, or you’re trying to get a family photo, or you’re in some vacation place, and you take 4.5 million photos of the thing, right? Then you choose one, the perfect one that reflects what you want to show the world.

It’s curated to look the best. You get rid of or ignore all the other broken things, the not so nice things, or the misshapen things. And a lot of people think something’s going on in the Christian faith, but we’ve curated it so we only show the good things, not the broken things. We show the fake things. So what are Christians hiding?

So let’s go back to the foundation, the core, the epicentre of the Christian faith, the belief that Jesus physically rose from the dead. If the physical resurrection of Jesus is true, then everything changes. And if it’s not, it doesn’t matter. See, that’s a big *if*. This week’s sermon is built on last week’s, and of course, these two weeks connect to all the weeks before. Last week, we looked at history and asked questions like: What’s the difference between science and history? Is history accessible? And what are the rules of accessing history? Can we use those historic criteria to know if Jesus existed? Can the Bible be trusted as a historical document?

Are there sources outside of the Bible that verify what we find in the Bible? Are there any reputable leaders, historians, or philosophers that say, “Yeah, that stuff happened?” Was there anyone who was not a Christian who said, “Yeah, Jesus existed? Yep, Jesus was around; yep, Jesus was killed in a cross; yeah, he was even buried.” That was last week.

Today, we’re going to look at some of the biggest conspiracy theories surrounding Jesus’s life, death, resurrection, and empty tomb. Some of you are going, “Sure, yeah, Jesus existed. I’m in,” or “Yes, Jesus lived, and I’ll give you that he maybe did some really weird, spiritual, crazy stuff and maybe he died. And actually, maybe I’ll even admit there was an empty tomb, but it’s not empty because Jesus rose from the dead. I mean, it’s so obvious something else happened.”

If you go to the internet—because everything on the internet is true, right, everyone?—you will read many, many people say things like this: “Oh, actually, the idea of physical resurrection was everywhere thousands of years ago. All sorts of religions and cults taught it, so it’s no big deal. So the claim that Jesus rose from the dead was just Christians stealing, hijacking, and borrowing an idea that everyone else believed, and they used it to their advantage. And, Jon, back then people were a bit stupid anyways; they didn’t know the difference, and they all just got sucked in to the latest crazy claim.”

Theory 1: The idea of a physical resurrection was everywhere and was believed by most people.

That’s not even close. Read scholars, read historians. When Christians started to claim Jesus’s physical resurrection, it was undeniably unprecedented. Period.

Pagans did not believe in physical resurrection at all. Greeks and Romans, in their thinking and mythology, do not hold to this hope or idea. Their literature is not full of physical resurrection ideas or physical resurrection beliefs. In his recent and massive study on pagan thinking and physical resurrection *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N. T. Wright concludes, “Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be a lie. Many believed that the dead were nonexistent, and outside of the Jewish faith, nobody believed in resurrection.”³²

Some Greeks or Romans believed in afterlife, in Hades or bliss, but they weren’t coming back. And most, if not all, people held that life was done, and more importantly, they didn’t want to come back. We need to get our heads wrapped around this. For the great golden age of Roman

³² N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Fortress, 2008), 25.

and Greek thinking for a thousand plus years, many people taught that the physical side of us was bad. It was a prison; it was temporary. The true you, the real you, the essence of you, is your spirit. Death was viewed as liberation. Why would you want physical resurrection since that's putting you back in the prison you got set free from? Simply stated, the millions that lived across the Roman Empire did not believe in or desire a physical resurrection of anybody.³³

Think about it. In Acts 17, Paul goes to the centre of Greek philosophy in his day. He goes to Athens, to a place called Mars Hill. It's a small bald hill across from the Acropolis. If you go to Athens today, you still can see Mars Hill. Paul preached on the physical resurrection of Jesus. And what was the response from the Greek philosophers in Paul's day? They said, "Oh, yeah, we know about resurrection. You're just using our old myths." Or they said, "We've heard about this in Babylonian and Egyptian literature, or in our own Greek stories, and you're just reinterpreting them."³⁴ No. They don't react that way at all. In Acts 17:32, when they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some of them sneered, laughed, mocked it, called it stupid, and others said, "We want to hear more of you on the subject."

But no one, absolutely no one said, "Ah, that's an old idea. You're recycling." They mocked it or were interested, but it was new. This gets at one of the biggest ideas floating out there in movies, podcasts, and books: Jesus's resurrection is just another religious story that every sort of religion held and was adapted by Christians. No, actually, it wasn't.

Some of you that are a little better read are going, "Well, it might not have been in classic Greek or Roman thinking, but older faiths held it, right?" I mean, what about Attis? What about Marduk or Tammuz from the ancient Babylonian religion? There are religions older than

³³ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 83–86.

³⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 81.

Christianity that talk about their gods rising. Well, yes, and a big no. Read them. They never talk about physical resurrection from the dead. They're vague; they're incomplete. They're nothing like the physical resurrection of Jesus.

We've talked about this in depth for weeks. Top Near Eastern scholars, after looking at the possible resurrection connections from the Jesus story to religions found like in Babylonian literature, have concluded that this popular belief that continually gets recycled every five or ten years on the internet is nothing but inference, surmise, guess, and conjecture.³⁵ It's a false narrative. There's no magnetic link.

Others go, "Okay, fine, Jon. Maybe not the Greeks, but the Egyptians talked about resurrection of the dead, and the Christians stole Egyptian mythology." Hmm. Well, let's listen to a top scholar interact with that idea.

We can note that the ancient Egyptian cult of Osiris is the only account of a god who survived death that predates Christianity. According to one version of the story—and there are several—Osiris was killed by his brother, chopped up into fourteen pieces, and scattered throughout Egypt. The goddess Isis collected and reassembled his parts and brought him back to life. Unfortunately, she was only able to find thirteen pieces. It is questionable whether Osiris was brought back to life on earth or seen by others as Jesus was. Osiris was given status as god of the gloomy underworld. So the picture we get of Osiris is that of a guy who does not have all of his parts and who maintains a shadowy existence as god of the mummies. As a friend, Chris Clayton, put it, Osiris's return to life was not a resurrection, but a zombification. Further, the hero of the account is not even Osiris, but Isis or their son Horus. This is far different than

³⁵ Samuel Noah Kramer and Rudolf Anthes, eds., *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Anchor, 1989).

Jesus's resurrection account, where he was the gloriously risen Prince of Life who was seen by others on earth before his ascension into heaven.³⁶

It's not even close. And some of you are like, "Well, I've read some Roman literature, and I'm pretty sure there is death and rising themes, like Jupiter or Hercules and others that rise to heaven on the horse Pegasus." Well, this is why history matters. The first real account of a dying and a rising god in Roman story telling is the god Adonis. That came out in AD 150. So the first story in Roman myth of a god rising in any form is written 120 years after the Jesus event, not before.³⁷

But again, more importantly, pagans did not believe in personal resurrection. The myths did not teach anything close to it.

Some of you are like, "Okay, yeah, but Jon, the Jews believed in physical resurrection, and Jesus was a Jew, and the original disciples were Jews, and all the first Christians were either Jews or converts to Judaism. So when they said that Jesus physically rose from the dead, of course they're going to accept it with no scrutiny at all, because that's a Jewish thing, and they're all Jewish, and they're all in." Again, that's not even close to being true.

Yes, you're right: Jews were the only ones 2,000 years ago that believed that all people would be physically raised from the dead, and they didn't view the body as some trap. Now, there was a group that didn't hold to the idea of resurrection, the Sadducees. But for the vast majority of Jews that held that resurrection was coming, they all agreed it would happen at the

³⁶ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 91.

³⁷ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 90. To deal with other myths/religious figures like Mithras, Adonis, Dionysus, Buddha, Krishna, or Zoroaster, read Lee Strobel's interview Dr. Edwin Yamauchi, who is an expert in the field of copycat gods. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus: A Journalist Investigates Current Attacks on the Identity of Christ* (Zondervan, 2007).

end of time, all at once, in the age to come, to every single person that ever existed. So when a small group of renegade Jews start preaching in Jerusalem that only one guy was risen from the dead, and the general resurrection hasn't happened yet, and the world's still in pain and sin, death is still around, the Romans are still in charge, and no one has set the Jews free, it violates a thousand years of Jewish understanding. You might be saying, "Jon, give it to me, simple." Okay. The idea of one person physically rising from the dead before the end of time does not exist in Jewish thinking anywhere. That's why N. T. Wright, that eminent British scholar, said, "As a historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity, unless Jesus rose from the dead, leaving an empty tomb behind him."³⁸

Here's an interesting story that might help. I was born in Oshawa, Ontario, just outside of Toronto, Canada, but I grew up in Ecuador in the '80s. This was before the internet; it was a fourth-world country, I think, according to the United Nations at that time. But more, I grew up on a volcano—yes, I actually did—in a large city called Quito. This city was 10,000 feet above sea level, so there was a lot less oxygen, probably up to 30 percent. So you were like, "Oh, that explains a lot about you." Thanks everyone, that's kind.

What does this have to do with Jesus and history? Stay with me. When we wanted to light a fire inside our home growing up, here's what we did: We went to the fireplace, piled in the wood, added the newspaper, and then douse all of it in kerosene—yes with gas—and light it in our house. When we would light it, there was a small puff of smoke and then a small fire would start.

³⁸ N T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus," *Christianity Today*, September 13, 1993, 26.

Many of you who know about fire are in disbelief. Why only a small fire? Because there was so much less oxygen in the room, it wasn't a threat. If I went home today and pulled out a bunch of wood and newspaper in my fireplaces in my home, just outside of Toronto, and doused them with gas and lit them, what would happen? Anyone? That's right, 9-1-1, Jon's dead, the house is burning down, massive explosion.

Are you making the connection to history yet? There's not just little oxygen in the room for the idea of Jesus's resurrection to start the fire, there's none. Jews don't believe what they're saying. Greeks and Romans didn't believe it. Egyptians didn't teach it. No one believed it; there's no way it could happen. And yet this little idea turned into a forest fire that's still burning today. And oh, by the way, do you know how serious it is? Why is it 2022 today? It's so massive that we divide history based on Jesus's life—BC, AD. Wow. This is why history matters.

Within fifty years before and after Jesus's life, there were a ton of so-called other Jewish messiahs. They came and said, "Oh, I'm from God." They inspired revolutions and great thinking, and then they died. Jewish history is littered with people claiming to be a messiah. And why does this matter for this conversation we are having? Well here's what another person wrote:

In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero has been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event; Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities and who managed to escape arrest themselves had two

options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option unless, of course, he was.³⁹

Let me just say this again: All the very first Christians were Jews or converts to Judaism. The very heart of the Jewish faith even today is that there's only one God and only he's to be worshipped. Anything else or anyone else that is worshipped is actually wrong; it's sinful, it's blasphemous, and it's actually the end of true faith.

Yet hundreds within months of the Jesus event, thousands within two years, and then tens of thousands of orthodox Jews from Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and throughout the Roman Empire are worshipping Jesus. What?

Remember, two weeks ago, we talked about the story of Thomas. Jesus appears to Thomas, and Thomas doesn't believe anything. He's totally out. And Jesus says to Thomas in John 20:27, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Then Thomas, as an orthodox Jew, looks at Jesus the Nazarene, whose dad is a carpenter, and says, "My Lord and my God." What?

Here's the summary: Pagans didn't believe in physical resurrection. Jews were not expecting it until the end of time. All the Christians were Jews or converts to Judaism, and within twenty years, Christians start preaching and writing public letters. They are worshipping Jesus as God in flesh and claiming Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead.

So what can explain this? Oh, the sceptic says, I know. It's all based on smoke and mirrors. It's a trick, it's a mistake, it's a lie, it's a conspiracy. Fair. But let's keep going. There's a lot of conspiracy theories out there. Here's the next one, let's call it,

³⁹ N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2014), 63.

Theory 2: Jesus only appeared to be dead.

“Yeah, yeah, Jesus lived, I’ll give you that. And he did some crazy stuff, and Jesus was even put on a cross. But after he was put in the tomb, he only appeared dead. He wasn’t really dead. He was probably in a coma. Then he got out of the tomb.” By the way, almost every Muslim on earth, over a billion people, believes this. They revere Jesus as an amazing prophet. They even believe he’s going to come back and judge humanity, but he never died like the gospels teach. Well, there’s lots of problems with this idea.⁴⁰ Have you researched flogging or Roman crucifixion this week? You’re like, “Um, no.”

Okay, I’m just going to stay with the flogging. I’m not even going to get to the really bad part. One person says this medically,

The injuries sustained during scourging were extensive. Blows to the upper back and rib area caused rib fractures, severe bruising in the lungs, bleeding into the chest cavity and partial or complete pneumothorax (puncture wound to the lung causing it to collapse). As much as 125 millilitres of blood could be lost. The victim would periodically vomit, experience tremors and seizures, and have bouts of fainting. Each excruciating strike would elicit shrieks of pain. The victim would be diaphoretic (profusely sweating) and exhausted, his flesh mangled and ripped, and would crave water because of the loss of fluid from bleeding and diaphoresis.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Kate Hill, “The Physical Death of Jesus Christ: The ‘Swoon Theory’ and the Medical Response,” *Faith and Science: Providence College Digital Commons* (May 2015).

⁴¹ Terry McDermott, “Catholic Insight,” The Physical Effects of the Scourging and Crucifixion of Jesus, April 19, 2025, <https://catholicinsight.com/2025/04/19/the-physical-effects-of-the-scourging-and-crucifixion-of->

That all happened before he carried his cross. Then he is publicly mocked. Oh, right, and then he has spikes put through his wrists and his feet. I love this simple response that John Stott wrote years ago,

After the rigours and pain of the trials, and mockery and flogging and crucifixion, Jesus could survive 36 hours in a stone tomb with neither warmth nor food nor medical care, that he could then rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder, which secured the tomb, and I'd add also break the seal that sealed it, and do this without disturbing the Roman guards, and then weak and sickly and hungry, he'd appeared to disciples in such a way to give them the impression he had vanquished death, that he could live somewhere, hiding for 40 days, making occasional surprise appearances, then finally disappearing without any explanation. Such naivety is more incredible than Thomas's unbelief.⁴²

Theory 3: Someone stole the body.

Remember a few weeks ago, we talked about how Jews dealt with their bodies differently than Romans, Greeks, or Egyptians? Bodies were bandaged tightly from the armpits to the ankles with strips of linen about a foot wide, and then they'd use glue in between the strips of linen and put spice in there to make the body smell good.

jesus/?fbclid=IwY2xjawLrtldleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETFTcTViWDVCR2I3a1J0N0ZrAR5qiDZgTkrNAyYxGcUtyAbGdoKLqIxUwWwej8I-p0SCWzFvUmaI6jPzfusN4w_aem_1Zp_e6RIWRNCC9WSvP0uGA.

⁴² John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 1st ed (Eerdmans, 1986), 49.

And we know from the biblical accounts seventy-five pounds of spice were used by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea as they wrapped Jesus's body, and then there was the head turban and the chin strap that kept his chin up.

Theory 3 is the very first thing that comes out by those who oppose the Christian faith.

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that, while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days, I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. (Matthew 27:62–66)

The first problem with theory 3 is that the Romans are guarding the body. These guards were not mall cops. They are the elite SWAT team of their day, and the theory is a bunch of disciples come and take out the special forces. Now, that's possible, that happens. But the disciples we know are afraid and depressed. They've lost everything they believe in. They're hiding in a sealed room because they are afraid of being killed by the Romans too.

Maybe the soldiers were sleeping, and the disciples snuck by the body, and . . . Well, we've got some problems with that too because if you read extrabiblical sources, a watch by Roman standards always usually had four men. One would take a turn while the others rested or slept, and sometimes more than four guards were on watch. Not only does the guard-rotation idea bring this into question, but the penalty for a Roman soldier on guard to sleep without permission is

death. So either the disciples either took out the special forces, or all the soldiers decided to sleep and risk their own lives? And remember, the disciples are afraid of the Romans.⁴³

The next problem is the stone. How could they move the stone without getting the attention of all the guards? By the way, the average weight of the stone is between 1,000 and 4,000 pounds. And you have to break the seal, which is breaking the law, and that's also punishable by the death penalty. Why risk it?

Like I've already shared, the Jewish faith formally and informally did not believe at all in only one person rising from the dead. And since, obviously, it's not the end of time, people would have laughed the disciples out of the room for trying to preach them this. It's anti-Jewish, and Jesus and his followers claimed that Jesus was a Messiah, the fulfilment of the Jewish faith and the King of the Jews.

Someone else says, "It wasn't the disciples. Robbers got the body." You're like, "So a group of robbers just happen to go to that tomb, and they move the stone, and they take out the SWAT team, and they steal the body?" It's hard to imagine, and some of the biblical accounts of the empty tomb really put this to a greater question mark.

In John 20, John and Peter ran to the tomb. John saw the strips of linen lying there. He did not go in. Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus's head. The cloth was lying in its place, separated from the linen. But if someone had come and taken the body, they would have taken the body with all the linens. Remember, Jesus's body, at this point, is wrapped tightly

⁴³ Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel Publications, 2004), 93–97.

with seventy-five pounds of glue and spice. So the original disciples run into the tomb and see all the linens and glue and spice in its proper place, but the body is not there.

If they wanted to do something really rude or disgusting, they would have unwrapped his body, which, of course, would have taken a ton of work and all the stuff would be strewn everywhere. But when they run in, there's the strips of linen from armpits down, in its place—all the glue, all the spices; the head piece is there, the little chin strap is there. It's like the body just evaporated.

Oh, and remember, Jesus was executed in Jerusalem, and all these moments after his death, his postmortem appearances, and the empty tomb are also all publicly pointed to and proclaimed in Jerusalem. If the enemies of Christianity wanted to kill these ideas, they could just go get his body. But they never did. Some say, “Oh, no, no, that's impossible. See, his body would be unrecognizable.” Well, no. First, if you produce a body, you'd at least shut down much of the story. And new evidence has come forward recently: “In the arid climate of Jerusalem, a corpse's hair, stature, and distinctive wounds would have been identifiable, even after 50 days.”⁴⁴

I love what two world-class scholars said about this:

If your mother says that you are an honest person, we may have reason to believe her, yet with reservation, since she loves you and is somewhat biased. However, if someone who hates you admits that you are an honest person, we have a stronger reason to believe what is being asserted, since potential bias does not exist. The empty tomb is attested not only by Christian sources. Jesus's enemies admitted it as well, albeit indirectly. Hence, we are not employing an argument

⁴⁴ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 70.

from silence. Rather than point to an occupied tomb, early critics accused Jesus's disciples of stealing the body (Matt. 28:12-13; Justin Martyr, Trypho 108; Tertullian, De Spectaculis 30). There would have been no need for an attempt to account for a missing body, if the body had still been in the tomb. When the boy tells his teacher that the dog ate his homework, this is all indirect admission that his homework is unavailable for assessment. Likewise, the earliest Jewish claim reported regarding Jesus's resurrection was to accuse the disciples of stealing the body, an indirect admission that the body was unavailable for public display. This is the only early opposing theory we know of that was offered by Jesus's enemies." This is so important. The only early opposing theory we know that was offered by Jesus's enemies.⁴⁵

Theory 4: They just went to the wrong tomb.

Guys, this is just easy. They went to the wrong tomb. I mean, "Hey, Siri, where is Jesus's tomb?" And Siri, by mistake, took them to Port Perry, and it was supposed to take them to Port Hope. You went into Google Maps, and Google Maps screwed up, and you ended up in the middle of nowhere. No, that's not what happened.

Scholars disagree with that theory:

No sources support the wrong tomb theory. If the women and disciples had gone to the wrong tomb, all that the Roman and Jewish authorities would have had to do would have been to go to the right tomb, exhume the body, publicly display

⁴⁵ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 71.

it, and clear up the misunderstanding. Yet, not a single critic is recorded to have even thought of this explanation for the Resurrection during the first few centuries of Christianity. The evidence suggests that the tomb's location was known, because a well-known man, Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus in his own tomb. If the burial by Joseph was an invention, then we might expect ancient critics to state that Joseph denied this version of the story. Or the critics could have denied the existence of Joseph if he had been a fictitious character. After all, Joseph was allegedly on the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish ruling body in the time of Jesus, and was therefore a public figure. Instead of questioning the place of burial, however, this group resorted to claiming that the disciples had stolen the body.⁴⁶

The women, Peter, and John all went to the wrong tomb? Not so much. Remember that James and Saul (we're going to talk about both next week), Peter, John, the women, and 500 others become followers not just because the tomb was empty. They claim to have seen Jesus, eaten with Jesus, touched Jesus, hugged Jesus, and been forgiven by Jesus. Suddenly, they became bold preachers of his death and resurrection. Thomas didn't believe. James thought his half-brother was crazy, mad, mentally ill, or demon possessed. And Paul, who was called Saul, was literally at the killing of the very first Christian and jailing people like me.

Theory 5: Everyone was high.

⁴⁶ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 98.

Everyone went down to the local cannabis shop and got high. They went to the forest and picked the wrong mushroom and saw a lot of wild, fun things together. This is everywhere on the internet, but actually, it's one of the weakest arguments.⁴⁷ One Oxford scholar says this,

Psychological medicine itself witnesses against these explanations. Hallucinations usually occur to people of a certain temperament, with a vivid imagination. But Matthew was a hard-headed, shrewd tax-collector; Peter and some of the others, tough fishermen; Thomas, a born sceptic; etc. They were not the sort of people one normally associates with susceptibility to hallucinations. Again, hallucinations tend to be of expected events. But none of the disciples was expecting to meet Jesus again. The expectation of Jesus's resurrection was not in their minds at all. Instead, there was fear, doubt and uncertainty—exactly the wrong psychological preconditions for a hallucination. Hallucinations usually recur over a relatively long period, either increasing or decreasing. But the appearances of Christ occurred frequently, over a period of forty days, and then abruptly ceased. Hallucinations do not occur to groups so yet Paul claims 500 people saw Jesus at once. In any case, hallucination theories are severely limited in their explanatory scope: they only attempt to explain the appearances. They clearly do not account for the empty tomb—no matter how many hallucinations the disciples had, they

⁴⁷ André Aleman and Frank Larøi, *Hallucinations: The Science of Idiosyncratic Perception* (American Psychological Association, 2008); Gary Habermas, "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: The Recent Revival of Hallucination Theories," *Christian Research Journal* 23 (2001).

could never have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem, if the nearby tomb had not been empty!⁴⁸

They don't account for the empty tomb. No matter how many hallucinations the disciples had, they could never preach the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem if the nearby tomb had not been empty.

Okay, so you're going, "You know what? Fine. It's simple. Jon, it's a lie. The authors all just made it up. It's conjecture. It's fantasy. It took off. They watched a Marvel film and thought Thor and Loki were real. Like, real? Come on."

I love this conversation I read years ago that was invented by a guy named Bernard Howard. He imagined Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John talking about how to build this lie together. I want you just to listen to it:

Luke: Let's have another round of drinks. I've an idea I want to run past you.

John: Sure. What's on your mind?

Luke: You probably heard about the Nazarene named Jesus who was crucified yesterday. I think he could be the perfect candidate for our fake Messiah project.

Mark: One tiny problem: he's dead!

Luke: Yes, but that means we'll control the narrative. We'll be in charge of his reputation.

Matthew: Who would follow a dead Messiah?

⁴⁸ John Lennox, "The Easter Miracle," Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (OCCA), <https://theocca.org/resources/the-easter-miracle/>.

Luke: Nobody, so we'll begin with a resurrection myth. We'll hire some thugs to fight off the soldiers guarding his tomb so we can get rid of the corpse.

John: But a missing corpse isn't the same as a resurrection.

Luke: You're right, so we'll have to persuade Jesus's friends to spend the next 30 years telling everyone he's risen from the dead, even if sticking to that story means they'll be imprisoned or killed.

Mark: Okay, then what?

Luke: Well, to make a conspiracy credible you need precise details. So we'll invent stories where Jesus interacts with people in specific locations.

Matthew: Won't people just disprove the stories by visiting those places and asking around?

Luke: There's no need to worry about that. We could invent a story about a synagogue ruler's terminally ill daughter being healed, give the synagogue ruler a name, set it all in a particular place, and still no one—absolutely no one, not even the people living in that place—would trouble to fact-check. Everyone would simply swallow the story whole!

Mark: It sounds like we're on safe ground there. But if we want people to follow Jesus, he'll need a message. People have been waiting for the Messiah for centuries. He's got to be worth listening to when he finally appears.

John: Good point. I'll cook up some deep quotes.

Luke: Thanks, John. Mark's right: you'll need to put profound wisdom on Jesus's lips that theological scholars can happily study for their entire careers.

John: Not a problem.

Luke: Guys, it will take us a while to put these documents together. We need to get communities of people worshiping Jesus in the meantime so that when our books come out they'll get a good reception.

Mark: There's a guy I know called Saul, he could help with that.

Luke: Saul the Pharisee? I can't imagine him getting involved with this kind of thing.

Mark: Trust me, he's our man. I see him leaving behind everything he's been trained to do and planting congregations of Jesus worshipers throughout the Roman Empire, whatever it costs him personally—beatings, shipwrecks, and the like.

Matthew: Awesome. But Luke, can you just remind me, what's the point of all this? I mean, what exactly do we get out of this?

Luke: Come on, Matt, it will be so much fun. We'll watch people being brutally martyred, and we'll know they've been deceived by our dishonest fiction! What's not to like about that?

John: I agree with Luke. This is definitely worth years of effort on our part. Count me in.

Mark: Me too.

Matthew: I'll do it if my name comes first in all the promotional material.

Luke: Deal. Let's get to work.⁴⁹

Some of you are genuine followers of Jesus, and you might be struggling or doing well, but you are committed. I just want to say to you, your faith is informed trust. It's real. It's based on a real person. He's for you. He's with you. He's alive. What he has done in your life is real. It's

⁴⁹ Bernard N. Howard, "If Richard Dawkins Is Right," TGC (US Edition), November 7, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/if-richard-dawkins-is-right/>.

not smoke and mirrors. You didn't just cross your fingers. It's real. Be encouraged, keep going, no matter what the culture says. No matter what's floating around on the internet, it's true.

Some of you who are really wrestling, really struggling—maybe you grew up in the Christian faith and aren't sure anymore, or you're trying—I just want to say to you, slow down. Really listen to what people are saying, really do your homework, because the more that you study and the more that you understand when the Gospels were written and what was at stake, the more you begin to realize that this is true. In some of you, sceptical, unbelieving, doubting, wanting to believe but can't for many different reasons. I just want to say to you: Look, I hope you're beginning to see that this is not smoke and mirrors. Where there's smoke, there's fire. This isn't a redirect. This isn't a deep fake project or an Instagram redo. There's a lot of smoke. Jesus is the most influential person in history. Over two billion people worship him today. There's a lot of smoke, but where there's smoke, there actually is fire.

Next week, we're going to walk down the path even further about why this shouldn't happen. We're going to talk about the role of women in society. We're going to talk about James, Jesus's half-brother. We're going to talk about Saul, who became Paul. Then we're going to talk about Jesus's own claims. When you pair his claims, which are audacious and crazy and wild, with his character, that leads even further to the idea that Jesus is who he claimed and what happened to him is true. That's why Saul, who became Paul, again wrote 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" (Romans 10:9). That's when you cross the line of faith, and all of this becomes personal. Like I said last week, it's one thing to know about Swiss Chalet fries. (Or your favourite food.) It's another thing to hear people talk about it. It's another thing to observe someone eat it. It's another thing for you to experience it. This is the process. "It doesn't exist. I've heard it exists. It

might exist. I see other people talking about it. I've now seen it. I've now encountered." That's the trajectory of what's taking place with some of you.

So let's just pray like this: Number one, thanks, Jesus, that you're alive, that you're real, that you're hopeful, your life is hopeful and hope giving. Encourage the many, many, many people listening today that this is true and real and supported and accessible. And you're alive, and there's hope beyond this moment. For others, Lord, who are struggling and wrestling and aren't sure, cut through their doubt and cut through some of their deconstruction and begin to reconstruct and build back into this faith in you. Begin to repair what's right, what's beautiful, what's biblical.

And for other people who are doubting or skeptical or don't believe or want to believe, would you not only help them wrestle out the facts? Would you also open their minds? Because you know what, God, you know this about us. We need you to even help us intellectually engage with the facts, to move into trust and relationship, help people across that line when they can't even do it.

We look forward to what you're going to do over the next seven days in our lives, whether this is happening now or in years from now. Thanks for this in Jesus's name. We all say amen.

I look forward to seeing you next week as we continue to wrestle well through this really significant conversation. See you next week.