

## ***Making Disciples Who Make Disciples***

Ministry year 2021-2022

Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series

Pastor David Palmer

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

**TEXT: Mathew 27:57-28:15**



This Sunday marks the culmination of Holy Week. It's the ending, without which the entire story could not be told. Without the climactic events of the first Easter, Holy Week would not be different from any other week. Without the climactic events of the first Easter, Christianity would not exist as a recognizable religion. Without the climactic events of the first Easter, people would scarcely know the name of Jesus, much less call upon His name for salvation, forgiveness, and everlasting life.

So what happened? What happened the first Easter, and how can we know for sure? Holy Week is a dramatic week to be seen in its entirety. Holy Week began on Palm Sunday with Jesus' royal presentation to the massive pilgrimage crowds of Jerusalem. As He entered the city, the crowds proclaimed:

*"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

Jesus entered the temple on Monday and cleared it out. He said:

*"My house shall be called a house of prayer."*

On Tuesday, Jesus taught publicly and interpreted the Scriptures in the hearing of hundreds of thousands of people. When He was asked, *"Which is the greatest commandment?"* He replied:

*"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

On Wednesday, Jesus resolved to go to the cross. Religious leaders resolved to betray Him. Mary resolved to anoint Him for burial. And Judas resolved to betray Him.

On Thursday, Jesus, with divine institution, celebrated the Passover, that great remembrance of redemption. He celebrated the Passover and interpreted the symbols of the meal around His own imminent death. He broke bread and told the disciples this was His body. He drank the cup and said:

*"This is the New Covenant in My blood."*

He instituted the Lord's Supper and went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray:

*"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."*

Jesus is arrested, betrayed.

Friday turns to profound lamentation. Jesus is brought before a religious trial and condemned on the charge of blasphemy. He is brought before the Roman governor Pilate and condemned as a danger to the state, charged with sedition. Pilate determines to crucify Him. Jesus is led outside the city. He is crucified at 9:00 A.M. He is mocked on the cross by the very ones He came to save. From noon to 3:00 P.M. in the middle of the day, the sky turns dark for all to see, as the wrath of God is poured out against the sin of the world—yours, mine. Jesus cries out with a loud voice and yields up His spirit. The centurion who stood at the base of the cross says:

*"Truly this was the Son of God!"*

Jesus is taken down from the cross. His body is entrusted to the care of Joseph of Arimathea, who had become a disciple of Jesus. He asked Pilate for the body, and Joseph took the body. He wrapped it in a clean linen cloth. He laid it in his very own tomb, a new tomb, freshly hewn from the rock, and he sealed the tomb with a large stone weighing four tons. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite.

On Saturday, hopeful expectation, Jesus' body is lovingly laid in the tomb. The next day (that is, after the day of preparation, which is Friday) now on Saturday, the chief priests (religious leaders) come to Pilate. They say:

*"Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while He was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'"*

Notice that their testimony concedes that Jesus is dead. They asked Pilate to order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples steal the body and tell the people He's risen from the dead, and the last fraud be worse than the first. Pilate entrusts to them a Roman guard. The Greek text says, "You have a *custodia*," which is a Roman cohort of soldiers, professional soldiers under Pilate's care and command, and he says, "Make it as secure as you know." They sealed the tomb with a wax seal pinned against the walls of the tomb on the

outside, secure across the stone, a wax seal with the imperium of Rome marked upon it and a professional group of soldiers guarding it in front. Hopeful Saturday ends with Jesus dead, laid in the tomb.

After the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. When they arrived at the tomb there was a great earthquake, and an angel of the Lord had descended from heaven. He rolled back the stone, and he sat on it, a detail which I love. He sat on the stone which he had rolled back. *“His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.”* The professional soldiers, who saw the angel themselves, *“became like dead men.”* The angel addressed the women with words that we all need to hear:

*“Do not be afraid, for I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said.”*

The angels invite the women to *“Come, see the place where He lay”* and then instructs them to go and *“tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead.”* They go quickly from the tomb with fear and awe and great joy, running to tell the disciples. On their way, Jesus Himself meets them—alive—and issues the best greeting the world has ever received. *“Greetings!”* Jesus says to the women, and they fall at His feet and worship. Jesus says to them this same word that we all need to hear:

*“Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.”*

As they were going, some of the guard at the tomb went to the chief priests, religious leaders, and told them what had taken place. The religious leaders took counsel and decided to bribe the soldiers. They bribed the soldiers and told them:

*“Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’”*

That's not what happened, but they were bribed to say that's what happened. They even said:

*“And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”*

These professional soldiers took the money, and they did as they were told. They said His disciples stole the body while they were sleeping, and that story still persists.

That's what happened at the end of Holy Week, and the question for us today is: “How can we be sure?” We live in a time where certainty seems to slip from our grasp. We often wonder: How can I know if this is the case if I can find another account that seems contradictory? What sources can I trust? Can we really know anything for sure, or is truth up for grabs? How can we be sure of this? The climax of Holy Week is the most important event ever in the world. I want you to journey with me, because I want us to know that we **can** know about this. We **can** know

the truth of the climax of Holy Week.

I want to invite you to follow with me a paradigm, a way of thinking about this. This was developed by Dr. Gary Habermas. He's authored 40 books, which is impressive. Twenty of those books are about the resurrection. His wife died from cancer, and Gary has become a committed believer, a very careful thinker. He has devoted his life to this critical question: "How can we know if Jesus rose from the dead?" If Jesus rose from the dead, that has implications for all of us, not only all of us here in person and all of us online; it has implications for the entire world. It's the most important question. Gary is working on his magnum opus right now. It's the climactic work of his career, and it's going to be close to 5,000 pages. It's all about the resurrection of Jesus. He suggests what has been called a minimal facts approach. It's a set of things that we **can** know. I want you to know these things today, because if Jesus rose from the dead, that means something for all of us. These four facts, minimal facts, have two criteria. One is that they have to be confirmed by several independent sources, and, two, the vast majority of scholars, even critical scholars, must recognize the historical nature of these facts. There are four of them: (1) Jesus died by crucifixion. (2) Jesus' tomb was later found empty. (3) His followers had real experiences that they thought were actual experiences of the risen Jesus. (4) There has been explosive growth of the Christian faith.

Sometimes people believe that the resurrection can't be investigated, that the events of the resurrection are not available, but they are. They are available for anyone who wants to examine this and look into it. The resurrection of Jesus is a miraculous event, absolutely. But the evidence of it is not miraculous. None of these facts is inaccessible or closed to honest investigations. Let's look at them together. I want to write them on your hearts:

**Fact one: Jesus died by crucifixion.** No other fact surrounding the life of Jesus is better attested than His death by crucifixion. The crucifixion is included in every gospel narrative. It is also confirmed by several non-Christian sources. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions the crucifixion. The Roman historian Tacitus mentions Jesus' being crucified. Even the Greek writer Lucian of Samosata mentions Jesus' crucifixion. The Talmud mentions His crucifixion. Josephus says, "Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us ... condemned Him to the cross." John Dominic Crossan, a critical scholar, founder of the Jesus seminar, a hostile witness, said himself, "That Jesus was crucified is as sure as anything historical event can ever be."

Some skeptics contend that Jesus didn't really die, that He just appeared to die, that He lost consciousness and merely appeared to be dead and later revived. This objection is problematic. First, it doesn't take seriously everything we know about crucifixion. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* concludes that interpretations based on the assumption that

Jesus did not die on the cross are at odds with modern medical knowledge. Jesus' faking His resurrection goes against everything we know about His ethical ministry. Roman soldiers were professional killers, and everything we know about the torture and method of crucifixion confirms Jesus' death. A half dead, half resurrected Messiah would hardly inspire the disciples. David Strauss says:

“It is impossible that a being who had emerged half-dead out of the sepulcher, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging ... could have given to the disciples the impression that He was a Conqueror of death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry.”

Fact one, Jesus died. Even the testimony of the religious leaders said, *“He said this while He was still alive.”* Jesus died, Beloved. He died for the sins of the world. He died.

**Fact two: Jesus' tomb was later found empty.** Something happened to the body of Jesus. Not only was Jesus publicly executed in Jerusalem, His post-death appearances were proclaimed there. This would have been impossible with a decaying corpse still in the tomb, wouldn't it? William Lane Craig says, “It would have been foolish to believe that a man was raised from the dead when his body was still in the grave.”

All four Gospels attest to the burial of Jesus by Joseph and place women at the tomb as witnesses to the empty tomb. The account of the empty tomb is attested by multiple sources. Historian Michael Grant, author of 70 books, who held the Chair of Humanities at Edinburgh University for decades, says that the historian cannot justifiably deny the empty tomb.

The earliest objection to fact two is that the disciples stole the body. This is the conspiracy theory that's in our passage. It's the earliest recorded disinformation campaign. It's a charge by religious leaders that the disciples stole the body. It proposes that Jesus' followers stole the body, unbeknownst to anyone. They lied about the resurrection, and they pulled off the greatest hoax in history. But this theory does not explain well the simplicity of the resurrection narratives. It doesn't explain why the disciples would perpetuate a story that they stole the body. An explanation that incriminates oneself is at odds with conspiracy theory.

More deeply, this theory is anachronistic. That is, it doesn't actually fit inside the mindset of first century Jews. There was no expectation in first century Judaism of a suffering servant Messiah, who would be shamefully executed by the nations as a criminal and rise again Himself alone before the final resurrection of the people at the end of time. As N. T. Wright puts it:

“If your favorite Messiah got Himself crucified, then you either went home or else you got yourself a new Messiah. But the idea of stealing Jesus' corpse and saying God raised Him

from the dead is hardly one that would have entered the minds of the disciples.”

Jesus' tomb was empty.

**Fact three: Jesus made post-resurrection appearances.** Jesus' followers had real experiences that they thought were actual appearances of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul recounts that many people saw Jesus. He says:

*“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas [the Aramaic name of Peter], 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. Then He appeared to James [His earthly brother], then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.”*

As with the crucifixion and the empty tomb, the post-resurrection appearances are attested by multiple early sources. William Lane Craig makes it certain:

“The evidence makes it certain that on separate occasions different individuals and groups had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead. This conclusion is virtually indisputable.”

Some people will say: This couldn't be; the disciples just had a vision. But the consistency of the description is that Jesus was physically, bodily alive. Visions are private experiences, aren't they? They are not group events. A group of people may be in the frame of mind to have a vision, but each vision experience is individual. A vision does not explain the disciples' belief in His bodily resurrection. For someone in the ancient world, visions of a deceased person are not evidence that they are alive, but evidence that they are dead. The disciples had visions of Jesus, and if they had been projecting these visions, they would have described Jesus as in heaven or in Abraham's bosom. Such visions would not have generated belief in His bodily resurrection. The disciples not only proclaimed that they had seen Jesus raised, they sincerely believed it. They sincerely believed that they had seen Jesus resurrected, so much so that they were willing to suffer, and they were willing to die. When they stood before courts they knew had the power to condemn them to death, they whispered in the ears of those courts, *“He's alive.”* Many people will die for what they believe to be true, but no one willingly suffers and dies for what they know to be false.

**Fact four: There has been explosive growth of Christian faith.** This is astonishing, isn't it? Within one generation of the death of Jesus, Christianity spread. It spread to Europe. It spread to Africa. It spread to Asia. Early Christians began to translate the Scriptures into the languages

around them. The explosive growth of Christianity needs an adequate cause, an explanation. Where exactly did the Christian faith come from, and what explains its origin? Some say that Christianity just emerged from within Second Temple Judaism, but remember that the Jewish concept of resurrection was one of a final, general resurrection of all. Jesus' resurrection alone is unique. Others say that Christianity is just a pastiche of paganism, just combining the motif of the dying and rising God found in pagan religions. But pagan mythology is the wrong context for Jesus and His disciples. The most compelling explanation is that the disciples truly saw the resurrected Jesus. Only an event of this magnitude could turn scared, scattered, and skeptical disciples, with no prior concept and no expectation of a crucified and risen Messiah, into courageous proclaimers of the gospel. This is hard to explain otherwise. This is what Peter boldly declared in the very first Christian sermon ever preached.

Recently we were in Boston to teach. I was teaching a class on how to interpret the Bible, and I was teaching a passage from Deuteronomy 30 and its use in Romans 10, that the Word of God is near us, and *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* We stayed an extra day and made the most of that extra day because I was able to run a half-marathon with our son. We hadn't had a chance to look at the route beforehand, and three miles in the route took a turn. It was Sunday morning, and as the route took a turn, I saw cars parked all along the streets. I ran closer, and all of a sudden I saw this church. My eyes filled with tears to see the people coming and filling the church. My eyes filled with tears, because that church was where I preached the very first sermon I had ever preached in my life, 25 years ago. People were worshiping Jesus and proclaiming Him. I wanted to run into the narthex and just wave at the pastor. I preached Christ for the first time there, and I've preached Him over a thousand times since.

The first Christian sermon ever preached concludes with Peter's declaring:

*“This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.... Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

Beloved, Easter Sunday is the climax of Holy Week because we mark the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus, the bodily resurrection, is the best explanation for what we know. Jesus died by crucifixion. His tomb was later found empty. Jesus was seen in multiple post-resurrection appearances, and those who saw Him shared Him with all the world. This is the origin of Christian faith. Jesus Christ, promised Messiah—He is the central figure of Holy Week. He is a suffering King, a saving King, a resurrected King. When we retrace Holy Week in our soul, we move from anticipation to confrontation, decision, lamentation, expectation, and finally, this morning, into celebration. Holy Week is the most important week in world history. It

is the most important week in the Bible. It is the most important week in all four Gospels. It begins on Palm Sunday and leads us to the cross and the empty tomb, and we see Jesus crucified, and we see Jesus resurrected. I want to declare in your hearing this morning with every fiber of my being: This is what I believe happened. This is how I believe that we can be sure. This is why I am a Christian, although I grew up without Him. This is why I desire you to be one as well. This is why, in Jesus Christ, we have a living hope. This is why, in Jesus Christ, we have the hope of forgiveness, hope of darkness turned to light, hope of work completed, hope of boundless grace, hope of freedom, hope of broken chains, hope of everlasting life, hope in Jesus Christ. I invite you to receive Him as triumphant Lord, to believe in Him, and to live for Him today. Hallelujah! Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we come before You now, this Easter Sunday. You are enthroned in glory. Lord, we praise You for the Holy Week that takes us from Your dramatic entrance into Jerusalem to Your suffering on the cross, to Your empty tomb and Your bodily resurrection. Lord, Your resurrection vindicates Your teaching. It verifies that Your promises are true. Lord, You said, *"After three days, I will rise."* Lord, Your resurrection means that Your Word can be trusted, and so we also trust Your Word that says, *"If anyone believes in Me, he will not perish but have everlasting life."* Lord, we open our hearts to You this Easter Sunday. Be enthroned within. Allow us to receive You, to believe in You, and to live our lives for You. We give You glory. We give You honor. We give You praise.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.