

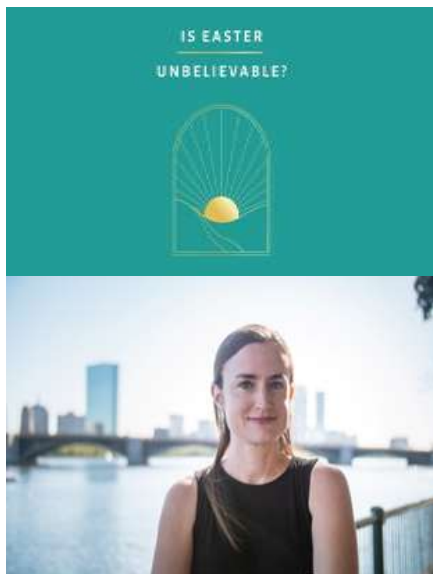
***Following Jesus***  
Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series  
Pastor David Palmer  
April 6, 2025

**TEXT: Matthew 16:13-28**



Good morning, beloved. We continue this morning in our series this spring on “Following Jesus.” This month of April, we follow Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew through the events that will take us into Holy Week. This is the most important week of the year for Christians. According to Christian faith it is the most important week and set of events that have ever happened on the planet.

As we get ready to journey toward Easter, we have invited you to read as a companion with us



Rebecca McLaughlin's short book, *Is Easter Unbelievable?* You might think immediately in reaction to that question, “Of course Easter is believable!” But many people don't think that. There was a survey done in the UK recently that said that 40% of the people in the United Kingdom were not sure that Jesus even existed as a historical figure. That is an alarming number in one sense, but we have to remember that 40% of people here say they have no personal connection to Christ at all. Thinking about that this week, what struck me was that when Jesus taught the disciples—what we are looking at this morning—that number was 99%. In the whole world, no one knew who Jesus was. So we have to ask, how has that number come

down so far? And there is still work to be done. Rebecca Mc McLaughlin was here last year. It was delightful to have her speak on friendship. In this short little book, she frames the topic “Is Easter unbelievable?” around four additional questions. We will look at these questions together over the weeks of April as we follow Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

The first question is: **Is Jesus' life historical?**

Are we looking at real events, real places? Was Jesus a real person? This morning we will see that answering the question “Was Jesus a real person?” is just the beginning. If that is true, then it requires us to ask, “Then who was He?”

Next week we will look at the second question: **Is Jesus' death ethical?**

Jesus will teach that He will suffer and die, the righteous for the unrighteous. Is that right? Is Jesus' death and its consequent application ethical?

The third question, on Easter Sunday: **Is Jesus' resurrection credible?**

Is it believable? Christians believe that Jesus, who was publicly crucified, was bodily raised. Some people will say, “Oh, the disciples had a vision, or dream, and they thought they saw Jesus.” But that is not the consistent testimony of the New Testament. The New Testament says that these men who knew what it looked like when someone died, said that they saw Him alive.

Finally, the fourth question: In light of all of this, **is Jesus' offer of eternal life desirable?**

Is it something that you should want? Is it something that is worth sharing?

Historical? Ethical? Credible? Desirable? Rebecca McLaughlin writes in the intro to *Is Easter Unbelievable?*:

“I don’t know how you feel about Jesus today. I don’t know whether Christianity sounds to you like clothes you’ve long outgrown, like an outfit in which you wouldn’t be seen dead, like clothing from a culture not your own, or like something you used to wear and wish you could again.

“I don’t know whether you’ve been hurt by Christians or seen Christians hurting others. I don’t know if you’re living your best life now or trudging through a trench of hopelessness.

“None of us come to questions about faith without feelings: good or bad, or just indifferent. But if we’re honest, we all long for a hope beyond the grave—some kind of happy ending for ourselves and those we love.”

The events of Jesus' final teaching of discipleship address these deepest questions. So let's listen to Him.

Matthew 16:13 begins:

*“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”*

This is a critical question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

The district of Caesarea Philippi is a city in the northern boundary of Israel, just beneath the modern boundary of Lebanon. There are two Caesareas in Israel at the time of Christ. There is Caesarea Maritima, which is the Caesarea that was built on the coast by Herod the Great, an extraordinary city jutting out into the Mediterranean, building a harbor where there was no harbor. You can still see the ruins of it today. But there is another Caesarea, and it is not the one built by Herod. It is the Caesarea of Philip, his son. This Caesarea was also built to honor Caesar, but it was a different city. It was an out-of-the-way place. It was the kind of place that you might go as a retreat from the crowds. It is a characteristic of the historicity of the New Testament to be accurate in even these small ways, like place names or people's names. I am going to be asking you in a few weeks to believe the New Testament witness that this dead Man was seen alive, and I am going to ask you to risk your eternal life on the truth of that statement. It is helpful to see that the people who are asking you to believe that are also people who are trustworthy in the details of names and places.

It is in this place that Jesus asks this question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The expression “Son of Man” is not a moniker for a human being; it is an allusion to the Old Testament. In Daniel chapter 7, Daniel had seen a vision of God enthroned in glory and the heavenly court all around Him. And as he looked at God enthroned, the Ancient of Days, all of a sudden Daniel saw one like a Son of Man approaching God. In Daniel 7:13, we read:

*“...and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came One like a Son of Man, and He came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His Kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*

The Son of Man is a divine human figure who comes to God and receives an everlasting Kingdom that will never perish, to whom all nations rightly belong. He will rule the world in righteousness. It is Jesus' favorite way of referring to Himself.

When He asked the disciples, the disciples replied with their market research, and we read their report in Matthew 16:14:

*“And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’”*

They report that some people say that Jesus is John the Baptist. And this is attested: Herod Antipas says this because he was the one responsible for killing John the Baptist. Now here is this prophetic voice speaking, and Herod is a little terrified that, as in some Shakespeare play, John has come back to life. Other people say that Jesus is Elijah. Why would they say that? At the end of the Old Testament, God says that He would send one like Elijah to call people back to Himself in repentance, right before He arrives. In a traditional Passover Seder, the youngest child of the meal gets up and goes to the door of the house and opens the door to see if Elijah is standing there. Others said that Jesus was like Jeremiah—calling for national repentance, predicting the destruction of the temple—or one of the prophets.

Then Jesus says to the disciples, “What about you?” In Matthew 16:15, Jesus asks the disciples:

*“But who do you say that I am?”*

The “you” in verse 15 is plural, so it is a group question, which is a little safer. In Matthew 16:16, Simon Peter steps forward and confesses, I imagine with trembling lips:

*“‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”*

This declaration is what Christianity is. It is people who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Savior, that He is uniquely the Son of the living God.

Jesus commends Peter for this. He receives this declaration of Jesus' identity. It is not enough to say that Jesus existed as a person; we can say that about Julius Caesar. But Peter says Jesus is this Christ, promised, expected. Jesus commends him. In Matthew 16:17, Jesus says:

*“‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven.’”*

“Blessed are you,” He says, recalling the blessings of the Beatitudes, where Jesus confers the state of blessing. “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!” Son of Jonah. *Bar* is the Aramaic word for “son” and Jonah, the name of one of the Old Testament prophets. This has created some scholarly controversy because in John 1:42 and 21:15, Simon is said to be the son of John. So is he the son of John or is he the son of Jonah? Maybe this is the Aramaic equivalent of John. Maybe Jesus gives a nickname for Peter's father John and names him Jonah. There are actually four very possible solutions for this, and I am not going to give them all. It is not a real substantive issue. What is substantive is the blessing, and that Jesus says, “You can't see this; you can't see who I am without God working in your life.” This takes a great load off us, on the one hand because it means that you and I cannot cause someone or compel someone to see Christ for who He is. It also means that you cannot take credit for your own Christian faith.

What it does mean is that God the Father delights to make His Son known. When He allows us to see Him as He really is, we have life, we are blessed.

In response to Peter's statement about who *He* is, Jesus then, in turn, tells Peter who *he* is. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus tells Peter:

*"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

"I tell you, you are Peter." This is a nickname: *Petros*; rock. It means that he was sturdy and reliable, secure, someone you could pound on without injuring. Jesus says that you are Peter, this rock, and *"on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."* We find out who *we* are, dear friends, only when we know who Jesus is. Do you know that? We can search for who we are and we can find ourselves in all kinds of ways, but in the gospel vision it is only when we see clearly who Jesus is that we find out who we are. This is very true in my own life, though it didn't lead to a change of name. I suspect this is true for a lot of you, too. We can build our identities in all kinds of ways, in our careers, our ethnicity, our achievements, our competence, our relationships, all kinds of things, but it is only when we see who Jesus is that He reflects back to us who we are. Jesus says, "I will build My church, My assembly..."—remember that the church is not the building here; it is a group of people, and Jesus is the Great Builder. It is as Peter is confessing Jesus to be Messiah that Jesus says, *"I will build My church, and the power of hell will not prevail against it."* There is nothing supernatural about Peter, but it is on Peter, as a real historical figure who sees Jesus' true identity, that Jesus builds His people. When Peter talks about "the rock" in his own writings later, he loves to call Jesus The Rock, The Rejected Stone, chosen and precious, and *"whoever believes in Him will never be put to shame."*

Christianity is named after Jesus Christ. That may seem obvious to us, but it was new in the first century. Yet as the naming of Christianity is something recognizable, it is really important to me this morning that Christianity is nothing less and nothing more than the confession of Jesus as the Christ. You cannot add to Christianity without detracting from it. You cannot minimize the requirement that to be recognizably Christian is to say, "Jesus is the Christ."

Pastor Scott and I love talking about the Bible. And now we've been recording these conversations for your joy and pleasure. If you have enjoyed listening to our podcast, *The Word Revealed*, we just recorded a couple of episodes about the evidence for Jesus outside of the New Testament, and I commend those to you. Roman writers, like Tacitus, say that Christians are named for this man Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius, at the hands of "one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate," was crucified. Josephus, the Jewish historian, says the tribe of

Christians, so named for Christ, still exists to this day. He is writing about sixty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus builds a people on the confession of His identity.

Then Jesus tells Peter, in Matthew 16:19:

*"I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven."*

This language of binding and loosening is language that is used in Judaism to describe "Where am I duty-bound to God's command and where am I loosened from it, or I fulfilled it?" This doesn't have anything to do with binding and loosing spirits. What it has to do with is the discipleship community recognizing where God's Word is to be lived out and kept. This function of binding and loosing fills the discourse of the Pharisees, and yet Jesus now applies it to the disciples. What is He really saying? He is looking at the disciples—which includes you and me—and saying, "It's on you to study the Scripture and know how to live it out. It's not for you to go ask someone else. It's for you as a community." Studying God's Word and learning to live it out is a vital aspect of discipleship. Am I my brother's keeper? How do I love my enemy? How should we pray? What does it mean to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength? These are questions that disciples ask, and disciples answer together in community, studying God's Word.

Then Jesus surprises us. We read in Matthew 16:20:

*"Then He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ."*

This gives us pause. "Tell no one that I am the Christ." I imagine the disciples coming to a sudden stop right here. Some of you are thinking, "Our discipleship definition is totally wrong, Pastor! 'Disciples are committed followers of Jesus who learn to obey Him over time *and say nothing about Him to anyone!*'" Why does Jesus say this? Jesus says this because the disciples at this moment have a cross-less Christ. The disciples at this moment in their discipleship do not have the final part of Jesus' saving mission. They realize Who He is. They never wondered if He was a historical figure; they lived with Him and walked with Him. Now they see He is the Messiah. He is the Christ, and in Matthew 16:21, Matthew tells us:

*"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*

For us, two thousand years later, we live clearly on the other side of the cross and the empty tomb. Sometimes I think it is challenging for us to appreciate just how startling this is. The King of Glory, the One who came to save, is to suffer? And die? How can this be?

Peter steps forward. In Matthew 16:22, Matthew, who was there, says:

*"And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord! This shall never happen to You.'"*

Peter pulls Jesus aside and he says something very interesting. The *ESV* says, *"Far be it from You, Lord."* Many English versions say something like this: "Impossible!" "Never!" "No, Lord!" The text says, "May God have mercy!" He says, "God have mercy, Lord! This will not happen!" It raises a question for us: Is Jesus's death something to be avoided? Is it a sign of disfavor? Or is it actually the very design and plan of God? The only English version I could find that brought this forward clearly is the complete Jewish Bible translation by David Stern. He uses Peter's Aramaic name, Kefa. His translation reads:

*"Kefa took Him aside and began rebuking Him, 'Heaven be merciful, Lord! By no means will this happen to You!'"*

And it just hangs there over the Gospel narrative. As Matthew tells the Gospel story he comes in the end to say that that prayer, "God be merciful," is actually answered by Jesus' dying. Not by His avoiding it. God's mercy for you and for me, the words he uses here, is related to the same noun of the mercy seat, describing the top of the Ark of the Covenant.

In Matthew 16:23, Jesus turns to Peter and, somewhat alarmingly to read for us, says:

*"Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

As can happen so easily to us after following Jesus, Peter flops. He flops, and Jesus tells him, "You are a stumbling block, a hindrance to Me because you are not setting your mind on the things of God. You are thinking about greatness as people do, not as God does." Greatness, according to Jesus, is to be the servant of all. Greatness, according to Jesus, is to give your life as a ransom for many. Power, according to Jesus, is to give your power for the sake and life of others. It is the word of the cross. John Meier, the Catholic theologian, says this beautifully:

*"Peter, or any church leader who does not accept the whole message of Jesus, especially the message of the cross, becomes a demonic spirit, an adversary of Jesus and his church."*

So if you want a Jesus without a cross, that is the devil's design. The devil hates the cross because it is the cross that will destroy him and silence his accusation. We cannot have a cross-less Christ to follow.

Jesus ends this passage by saying that the cross is in fact the template and design for us, too. He told the disciples in Matthew 16:24:

*"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow*

Me.”

“If anyone would come after me...” That is the language of discipleship. “Then let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” That is the call. Deny myself, pick up the cross, and follow Jesus, all interrelated. Dear friends, even though I have been in ministry over twenty years, this still stops me. It never stops stopping me in my tracks when Jesus says, “If you want to follow Me, start with denying yourself. Start with picking up the sin of the world and carrying it, and then you follow Me.” That is arresting. It strikes terror. It is an image of death. It is an image of dethroning self. It is such an arresting image that Jesus, in His kindness and grace, in four different metaphors explains why. Isn’t that kind? Jesus just dropped a theological grenade into our sense of self-protection, and then He says, “Let Me explain this a little bit more.” So kind.

Four pictures. Four reasons. Four exclamations. Let's look at these together so we can hold onto that word: “If you want to come after Me, deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Me.”

The first one is a paradox. In Matthew 16:25, Jesus says:

*“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”*

Whoever would save his life will in fact lose it. If we live our lives trying to protect ourselves and keep ourselves at a safe distance from relationships, never taking any risks, it's like saying, “Well, I'm never going to the gym because I would never want to have sore muscles,” and thinking that you are going to have a healthy life. It's like saying, “I'm never going to the grocery store because I might get in a car accident on the way.” Things aren’t going to go well. Jesus says if we try to protect ourselves, then we are going to end up with less and less and less of ourselves. Isn’t that a paradox? You think, “Hey! I'm trying to protect what I have.” And Jesus says if you live that way, then you are going to have less and less and less. This is so true. And so is the converse. According to Jesus, if we lose ourselves in Christ, we gain ourselves. We know ourselves. We live for something so much bigger than just ourselves. We become part of God's growing family, and we find ourselves. So Jesus, with this paradox, the first way He draws a box of grace around this image of the cross, says that if you want to protect yourself, then lose yourself in Me, and you will find yourself.

The second reason, or explanation, in Matthew 16:26, is a marketplace image:

*“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”*

What’s the profit? What if you gain a six figure salary? Or you become a millionaire? Or let’s say you become a billionaire. Or let's say you gain the whole world. Just try to imagine that. Gain



the whole world, but you lost your soul. Did you come out ahead? This is a temptation, to live for success, and measuring that success in monetary terms, and assessing our value in the world by what we earn. But Jesus says what if you earned everything there was to earn and you lost your soul? You would lose.

The third reason why the cross is so central: Jesus asks us, what would the ransom price be? In the last part of Matthew 16:26, Jesus asks:

*“Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”*

What would a person give in exchange? The *ESV* says “in return.” What would you give as a ransom price for your life? Jesus states here that you and your life are the most valuable thing for Him and the only exchange that can be given is life for life. And Jesus gives His life to save yours and mine.

The fourth explanation of the centrality of the cross and why denying self, taking up the cross, and following Jesus proves to be worth it, is the end. Jesus is a historical figure. Peter confesses Him to be Christ, Messiah. As we will see in the weeks ahead, He dies, He rises, and He says He will return again in glory, and that everyone will stand before Him. He says that He will repay each person according to what he has done. In Matthew 16:27, Jesus says:

*“For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay each person according to what he has done.”*

Some of us, especially the accountants among us, are thinking, “Okay, okay,” and we just start documenting. “Should we provide our documentation? These are the things I’ve done. I’ve done a bunch of good things.” You start stacking up your papers. And then, at a certain point, we say, “Wait, wait. I’ve also done a bunch of lousy things. Are those going to be reported?” It raises this question: What if we were judged rightly, accurately, and compensated for what we have done? I hope for all of us it would prompt in us the need for forgiveness. And that is why the cross is so central. The cross gives us forgiveness for those lousy things that we’ve done and then gives us new life so that we can live in ways that reflect Jesus and that will be recognizable in the end.

Jesus’ last word to us this morning from Matthew 16:28 is:

*“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom.”*

Jesus is telling the disciples that they are going to see this. Everything He has just been talking about, they will see. And what is it that they see? They see His death and resurrection, and they spend the rest of their lives talking about that.



So for us this morning, as we are learning to follow Jesus together, how does Jesus' teaching call us to action? We have been so blessed this spring by the artists in our church. The artist's response to this passage this morning is beautiful. It is a painting that draws us to this moment: Peter and Jesus standing; others around them; the opinions of the crowds swirling around in the words around them; and at the center of the picture we see the words of Peter's confession: "You are the Christ. That's who You are."

Dear friends, this morning I want to affirm clearly to myself and to you that Christianity is defined simply and profoundly as **people who confess Jesus as Christ**. It is nothing less than that, and it is nothing more than that. Christianity is a community of people who recognize Jesus for who He is. This is a gift of God's grace, to allow us to see Christ.

A few years ago, my wife and I and a team from our church were in Greece teaching an overview of the Bible to several different language groups. Each class was in a different language. My wife and I taught all the people who could be taught in English. We had a Farsi group and an Arabic group; there were a couple of other languages. We were all teaching the same class with these different language groups. Many of these people were refugees and people fleeing for a new life. One of my dear friends, Bill Artz, was teaching the Iranian class. Bill, from Cincinnati, from a Jewish family, who had become a believer in Christ, was there teaching a group of Iranians who were in Greece. On Wednesday morning, as they finished going through the Old Testament and had started the Gospels, a man suddenly interrupted Bill while he was teaching and called out: "I see Him! I see Him! He is the Son of God!" He became a Christian right in the middle of class. Bill stopped the class and said, "God has revealed His Son to our friend here. We must praise Him for that."

If you wonder, "How do I become a Christian?" you can't willpower your way into it. If you think, "How do I share Jesus with someone?" you can't win an argument with them. But God in His mercy can graciously use any of us as His instrument. At the end of the day, God in his grace allows us to see His Son for who He is. And God delights to reveal His Son. We prayed for my mother for twenty years, and then finally she saw Christ for who He is. It was so wonderful.

This text also calls us to action because Christianity is recognized as a **people who follow Jesus** to the cross and empty tomb, from death to life to losing life to finding it, to self-denial to self-fulfillment in following Jesus. In knowing Christ we know ourselves. Disciples and communities who modestly, tirelessly, and faithfully point to Jesus, Jesus honors by using them to build the church. I want to invite you, if you took two copies of *Is Easter Unbelievable?* last week, take two more. Let these questions sit with you:

- Is Jesus historical?
- Is His death ethical??
- Is His resurrection credible
- Is His offer of forgiveness and eternal life desirable?

It is a helpful way to inform conversation.

The cross is no accident. It is a divine design for your salvation and mine. It is not something to be avoided or denied. It is something to be embraced. According to Jesus, it is the reason He came: to suffer, die, and be raised. It is how His grace and forgiveness would be revealed to all the world.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we honor You. We receive Your teaching. Write it on our hearts this day. Lord, we confess to you the lousy things we've done, the things we've left undone, and we ask for Your forgiveness this morning. Cleanse us from unrighteousness, Lamb of God. Take us as broken people and put us back together again.

In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen