

Consider your verdict in a sceptical world

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Date: 16 April 2017

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[0 : 00] This week I was just doing some reading and one writer said this, that if the resurrection is true, then you don't have to be afraid of anything anymore.

I thought that was an incredible way of putting it. If the resurrection is true, you don't have to be afraid of anything anymore. And of course that is true.

Well, thanks again. Great opportunity for me to be here. It's a great privilege. And our title for this morning is simply Consider Your Verdict. Consider Your Verdict, The Historical Claims of Christianity in a Skeptical World.

That's a bit of a long title, isn't it? Consider Your Verdict, The Historical Claims of Christianity in a Skeptical World. Now, as Nick has pointed out, at this time of the year, as the Church, we are called by God and the Scripture to reflect on the most important historical event, not only of Christianity, but indeed, and think about this, in world history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But, of course, the other question then is, why is it so important? It's important for us as a Church to attend to this question, for all of us, especially for those of us who are here today as visitors, those of us who are not quite sure what the fuss of Christianity is all about.

[1 : 35] It is indeed an important question. And so, as I start, let me quickly sketch out three reasons why the resurrection is indeed critically important.

First of all, if it is true, then all of Jesus' teachings are true, and indeed, all the teachings of the Bible, Old and New Testament.

All of the teachings of Scripture point to this great moment. All the rivers of the Bible, from the book of Genesis, all flow into this mighty event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If it is true, then everything Jesus taught is true, including the things, of course, we find difficult to stomach, things like the existence of judgment and the existence of hell, and so on.

Secondly, if the resurrection is true, then there is hope. Whatever you're going through, whatever circumstances you are facing right now in your life, it's great that Nick's going to start this new series on the crises of life, because only Christians truly have answers.

[2 : 53] Because, secondly, if the resurrection is true, whatever it is you're going through, whatever struggles you're grappling with, today, there is hope.

Indeed, there's hope beyond the grave. This life is not all there is. And then, thirdly and finally, if the resurrection is true, well, then it must mean that Jesus is alive.

It must mean that. And if Jesus is alive, then all of your prayers are heard. Must be the case.

And, of course, if Jesus is alive, then you will have to meet him. A lot of folk don't see that.

But the rational consequence of the resurrection is that if he is alive, you will have to meet him in the judgment. Furthermore, we are also reminded today that the Bible insists that the resurrection is a historical fact.

[4 : 09] I need to comment on that briefly because over the years people have come to me in my own ministry suggesting that we don't necessarily need to accept the Bible or the stories of the New Testament as factual.

Let's rather, they say, just accept the moral teachings of Jesus. Folk come to me and say to me, well, whether he did rise from the dead or not, or whether he performed all these miracles or not, I don't really believe that he did, they say.

But that doesn't matter. That's besides the point. What is important is that we simply believe in the moral of the story. Like any good myth, they say to me.

Like any good fairy tale. Now that is essentially, of course, the position of Dan Brown and the Da Vinci Code. But if you read the New Testament on its own terms, you will observe and appreciate that the New Testament won't allow us to take this approach.

Its writers insist that readers cannot separate the teachings of Jesus from his deeds. His miracles, his deeds, his resurrection, and his teachings blend indissolubly together.

[5 : 25] The historical foundation of Christianity, the historical facts of our faith, of the resurrection itself, are fundamental. To reject them Christianity itself.

But does the Bible state that certainty is even possible concerning faith in God and, of course, trust in the resurrection? Some folks say, well, certainty is not possible.

We live in a modern world, they say. We live in a scientific environment. It is simply not possible to take the Bible that seriously. Now, with that in mind, of course, we need to consider what Nick read out a little bit earlier.

Let me read also to you some verses from Luke's gospel. Luke starts out his gospel about Jesus and his life and death and resurrection. And the first four verses of the gospel of Luke say this, and I quote, many have undertaken, writes Luke, to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

And he goes on and he writes, with this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of what you have been taught.

[7 : 11] Luke chapter 1 from verse 1 to verse 4. Now, as we consider these verses, we need to take into account the following.

First of all, Luke states that his gospel, just like John in his own gospel, Luke states that his gospel is based on eyewitness accounts.

We have to take that seriously. There's no evidence that Luke was mad or out of his mind or crazy, didn't know what he was talking about. It's very, very cogently written.

The gospel is very carefully laid out and he insists that it is based on eyewitness accounts. Secondly, he has carefully investigated the facts of the gospel.

The original language is interesting. He uses the scientific language of the law court. I have carefully investigated the facts.

[8 : 12] We have a picture here of a scientific careful procedure, the sifting of evidence. Thirdly, it is orderly. It's not a haphazard, chaotic arrangement of fact and argument.

If you read some of the so-called gospels, they're not real gospels, but if you look at the later gospels that were floating around in the third and the end of the second century, the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Judas, none of those are carefully rooted in fact.

They are indeed indicative of haphazard, chaotic arrangement. Not the case with the four biblical gospels. Luke carefully put his gospel together.

Fourthly, he has written what he has written, he has researched in the way that he has in this way so that we are necessarily his disciples, but the church, you and I, can be certain.

So if that's the case, if this is the stance of the New Testament and the gospels, let me unpack some of the implications of this further.

[9 : 24] And we're going to particularly, of course, today focus on the resurrection. Let's have a look at this idea, this fascinating idea of eyewitnesses. how can we know that the resurrection of Jesus is factual?

Now, in the New Testament, there are various references to eyewitnesses of Jesus who had risen from the dead. Paul the Apostle, for example, writes about eyewitnesses.

One of the most interesting chapters in Paul is in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. I won't go into great detail this morning, but Paul points out in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 that there were on one occasion 500 witnesses who met up with the risen Jesus on one occasion.

It wasn't the only case where eyewitnesses met up with Jesus, but certainly 501 occasion is quite significant. Now, let me explain the significance of this.

Shortly after I began my ministry in the 1990s, the early 1990s, I made this particular point to my church around about 93, somewhere around there, maybe a bit later.

[10 : 42] I remember at that time there were some skeptics, agnostics, who were attending my church, some visitors, and they suggested to me that Christianity was nothing more than really belief in legend and fairy tale.

Perhaps that's your position here today. You've come along as a visitor. You're fascinated by the fact that people can believe in today's modern world in the notion of somebody rising from the dead.

Perhaps you're also a little bit cynical about these things. So what I decided to do on that day before my congregation was preach a sermon, believe it or not, on Nelson Mandela.

I had no Bible reading. I think my church council were very worried that morning. And I stood up and I announced to the congregation that I was going to preach a sermon not on the Bible and not necessarily just on Jesus but on Nelson Mandela.

Now the reason why I did that was because Nelson Mandela, as you know, was very much big in the news at the time. He had come out of prison and I think if I remember correctly he was about to become the president.

[11 : 48] I can't remember exactly when I preached my sermon but he was pretty much about to become the president of the country at the time. And my sermon created a real stir because I started out and I said this.

I said that I had bad news for my congregation. I said that in actual fact the real Nelson Mandela was dead and that irrefutable evidence had come to me that the real Mandela had died in prison.

and that I had discovered to my shock that the Nelson Mandela who had appeared on the news, who gave the speech when he left Polesmoor prison, who was regularly appearing on television and who was indeed about to become the president of the country was in actual fact a charlatan.

He was a stand-in. He was a substitute I said. much to the horrified silence of the congregation members.

I said that he was a necessary substitute. He was an invention of the government. He was a highly trained actor because realizing that if the truth got out and that the real Mr. Mandela had died in prison, the country would descend into civil war, I said.

[13 : 12] And I said that in order to maintain law and order at this very precarious political time in our country's history, the National Party had colluded with the ANC to replace the dead Mr.

Mandela with an actor that we were seeing on the television. Now once the congregation of course got over the shock and the stunned silence, of course they realized that I was talking rubbish.

rubbish and rightly so. Thankfully I was indeed talking nonsense. But I wasn't quite done.

I understand that this morning unless you are a conspiracy theorist you would agree with my congregation at that time. No doubt you would agree that the real Mr.

Mandela did indeed thankfully become the president. president. Yes I was talking nonsense. But how do you know that?

[14 : 19] You see. And so I then asked my congregation the same question. How can we be sure that the Mr.

Mandela we saw and know and came to love and respect, the Mr. Mandela who became the president of South Africa, I asked my congregation, how can we know that this Mr. Mandela was indeed the real one?

Have any of you actually seen, I asked, and touched the real Mr. Mandela in the flesh? Thankfully none had. I said how do you know?

How do you know that the Mandela we hear and the Mandela we listen to on the television is real? It's a good question, isn't it? because there are so many realities we all take for granted, not simply people and their existence, but other phenomena, things we take for granted that we have not necessarily seen with our eyes or touched.

I have never seen America. I have never smelt America. I have never touched America. And yet I have no problem standing before you this morning, proclaiming to you that I sincerely believe that America exists.

[15 : 43] But how do I know that? How do we know that Mandela, the Mandela we saw, was real? Well the answer of course is reliable witnesses.

Is that not so? Not only in the case of Mandela, but also in the case of the existence of the United States. It isn't really necessary for us to have touched Mandela in the flesh or to have spoken to him directly to believe that he existed because of the cumulative overwhelming evidence that comes our way from others, reliable witnesses.

Other parties we know and trust regard him as being real, have interacted with Mr. Mandela on our behalf. We have written evidence, we have video evidence, we have his books, we have his speeches, we have the testimony of those who sat with him in prison on Robben Island for 26 years.

So I don't think anybody here today, including those of us perhaps who are cynics when it comes to Christianity, those of us who are agnostic when it comes to the Bible, nevertheless I don't think that if you do fall into that category you would deny that indeed the Mr. Mandela we all came to know and love is real for those reasons.

And yet is it not true that this is precisely what the Bible says about Jesus. John chapter 1 verse 14 we read the word became flesh made his dwelling among us and then writes the apostle on behalf of himself as author and the other apostles.

[17 : 16] John goes on and writes this, he says we have seen we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth.

So what is John saying to his readers? He is saying to us well you might not have seen and touched Jesus with your own eyes and hands but you can certainly trust the reliability of others who have.

You can trust the reliability of other witnesses who have, the apostles. The reason why we accept that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead is for the same reason why we believe in the existence of all kinds of other things that we take for granted such as the existence of Tony Blair, the existence of Helen Ziller, I read her biography, I have never touched her, I have never seen her, the existence of the United States and so on.

Now Jesus rose from the dead in around about AD 33. That's 20 years before Paul wrote about the 500 witnesses who witnessed him and interacted with him in one place at one time after he rose from the dead.

Now 1 Corinthians chapter 15 from verse 1 to verse 6 features the apostle explaining to his audience that when he preached about the resurrection he simply preached the story that was handed down to him.

[18 : 51] Now 1 Corinthians was written around about AD 53 or so. So we can establish that Paul wrote about the resurrection only 20 years after Jesus had died and risen from the dead.

It's a very very early account and even Paul in such an early account says I'm simply proclaiming the gospel message that was handed down to me.

In other words what I'm saying is that when you read the New Testament when you read Paul and the other accounts in the New Testament and the resurrection it's very clear that the early church proclaimed Jesus' bodily resurrection from the beginning.

You might say Mark that's fascinating how is that relevant to me? Well it means that not sufficient time had passed in order for a legend or a fairy tale to develop.

The resurrection story could not have been fabricated years later by inventive members of the church as people like Dan Brown and other skeptics claim. If you are an agnostic or if you are somewhat skeptical of the claims of the resurrection you have to find a better explanation for this phenomenon.

[20 : 16] See sociologists and anthropologists who are experts in the development of ideas. Sociologists who study the way ideas and legends develop in history taking over the imaginations of thousands have shown that it takes a very long time for a new legend, a new idea or a new outlook to take hold of the belief or the imaginations of thousands of people.

people. This takes years of discussion and argument, sometimes more than a hundred years. We see that for example in the development of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson.

That is how culture and worldview changes. But with one exception in world history, Christianity. Christianity grew strongly like wildfire immediately after the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

So in terms of time, there was no historical development, no lengthy process to invent the idea, to process the myth, to process the legend in order for the argument to be fabricated and then implemented in the church throughout the known world.

How then do we explain this incredible change that took over much of the empire in the first century? There is only one explanation for an idea to become so powerful in the hearts and the minds of thousands and then millions of people.

[21 : 54] Jesus must have risen from the dead. His followers must have proclaimed what they have seen immediately after he died. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church grew.

Friends, in terms of the way ideas develop in world history, this is unprecedented. The scriptures teach us that Christ is indeed, has indeed risen from the dead.

Now you might respond and say Islam grew very quickly as well. That's true. But through war and through military conquest, through rape and through pillage, not through merely the presentation of an outlandish idea of a Jewish man who rose from the dead.

Thus, the scriptures teach us today that Christ has risen from the dead as the head of the church. And if we trust in him today, we are his body.

Now, consider a cat chasing a mouse. He chases this mouse towards a dark crack or a very dark hole in the wall. The mouse disappears into the darkness.

[23 : 12] Now, cat experts tell me that as the cat approaches the mouse and approaches the hole in the wall, his head plays an important role because he knows that as he dives into the dark hole after the mouse, that if his head will get in, if his head will fit, his body will follow.

That means he's going to get through the darkness and come out into the light on the other side of the wall and he's going to catch his mouse. Well, so it is with Christ's resurrection and ours.

The Bible tells us that Christ entered into the darkness of death and came out the other side, not to catch a defeat of mouse, but to destroy death itself.

Christ's own resurrection as the head of the church guarantees our own as his body if we trust in him because the eyewitness evidence is clear.

We are looking at an historical reality. So as I tie my strings together and slowly move towards a conclusion, you might want to challenge me and you might say, Mark, that's interesting, but if there is clear evidence as you suggest, if there is clear evidence for the resurrection, then why do people today who hear the gospel, people I pray for, people to whom I've presented the evidence, if you maintain the evidence as clear, why do people who hear the gospel still refuse to come to Christ?

[24 : 49] Mark, I know people who still insist that there is a lack of evidence for the gospel. people. I know how you feel. I've presented the evidence to many folk who've come to me over the years and say, well, Mark, I'm so happy you have faith, but I have facts.

You met people like that? That somehow people who have facts don't have faith. Mark, I wish I could be like you and other Christians. I wish I could have faith, but I can't have faith.

I just have facts. I said, that's interesting on one occasion. Somebody came to me and said that to me, and I said, that's fascinating that you don't have any faith. By the way, where is your car right now? He said, it's parked outside the church, where I parked it when I came to your service, before the service started.

I said, well, evidence has come to me that someone has stolen your car. I said, what are you talking about? Are you serious? I said, it is. I said, no, I'm only joking. He said, oh, what a relief. I said, in actual fact, I wasn't joking. Someone's stolen your car.

I said, what are you trying to do? I said, how do you know whether your car's there or not? I said, well, I assume it's there. I said, yes, we have faith in all kinds of things all of the time. There's no such thing as anybody, in order to make sense of their lives, it doesn't have to have faith in all kinds of things they cannot necessarily prove in order to make life meaningful.

[26 : 06] This morning we woke up, we got out of bed, and we just assumed that the same order in the universe that worked yesterday worked today. The same order that allows us to walk around because gravity is still there, and the same order in the universe that allows us to use the technology to send emails existed this morning, hopefully, when we woke up as it did yesterday.

But why? Scientists can't explain to us why it is that the scientific laws that bring about order in the universe that make life possible, that existed up to this point in history, will necessarily exist tomorrow.

We just accept that by faith. You see, everybody has faith. And Christianity is based on fact. People come to me and say, well, you know, you Christians have faith, but we have facts.

That's nonsense. Everybody has faith in something. The question is not whether or not I have faith. The question is, what do you put your faith in? Well, Christianity is certainly factual, as I have suggested, and there is not a lack of evidence.

But then why, Mark, do people refuse to accept the evidence? Now, that's interesting. Years ago, I had a conversation with a smoking addict.

[27 : 15] He told me he was unable, or more accurately, he was unwilling to stop smoking. And yet the scientific evidence, of course, is clear. It's printed on the side of every single box of smokes that he smoked.

I said to him, have you looked at the evidence when it comes to smoking? He said, what are you talking about? I said, don't you read the side of your cigarette boxes? It says clearly, smoking causes cancer.

Smoking is harmful to your health. Smoking can kill you, I said. And yet, tragically and incredibly, he chose, like so many other smokers, to smoke in spite of the evidence.

His addiction was more important to him than the evidence itself. Then, one day, he developed heart problems directly related to his smoking, and I spoke to him again, and I urged him to stop.

I said, you're a family man. Your life belongs to your family, your children. Don't be selfish. Don't be foolish. Smoking is going to kill you. This lifestyle is going to kill you.

[28 : 15] But he wouldn't stop. And finally, not long after that, tragically, he passed away with a heart attack. I thought about this incident for some time afterwards, and I thought about people in general.

And I realized that people live the way they do, choosing to believe what they do, whether it's smoking or whatever it is, not necessarily because the evidence is there, not necessarily because the evidence suggests they are right, but because it suits them, even in the face of the evidence that suggests that their lifestyles are destructive.

Even if the evidence clearly points to the destructive nature of their lifestyles, they continue to live the way they do. because at the end of the day, addiction.

Addiction to sin, addiction to sex, addiction to drugs, to pleasure, to materialism, and of course, mostly addiction to rebellion against God.

You might be one of those people. That's one of the reasons why you don't regularly come to church, but nevertheless, when you do open your Bible, you read the evidence of the resurrection.

[29 : 34] The evidence of the gospel proclaims that it is harmful to your lifestyle to continue to live the way you do. Your lifestyle, says the Bible, will kill you.

But like my friend, of course, you decide to continue to live in addiction to sin and rebellion against God despite what the Bible says. You see, people reject the gospel, not because of a lack of evidence, but in spite of the evidence.

Perhaps that's true with you. Well, we've established that Christianity is based on fact. Yes, indeed, there is evidence for Christianity's truth.

And so on this Easter Sunday, let's consider the message of the gospel again. In the gospel, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came down from heaven. He became a man in order to die on the cross for our sins and to rise from the dead.

These are the gospel facts. But folk have also said to me over the years, Mark, if that's the case, if the gospel is so true and right, what about all the different religions, they say?

[30 : 43] What about all the different religions? I think that's a good question. Because amongst other things, the existence of all these different religions surely indicate to us that we are pretty confused about who God is.

Surely if instinctively without God's help we could figure out exactly who God is, then I suspect there would probably only be one religion. I think the fact that there are many religions suggests that we are pretty confused.

But now think about what the Bible has to say about Jesus, because the gospel is unique. Amongst all the other religions in the world, the gospel is unique.

No other religion is quite like it. Because in the case of all the religions of the world, in one way or the other, it's always going to be bottom up. It's always going to be bottom up with all the other religions in the world.

Now bottom up simply means that you've got to find God, you've got to look for God on your own. You've got to use your own strength, you've got to get up there and you've got to find God. The religion might say to you, okay, we'll help you out a little bit, we'll give you a place where you can pray, we'll give you a book to read and we'll tell you how to pray.

[31 : 46] But at the end of the day it's got to be bottom up, it's got to be bottom up, you've got to find God on your own. But surely all the religions in the world suggest that in actual fact bottom up doesn't work. I say that particularly for those of us here today who are visitors and are not Christians.

No, bottom up doesn't work. What I love about Christianity is that it's the other way around. Christianity is not bottom up, it's top down. See, Christianity says left to our own devices we'll never find God no matter how hard we try.

That's what makes Christianity different. God doesn't wait for us to find him. In Jesus Christ God takes the initiative and comes looking for you.

It's top down. God takes on human flesh, becomes a man in order to die for sin on that original Easter weekend and rises from the dead offering us new hope and a new eternal future.

Realizing that we're all sinners and that we're all confused and that we'll never ever find God on our own. God knows that unless he himself comes into the world to reveal himself to us and die for our sins, we'll never figure him out.

[32 : 53] We'll never ever save ourselves. It has to be top down and no other religion is top down except Christianity. In Christianity, whoever you are, whatever reason you're here today, God came looking for you.

So in conclusion, you might ask me, Mark, that's great, but what does that mean for me personally? As I go out for the rest of my day and enjoy the rest of my Easter weekend, what does all of this mean for me personally?

Well, you see, if it's top down and if the facts of the resurrection are true, if in Christ God came looking for you, you will find him.

That is God's guarantee to you this morning. Whoever you are, whatever you're going through, even if I haven't answered all of your questions today, God's guarantee to you this morning is that you will find him.

no matter what. Why? Because it's top down. If you desire to do so, you will find him if you search for him.

[33 : 57] Because he has ensured that that is possible because it's top down. In the gospel, God in Jesus Christ came looking for you.

People don't find him, it's because they don't search for him. But of course, if God is a God of love, he's not going to force you to find him. He's not going to force you to love him and adore him. He asks you today, will you reach out to me?

His arms are open, guaranteed. Why, Mark? It's top down. But what about yours? See, when I was about 11 years old, in primary school, I was quite fond of this young lady who was one of my classmates.

parents. And we used to play hide-and-go-seek. I was always the one who had to go looking for her, and she was the one who always went to go and hide. And she wouldn't have it any other way, so I had to just fit into that.

And one day she came to me predictably during recess time at school, during break time, and said, let's play hide-and-go-seek. And I said, fine. And I said, I'll count to 100 and you go hide. She was very, very good at hiding, and so I started to count to 100.

[35 : 08] I shut my eyes as tightly as I could because I wasn't allowed to cheat, and I counted slowly up to 100, and then I opened my eyes and rubbed my hands together and I was ready for a good hide-and-go-seek. I was ready to look into all of her carefully concealed little places, and I knew it was going to be an arduous task, and I set about it with a will.

And I ran around the corner after having opened my eyes, and there she was standing. And I was quite stunned, and I looked at her, and I thought to myself, this is just not on.

I was about to tick her off. I was about to give her a telling down. I was about to tell her off and say to her, this is no way to play hide-and-go-seek. Why aren't you hiding? And as I opened my mouth and as I was about to rebuke the girl, well, then everything was revealed to me.

She smiled. She smiled at me in a way that I knew she wanted to be found.

So, friend, whoever you are, whoever you are, whatever reason God has brought you here today, whatever your issues, whatever your questions, in the death and the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus wants you to reach out to him and find him today, because God is smiling at you.

[36 : 30] The question is, will you reach out to him to find him and to trust him? Now, before I hand over to Nick, whose time is up, let me say this.

God has been speaking to you this morning, this Easter weekend, and you would like to know how to reach out to Christ, how to do it.

We can show you how. So don't leave the church until you've chatted to Alan or to Nick or to Gene or one of our leaders, because we can actually show you how to reach out to him and find him.

Thank you. Thank you.