

# *Too Good To Be True, Yet True Nonetheless*

Luke 24:36-49

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 21, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>36</sup> While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” <sup>37</sup> They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” <sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. <sup>41</sup> While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate in their presence.

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:36-49, NRSV)



A month or two ago I was up early one morning on the levee near my house. It was at the end of one of those weeks we had this winter which drenched us with rain, and the river was as high as I've seen it in some time. I paused for a moment, as I often do, to stare up at a giant old oak tree that I've admired for years. It had long since died, but its massive trunk and branches still stretched sixty feet or more into the sky. A week before I had spotted a bald eagle perched high in its branches. There was no eagle that morning, but I did notice that the river was so high that the first six feet or so of its trunk was under water. As I stood there I began to wonder how long it would be before all that water running around its trunk would erode the soil enough to send the whole massive tree toppling into the river. I imagined how fantastic it would be to witness such a dramatic sight.

Well, after a few moments I turned to head north along the levee. I hadn't taken more than a dozen steps, however, before a tremendous crack shattered the morning stillness. I was so startled I think I literally left my feet, as did my dog next to me. It sounded like a shotgun blast had gone off fifty feet behind us. I immediately turned back around to see the cause of the noise just in time to watch this massive old oak tree crash into the river. The fall happened in slow motion, as did the resulting explosion of water as the tree hit the river. It all was impressive as I had, just a few moments before, imagined that it might be. In fact, I could not believe what I was witnessing. That tree had stood there for 100 years or more and I was the one person there to witness its final dramatic moment. Me and Cooper, though he seemed far less impressed than I was. I must have stood there for ten disbelieving minutes, watching the remains of that old oak tree float down the river towards the delta. It seemed too good to be true, that only a moment before I had wished for the most unlikely thing to happen, and that thing had actually just happened before my eyes.

Maybe you have had a similar experience, perhaps even more significant than a tree falling into a river. You lose something of great value to you and you just know you will never see it again. And then suddenly there it is, back safely in your hands, and you can't believe it. A loved one faces a terminal illness or devastating injury and there isn't a doctor in the land who will give a good prognosis. But then there is a healing or recovery that is nothing short of miraculous and you can't believe it. It's just too good to be true.

The ultimate example of this, of course, would be if somebody dear to you died, but sometime later was back alive again and standing right in front of you. That would absolutely be too good to be true. Can you imagine? You would have a very difficult time believing what your eyes were telling you.

This is, of course, exactly what happened that Sunday evening in Jerusalem. Try to picture the scene. The disciples are gathered there in the middle of what was certainly a very lively discussion. Two of them have just returned from the village of Emmaus, a seven mile walk from Jerusalem. They probably sprinted the distance, however, because they had just encountered Jesus himself along the roadway there. At least that's what they were now claiming, adding to other similar claims which had already come in that day. People were

saying that Jesus was alive. It was all too good to be true.

Now remember, Jesus had not just been a friend to these men and women, he had been their master, their leader, their hope, the one they had left everything to follow. They believed he was the Messiah, the one God had sent to set them free and lead them home. But then just three days earlier he had been executed by the Romans. Nobody in those days was crucified and lived to tell about it; the Romans were accomplished in the art of crucifixion. When Jesus' cold, lifeless body was laid in the tomb that Friday evening, every one of his disciples knew it was over and they were crushed with grief. And the grief, for many of them, was tainted with guilt and shame because they had denied, and betrayed and deserted their master in his hour of greatest need. Because all hope was lost, these reports and rumors of his appearances seemed far too good to be true.

Luke is not dramatic in his depiction of the scene. **“While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”** Jesus doesn't jump through a window or bust down the door. He doesn't even knock on the door. He's just suddenly there in their midst. But the first words out of his mouth speak volumes. Both despair and shame are meant to be satisfied at once with these words. There is no need to despair because Christ is risen! There is no need for guilt or shame because Christ is risen!

It really was too good to be true. In fact, Luke tells us that the group was not only startled, but terrified. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Later translations of the text use the Greek word *phantasma*.<sup>1</sup> This was a phantom, an apparition of the dead without flesh and bones. Our familiarity with this story may keep us from appreciating the moment. Think of somebody you love who has been dead now for some time. Now imagine if that person were suddenly standing here right next to me in the flesh. You would not believe what you were seeing. You would search your mind for some other explanation. It's a ghost. It's a hologram. It's a zombie, one of the living dead. It's some trick of the mind, a hallucination that will soon pass. There would even be a part of you that would fight against the hope that your loved one was actually alive again because to believe it was true, and then to find out later it was not true, would only open up those painful wounds all over again.<sup>2</sup> We dare not believe it. There must be some other explanation.

In the ancient world there was a commonly held belief that the human soul was immortal and indestructible. In other words, people believed that the soul came into the body at birth and then left the body and returned to God at death. In this view the body, then, was nothing more than a vehicle that the soul used to travel around the world for a time before abandoning it at death.<sup>3</sup> Jesus could not have reclaimed his vehicle. That was abandoned three days ago. Therefore, this must be a ghost, his spirit visiting one last time before departing back to God.

I want you to notice how generous Jesus is with their doubts. He does wonder aloud why, after all they have seen and heard from him, they now can't believe that what he told them would happen was actually happening. Dwight L. Moody once said, “God never made a promise that was too good to be true.” Jesus had promised this very thing would happen. Earlier in Luke Jesus declared to his friends, **“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”**<sup>4</sup> It was one of many times he let them in on God's plan. They should not have been surprised or afraid.

Still, Jesus is still generous with them in their doubts, just as he is generous with us in our doubts. He's so generous that he gives them what it is they need to believe if they are willing to believe. **“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”** The original Greek here is as emphatic as it possibly could be.<sup>5</sup> All caps, underlined, bold letters: **“It is I myself!”** He's inviting the disciples to examine his body. Why his hands and feet? Because that's where the scars from the nails would have been. In other Gospel accounts we know Jesus invited his friends to actually touch the scars to confirm that they were real.<sup>6</sup> When even this doesn't overcome their doubts, Jesus goes a step further and asks if they have any leftovers lying around. Ancient Jews believed that ghosts and angels neither ate nor drank. So Jesus says, “Give me some of that dried fish you have in the cupboard and I'll prove to you that I am no phantom.” Who knows, maybe he was also hungry? He'd been to hell and back that day, and probably worked up quite an appetite on the journey.

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almost fight against the hope because it is too good to be true; you've been disappointed so often before.”

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary Series: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 289.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:22 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, 730.

<sup>6</sup> John 20:27

<sup>1</sup> James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans, 2015), 729.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Well, you know how it feels if you begin hoping for something that you want desperately badly; you

There is an ancient heresy that has gained a good number of contemporary subscribers. It's the idea that Jesus' resurrection was not literal or physical, but symbolic and spiritual. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong represents a growing number of people, even in the church, when he declares, "I don't think the Resurrection has anything to do with physical resuscitation. I think it means the life of Jesus was raised back into the life of God, not into the life of this world, and that it was out of this that his presence [i.e. not his body] was manifested to certain witnesses."<sup>7</sup>

To be fair, this is not a new idea. Many even in the time of the early church believed something similar. The problem, of course, is that this belief flatly contradicts the testimony of the biblical writers. Any honest reading of this text, and many texts like it, leaves no doubt that Luke is going overboard to emphasize that Jesus was going overboard to emphasize that the disciples were looking at his *physical body* and not just his spiritual presence. "Look at my physical hands and feet! Touch me! Give me a physical piece of fish and watch me put it in my physical mouth, chew it with my physical teeth, digest it with my physical stomach!"

The Apostle's Creed, which we recited earlier is the oldest creed of the church. It was written at a time in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century when this heresy, among others, threatened to dilute the core teachings of Christ and the apostles. The Creed itself declares that we believe in the "resurrection of the *body*."<sup>8</sup> This is one of the essentials of the Christian faith, and so if we believe that the resurrection of Christ was merely symbolic or spiritual, we place ourselves at odds with not only the historic church but the clear teachings of the New Testament writers who were, themselves, witnesses to these events.

But why does it matter? Isn't that the question? Whether or not Jesus actually rose in spirit *and* body makes for an interesting theological debate for those who relish such debates, but what does it matter for those of us just trying to get through day to day life? Well, I believe it matters immensely. Here's why.

In many other faith perspectives, this physical world, including our physical bodies, are throwaway. Some major religions in our day teach that the physical world is permanently corrupt and, therefore, something to be ultimately escaped and left behind for good.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Kimberly Winston, "Gospel Story of Jesus' Resurrection a Source of Deep Rifts in Christian Religion", *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> The Heidelberg Confession has a similar declaration. "Question 1: What is your only comfort in life and death? Answer: That I am not my own, but belong with *body and soul*, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." Emphasis mine.

Christianity is unique in its perspective that the Creator of this world loves this world, and not just the humans in this world or, more specifically, the human souls in this world. No, God made our bodies to be sacred, just as our souls. And God made our world to be sacred as well. The sky and the sea, mountains and deserts, animals and plants, color and taste, all of these things are sacred, cherished by God.

It's such an ugly distortion of the Christian Gospel when missionaries, in the name of Christ, have gone to other parts of the world where there is great physical suffering and have only been concerned with saving people's souls without any regard for the hunger in their bellies, the thirst on their lips, or the disease in their bodies. Yes, God loves the human soul but God also loves the human body. He loves it so much that when he came to earth in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, he took to himself a physical body. And Jesus' body wasn't just a vehicle he borrowed for a time to get him around Palestine until he could abandon it when his mission was over. No, his body was resurrected, scars and all, and when he ascended to heaven he ascended in his body. Think about that. When Jesus went back to heaven he took his body with him. His tomb on earth was empty and stayed empty. Even now those scarred hands and feet are at the throne of heaven.

Here's why this matters for us. *What God did for Christ God intends to do for all of creation.* In I Corinthians 15:20 Paul declares, "**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.**" Paul's using an agricultural metaphor here that we all understand. The first tomatoes that will ripen on the vines in our garden this summer and end up on my salad are the first fruits of those vines. But even though we pick them first, they are still a part of a greater "harvest" of tomatoes which will be picked all throughout the summer. Similarly, Jesus was the first fruits of the "harvest" of resurrection. But in time there will be a larger "harvest" of resurrection that will include not only all who trust in Christ, but creation itself. Remember, the Bible speaks often about the new creation, that time when God will not dispose of what he has created but will renew it, redeem it, restore it. Again, what we see in Jesus' resurrection we will one day see in all of creation.

Don't miss this. Though the disciples saw Jesus' actual physical body before them that Sunday evening, it was not in the same state it had been when they walked with him around Palestine those previous three years. Same body, yes, scars and all. And yet, also different. Here and elsewhere the Gospel writers record that in these post-resurrection encounters the disciples witnessed something supernatural about Jesus' physical body. He appears and disappears with ease. He has the ability to

be recognized or not, even to be in different places simultaneously. His body is no longer subject to the natural laws of this world.

In a way you might say that Christ's resurrected body was not *less* physical than it had been before, but actually *more* physical than before. We live in fragile bodies. Right? In time they will be gone – ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Christ was not resuscitated to the same fragile, aging body to only die again another day. No, he was resurrected *beyond* death. His physical body is now eternal in nature, free from death or deterioration forever. That's what resurrection means, and not just for Christ but one day for all who trust him. It means that for the cosmos itself!

I often pray with people who live with terminal illness or chronic pain. The resurrection makes those prayers bold as I declare to others who suffer that if they place their faith in Christ *there will come a day* when their physical body will be free of illness and rid of pain. We pray for these things in this life, even though we know that when healing or relief comes in this life it will only be temporary. But even when death comes before healing or relief, we still hold on to the hope that on the other side of death we will, like Christ, receive resurrected physical bodies that will never again know death or illness or pain.<sup>9</sup>

In his classic book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis imagines a scene where lost souls take a bus ride to the outskirts of heaven. Not yet resurrected, these people are like shadows in comparison to the resurrected reality they find there. Lewis describes one scene this way:

The men were as they had been; as all the men I had known had been perhaps. It was the light, the grass, the trees that were different; made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men were ghosts by comparison. Moved by a sudden thought, I bent down to pluck a daisy which had been growing at my feet. The stalk wouldn't break. I tried to twist it, but it wouldn't twist. I tugged till the sweat stood out on my forehead and I had lost most of the skin off my hands. The little flower was hard, not like wood or even like iron, but like diamond. There was a leaf – a young tender beech-leaf, lying in the grass beside it. I tried to pick the leaf up; my heart almost cracked with the effort, and I believe I did just raise

it. But I had to let it go at once; it was heavier than a sack of coal.<sup>10</sup>

Lewis' imagination is vivid, no doubt. But what he is suggesting is not a departure from the biblical truth, meaning this should not be a new idea to us if we know Jesus' teaching. What did Jesus teach us to pray, after all? **“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*”** Because of human sin, the present physical creation, and us as a part of it, is all a fragile shadow of what God once intended. So much in our world is not as God made it to be. In response, however, God's plan has never been to get rid of the corrupted world but to restore and redeem it. Jesus says nothing about us being transported out of the world one day to heaven, leaving the mess of this world behind for good. No, Jesus is insistent that heaven will one day come to earth. He teaches us to pray for that day, for the time when he will return and these shadowlands will be transformed by the resurrection that first transformed Christ.

I love that Jesus eats a piece of fish in this story. Don't miss this. In the Kingdom of God we will eat food, real food, with real taste, that will nourish real bodies. Much of it, I'm certain, will be Mexican food, the food of heaven. Can you imagine carnitas street tacos in heaven if the carnitas street tacos here on earth are merely a shadow of the real thing! In the Kingdom of God there will be trails to hike and rivers to swim. The smell of salt off the ocean and pine trees in the mountains. Brilliant sunsets to savor and the flash of lightning to dazzle. Words to speak. Art to create. Houses to share. Arms to embrace. Music to inspire. And all of it will be more physical than we can imagine things today, so solid that the most solid thing in our world will seem like a ghost or a shadow by comparison.

Can you imagine? It's too good to be true. It is, nonetheless, true. At least this is the claim of the resurrection.

Do you doubt it? I would not be surprised if you do. The disciples on that day saw it unfolding right before their eyes and yet Luke tells us that **“in their joy they were still disbelieving.”** If you are a Christian you are asked to believe some fantastic things. God is one God who exists in three persons. God is sovereign and in control of a world that seems to us out of control. In spite of all appearances, history is being worked it with clear divine purpose. Jesus was fully human *and* fully God. By dying on the cross Jesus extended forgiveness to every person in every age. And now this, that not only was Jesus resurrected to a new kind of never-

<sup>9</sup> I love these verses from Revelation 21:4-5: **“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”** (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Collier Books, 1946), 28.

before-known glory, but we can share in that resurrection of glory with him one day if we place our faith in him. It's a lot to swallow.

It's so much to swallow that I think we need help believing it all. It's why Jesus says here that even though he spent his entire ministry saying these exact things to these men and women, it was still now necessary for him to help them believe. Luke tells us that "**he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...**" Wouldn't you have loved to have been there to listen in as Jesus, starting with Creation and working forward to Abraham, and Moses, and David, and the prophets, and the Psalms, and all of the Old Testament scriptures, explained in specific detail how all of it pointed forward to what they were now witnessing before them, God's plan to bring new creation out of the old.

Listen to me. If you truly believe the too-good-to-be-true things that we declared earlier in the Apostle's Creed than understand that you have Christ to thank for that belief. God is our Father? Jesus was conceived by the Spirit and born of a virgin? Jesus descended to the dead but then rose to life? The saints commune? Sins are forgiven? Bodies are resurrected? Life is eternal? If you believe these things your faith is a gift of God for which you ought to be humbly grateful each and every day.

Now we, who are witnesses of these things, are to bear witness to those who do not yet believe. That's what Jesus said to the disciples that day and it's what he continues to say to disciples of our day. It's what I'm doing here this morning. Some of you do not yet believe. From where you sit, the story is still too good to be true. I'm not going to argue with you, or try to convince you against your will, or even reason with you in an effort to make sense of it all. How can I make sense of it all? My job is simply to bear witness to this too-good-to-be-true reality of the resurrection. If you're a follower of Jesus, that's your job as well. For we are to bear witness not only from pulpits in churches, but in every ordinary corner of our lives where we find people who are at least willing to consider this hope long enough to give Jesus a chance to open their minds to the truth.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! The resurrection we see in him is the ultimate destiny of all who believe. It is the ultimately destiny of our world. It is the hope of creation. This is the testimony. And I know, it's too good to be true...and yet, it is true nonetheless.

Amen.



### The Next Step

#### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Can you describe a moment in your life when what you were seeing before you was simply too good to be true?
2. Read Luke 24:36-49. Do your best to picture the scene described here. What do you notice?
3. Do you believe that Jesus' resurrection described here was literal and physical? If so, why do you believe this?
4. In verse 44 Jesus seems to suggest that everything written in the Old Testament is actually pointing to him and about him. Do you believe this is true? If so, can you give some examples?
5. Is heaven truly going to be more physical than earth?
6. Paul writes the following in I Corinthians 15:17-19: "**If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.**" What is he saying here? Why is the resurrection so crucial?
7. Jesus gives the disciples here what they need to believe. What would you need Jesus to give to you to help you to believe (or to believe more fully)?
8. For you, what is the ultimate hope of Easter? How do you bear witness to this hope in the world today?

#### Table to Table Question

##### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why was it important that the disciples touched Jesus and watched him eat fish to know that he was not a ghost?