

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON:** *The Empty Tomb*

**SERIES:** *Easter - Stand Alone*

**SCRIPTURES:** *Matthew 28*

**SPEAKER:** *Shaun Kipe*

**DATE:** *2022 - 4 - 17*

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*\*Credit to John Ortberg, NT Wright...*

Well good morning and Happy Easter, it so great to worship with you. Want to say welcome to all of you in this room and to those of you gathered on-line, at home, tuning in to the live stream.

Humans have long been fascinated about questions related to death and life after death and kind of a sixth sense that this life is not all there is.

Some of the most complex structures in the world were built as a way of ushering the most wealthy and powerful people from this world into the next. Give you a few kind of neat illustrations of this.

One of the 7 Wonders of the ancient world, in fact the oldest and the only one to remain still largely intact today is a tomb...

**The Great Pyramid of Giza (PIC)** It was built in about 2600 BCE.

It is about half a mile round at the base. Would have taken a labor force of something like 20,000 men working for 20 years to construct.

For nearly 4,000 years was the tallest man-made structure in the world. Guarded by the sphinx (**PIC OF SPHINX**) and built to hold the mummified remains of an ancient

Pharaoh named Khufu. This tomb has been a testimony for centuries to his power and his wealth.

Or what about this one? Do you know what this is?

### **Terracota warriors vault in China (PIC)**

Absolutely fascinating and I honestly didn't know much about this until a few weeks ago. It was only discovered in 1974 by a group of Chinese farmers who were attempting to dig a well.

It's an army of 8,000 sculpted and very life like, terracotta Chinese soldiers depicting the armies of the first Chinese emperor, I am not going to attempt pronounce his name, but dating back to about 200 BCE. The warriors have been buried with the emperor with the purpose of protecting the emperor in his afterlife!

The first vault that was uncovered is bigger than a football field. 3 vaults have been excavated, altogether there are an estimated 300 vaults. One scholar suggests it would require nearly ½ million workers, working for 30-40 years to develop this "tomb".

Or how about this one...**PIC OF TAJ MAHAL**

The most magnificent building in India is the **Taj Mahal**. Built in the mid-1600's by the emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his wife who died giving birth to their fourteenth child. The tomb is the Centerpiece of a 42 acre complex and valued in 2020 at about 1 Billion US\$.

Humans have long been fascinated and mystified by questions surrounding death and life after death. There is a certain reality to death. We use the phrase that in life there are only a few things that are certain taxes & death. You can count on it. It's

real. And yet within the reality of death, as these great tomb constructions remind us there is a certain mystery that we can't fully explain or grasp.

But the most important tomb in human history...is none of these (**EMPTY TOMB PIC**). There is one tomb that stands alone and dwarfs every other tomb and grave the world has ever seen. And it's not so much as famous for what's in it, as it is famous for what's not in it.

The story of this tomb is found in the pages of your Bible and it's the reason that we are gathering here in this building on this day. And the reason several million people around the world are gathering in churches all around the globe.

So first let's begin by telling the story of...

## **I. The Empty Tomb**

Interestingly, this story does not involve a wealthy powerful emperor, but instead is the story of a refugee, a poor man, a carpenter and a Jew...named Jesus, living in and around Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago.

He grew up learning and studying Jewish Scripture and law. He was all-too-familiar with the expectation of a long-awaited Jewish Messiah or rescuer and even spent 3 years as a Jewish Rabbi teaching and healing. All was going well, until he began claiming to be that long-awaited Jewish Messiah. And in the process he angered two key groups of people.

First, the **Jewish religious leaders**. Jesus had become a problem for them because he always seemed to be breaking the rules. Eating with unclean people, healing on the Sabbath, even calling the Jewish leadership hypocrites. People don't like it when you talk about them that way. And pretty soon he's got this group of people who are starting to believe he's the Messiah. He's building momentum.

Second player in this story is of course **Rome**. Rome was really the one with all of the authority. The Sanhedrin, (Jewish religious leaders) they didn't have authority to get rid of Jesus. It's why the Sanhedrin hands Jesus over to Pilate, the Roman governor.

For the Romans, their main concern was maintaining order and stability in their vast kingdom. The last thing Caesar needed was to be concerning himself with little bands of rebels, and so he didn't take lightly anyone messing with his power and authority.

Jesus came along claiming to be the **Messiah**. That was a pretty significant claim. Rome knew the Jews were looking for a Messiah to lead a rebellion against them. In fact there were dozens of men who came along claiming to be that Messiah. 200 years before Jesus there's a guy, Judas Maccabeus. He leads a somewhat successful rebellion and actually enters Jerusalem with Palm branches waving, caused a big problem for Rome.

So Rome had a way of dealing with rebellions...it was called a cross (**picture of a Roman Cross**). "Would-be" Messiah's always ended up on Roman crosses. Often these crosses were along public roads to show people this is what happens when you rebel against Rome. This is what happens when you claim to be Messiah.

And so, conspiring together, the Jewish religious leaders convinced the Roman authorities, to deal with Jesus the way they dealt with all rebels.

**(PIC OF JESUS ON CROSS)** Jesus was tried, beaten, hung on a cross and dies the death of a criminal.

After his death, the authorities give permission for some of his bewildered followers to take his body off the cross and place it in a tomb (**PIC OF TOMB WITH STONE**). To

this day, we don't know exactly where the tomb of Jesus was. It wasn't marked, it wasn't overwhelming, it wouldn't be that fantastic to behold. More likely a hole in the rock wall.

A big rock is placed in front to keep animals from devouring the now dead carcass and armed Roman guards are placed in front, to make sure that none of his followers come and steal the body and begin making outrageous claims, like "he came back to life."

It seemed to be just another tomb story. One that would soon be forgotten. Certainly not one that would rank as one of the 7 wonders of the world.

In fact, the first century world and particularly the Jews had been through this before. There were other would-be Messiahs, claiming to be the Chosen One. All on Roman crosses. All suffer the same fate.

***"There were many messianic movements in the first century. In every case, the would-be Messiah got crucified by Rome as Jesus did. In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better."*** (NT WRIGHT – Surprised by Hope)

An author, Ken Davis tells the story of a woman who looked out her window and saw her German shepherd shaking the life out of a neighbor's rabbit. Her family did not get along well with these neighbors, so this was going to be a disaster. She grabbed a broom, pummeled the dog until it dropped the now extremely dead rabbit out of it's mouth. She panicked. She did not know what else to do. She grabbed the rabbit, took it inside, gave it a bath, blow dried it to its original fluffiness, combed it until the rabbit was looking good, snuck into the neighbors yard, and propped the rabbit back up in it's cage. An hour later she heard screams coming from next door. She asked

her Neighbor, “What’s going on?” “Our rabbit! Our rabbit!” her neighbor cried. “He died two weeks ago. We buried him, and now he’s back!” (Ortberg)

Even in the ancient world, everybody knows that when someone dies, that’s it. The end. That’s life...or death. End of story.

But something happens here at this tomb, on this day, that is beyond the human capacity to put into words or fully comprehend.

Here’s how Matthew describes it...

**Matthew 28 - After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. <sup>2</sup> There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup> The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.**

**<sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”**

**<sup>8</sup> So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.**

This is the story, the moment in history, that changes the world. **“He is not here, he is risen.”** This is the sentence that can change your life.

Now as we contemplate these tomb stories...death and life after death...there appears to be a tension related to how we understand them. **The reality** of the story and **the mystery** that surrounds the stories.

The reality is there actually is a Great Pyramid, that you can go and see with your eyes. That you can touch and feel. It's real. And yet at the same time, you will stand in awe of the magnificence of the tomb and contemplate it's very existence. 20,000 workers over 20 years to make a home for the afterlife of their Pharaoh. It will mystify you. I find the same tension, in thinking about Jesus empty tomb. So let's talk about...

### **A. The Reality of the Resurrection.**

One of the first questions people have with the resurrection of Jesus is the historicity. Did it really happen? Can we believe a dead man came back to life? What do we have that we can see and touch and feel?

And I guess I would first want to just acknowledge the legitimacy of that kind of question. All too often, we Christians especially those of us who grew up in the church, just want people to believe and agree with our way of thinking but never pause to think about the legitimacy of their questions.

Sometimes we seem to be encouraging people into a kind of blind faith. Without any evidence, just believe. I don't think that's right or fair of us Christians. We want to be thinking people. It is good and right to ask about and investigate the historical nature of the resurrection accounts.

So, if you find yourself in this boat my first encouragement is that you have some searching and reading and studying to do. A good place to begin is a book by NT Wright **"The Resurrection of the Son of God"**.

I'm not a big fan of the "just blindly accept this" approach. So let me just talk us through some of the "historical reality" behind the resurrection stories and the empty tomb. And again, none of this proves the historicity of the resurrection, but it certainly points us in that direction.

## 1. Style

The style or genre. The Gospel's are not told as fiction or fairytale but very much seem to be told in the style of ancient history. It doesn't mean every detail is intended to be historically literal but definitely intended as historical in nature. Real places, real people, real events in history including ample of evidence from extra-Biblical sources that suggest the story is at least infused with historicity.

Second,

## 2. The Witnesses

The first eyewitnesses to the Resurrection according to the Gospels are **women**. What's interesting about this is that in the first century a woman's testimony was not considered valid or reliable. There were actually laws restricting women from testifying as eyewitnesses in a Jewish court of law. It's like if there's one thing a woman can't be, it's an eyewitness.

*Josephus, Jewish historian said that even the witness of multiple women was not acceptable **"because of the levity and boldness of their sex."***

*Celsus, the second-century critic of Christianity, mocked the idea of Mary Magdalene as an alleged resurrection witness, referring to her as a **"hysterical female . . . deluded by . . . sorcery."***

(Ortberg)

The Gospel writers who are writing about the empty tomb know this. And yet, Mary & Mary are the very first eyewitness to the resurrected Messiah.

If the Gospel writers were making this up, and wanting people to actually believe his story it just really unlikely they would have women as the primary eyewitness unless they believed it actually happened this way.

Third there is the nature of..

### **3. Jewish Resurrection Theology**

Some Jews believed in a theology of resurrection. But believed that resurrection would happen at the end of time, and that when it happened, it would happen for all people, not just the Messiah. Resurrection did not involve a one-man show, rather it was supposed to be a group event and it would mean that everything in the world had been set right. Sick people healed and starving people fed. But there was not a concept of a resurrection happening in the middle of history, for one person only. Historically speaking it becomes hard to explain the resurrection described in the Gospel's, unless it happened this way. The Jewish writers would not have "made it up like this."

Finally, there is the reality of

### **4. The Church**

You and me. It becomes very hard to explain the existence of the church without an event the magnitude of the resurrection. It's hard to come up with a good explanation why Matthew, Mark, Luke and John would have made this story up because they knew in it would probably lead to their execution.

They had seen Roman crosses where most of the fake Messiahs and their followers ended up. It doesn't seem to make sense that they would get together after Jesus died and say, *"Here's a cool idea. Let's start a brand new made-up religion that we can suffer and die for."*

John Ortberg says, **"The best explanation that will get you from deflated followers of a crucified Messiah to courageous followers (starting a church in the face of such gruesome persecution) is that they believed a resurrection actually happened and the best explanation why they believed Jesus actually rose from the dead is Jesus actually rose from the dead."**

Now again, just to clarify. We can't prove by historical evidence the resurrection. But there is a legitimate conversation to be had with both thoughtfulness and humility about what this group of people believed happened 2,000 years ago. I do not think it's fair to say the resurrection is simply naïve.

**"though admitting it involves accepting a challenge at the level of worldview itself, the best historical explanation for these phenomena is that Jesus was indeed bodily raised from the dead."** (NT Wright)

**The resurrection of Jesus was and is the most culturally significant event in history. It has changed (the world) more than anything else before or since. I think that is not just a religious statement but an empirically verifiable one. If you don't believe in the resurrection, substitute "whatever (it is you believe) happened just after the Passover in CE 33," because \*something\* happened that year that changed the world—and that's not a phrase I use lightly.** (Andy Crouch, Culture Making)

So, I would encourage you if you find yourself in this camp, wondering about the reality of the resurrection, you have some work to do. Start reading and studying and

asking those questions. We want to be thoughtful in how we approach the reality of our faith.

But then second...I think for all of us we must leave room for mystery within our worldview as we think about things like life, death, and resurrection.

## **B. The mystery**

Perhaps it is the mystery of the story that causes us the most discomfort. We would rather be able to explain more fully or rationalize it more completely. We are looking for full proof evidence, clarity...certainty.

This is why I began the message this morning with examples of this human fascination with life & death...there seems to be a human intuition that Something mysterious lies beyond what we can fully see and explain...that there is more to existence than a swirl of molecules and atoms, that death is a gate not just a fence. And this mystery transcends time and culture... and seems to go beyond certainty...

Perhaps we catch glimpses of the mystery of life in certain experiences. The love you experience as you look at your family, your spouse, your child...is this person and that feeling you get simply molecules and atoms or is something more going on? The sense of injustice when you see homes bombed and families displaced...is that simply a social construct or is there a mysterious absolute reality that this is wrong. The vast starry night sky, where the universe continues to expand into "some kind of infinite space out there, that we can't yet explain." The beauty of a sunset or sunrise, that causes you to wonder if this is just a natural phenomenon or if Someone is out there painting the sky.

We find examples of this mystery of life throughout Scripture...

**His ways are not our ways...**

**Where you when I laid the foundation of the earth...**

**Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...**

**He has placed eternity in the hearts of humankind...**

The story of the resurrection seems to also have that mystery about it as well.

**“He is not here, he is risen...”**

It is the mystery that we experience in life that forces us into a sense of humility and dependency that ultimately leads to something we call FAITH or **TRUST**. The resurrection story asks us to TRUST.

John Kavanaugh, the noted and famous ethicist, once went to Calcutta, he was seeking Mother Teresa ... and more. He went for three months to work at “the house of the dying” to find out how best he could spend the rest of his life. He was wrestling with this tension in life of reality and mystery.

When he met Mother Teresa, he asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she replied. He then uttered the request he had carried thousands of miles: “Clarity. Pray that I have clarity.”

“No,” Mother Teresa answered, “I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, **“Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.”** When Kavanaugh said that “she always seemed to have clarity, the very kind of clarity he was looking for,” Mother Teresa laughed and said: **“I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”**

The mystery of the resurrection asks us to trust God. So I guess what I’m saying is that while I don’t think the resurrection is asking us to have a blind faith, it is based in reality and history, at some point it will ask us to have faith.

Some people say, if I just had enough evidence then I would believe. I don't think that's true. There is a certain point at which even evidence will not be enough...and we are then asked to trust. Reality and Mystery.

And then finally as we bring together the reality and the mystery of the resurrection we find an

### **C. An Invitation to Hope**

When the women arrive they are invited into the tomb to see for themselves that the body is not here.

In fact, this is important to notice. Did you catch this? When the women arrive the stone has to be rolled away by the angel in order for them to enter in but the body is already gone.

Did the angel roll it back after Jesus walked out? Shouldn't the stone already have been moved so Jesus could get out? It seems more likely the stone is rolled away, not so Jesus can get out but so that the women can go in and see for themselves. It is an invitation.

And the moment they stepped foot in that empty tomb...and they saw no body...the thought began to formulate. Is it really possible...could it truly be...

Death, monotony, pain, defeat...temptation and depression and loneliness and fear...molecules and atoms...do not get the final word in our lives. Jesus does.

You and I also are invited into that tomb to believe, trust...hope that the tomb is empty. Is there more to this life?

Your boss is still cranky, your spouse is still imperfect, the money you want in your bank account is still not there, the empty chair at your table is still not filled, the runaway child has still not come home, anxiety still rears its ugly head, addiction never seems to fully subside, the dream still hasn't come true...but just this one thing as you enter the tomb... He is not here, he is risen!"

The invitation is to believe in a life, a power, a person that makes real change possible.

Death turns to life...And that gives us hope. Hope to face life. Hope to face cancer and covid. Hope when we see homeless Ukrainians. Hope when we hear about sex-trafficking and drug addiction. Hope to face death. Hope to encourage us and hope that can change the world. In the reality and mystery of the resurrection we find the greatest story of hope ever offered the human race.

And I'll just say, if you're a little uncertain about this invitation. You still have questions about the reality and the mystery we find in the resurrection, then sometimes the best way to begin is to simply start by following Jesus.

The resurrection was not the first thing Jesus did to prove to his followers he was the Messiah. It was actually one of the last things he did. He first invited them on a journey through life. The reality of the resurrection happened later.

All throughout the Gospels the invitation by Jesus is "come follow me." Come follow me. Watch me first. Listen to my teaching. Notice how I love and who I love. Notice the value I place on stuff and people. Witness my patience and grace. Watch how I forgive sinners and touch lepers.

Come follow and if you do, you'll begin to see in small ways "resurrection life"...new life...change...transformation happening. So that when the ultimate resurrection happens, it won't be such a shocker for you.

Jesus usually didn't say "come and believe all the right information about me and then you can follow me." He more often seemed to be saying, "come follow me, and eventually you'll come to believe the right stuff about me."

And see that's what we're trying to do here at Five Forks. So if you want to do that, the invitation is to join us at Five Forks each week. If you don't have a community to follow Jesus with. Come back next Sunday. Come back the Sunday after that. We're on a journey here at Five Forks that is all about...knowing, loving and following this Jesus.