

NOTE FROM PASTOR JONATHAN

Happy Easter! He is risen, indeed! I pray that the Good News of Jesus' resurrection will impact your life throughout the week.

Don't forget to sign up for Outreach Day (<https://willingdon.org/events/outreach-day/>)! I hope your group can serve together and share the Gospel with our community.

We'll be doing a sermon series on FAMILY, DISCIPLESHIP, and MISSION. It'll be a great time for all of us to get on the same page and see where God is leading us.

Matthew 27:57 - 28:15

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' ⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

¹ Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Let's Warm Up: Questions to break the ice.

1. Do you have a favorite keepsake or memento that reminds you of a significant moment or event in your life?

Some of us collect specific categories of souvenirs when we travel, like shot glasses or Starbucks mugs decorated with local landmarks, fridge magnets, or photo booth prints. Many married couples have wedding rings to remember the commitments they made to their spouses. Parents may keep their children's baby teeth.

What do you have?

In this week's passage, the stone reminds us of Jesus' resurrection and defeat of death.

2. What is the most meaningful monument or memorial you have visited? What message did you receive from it?

When I first moved to Canada, I couldn't help but notice all the monuments for and buildings named after Terry Fox (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_monuments_and_memorials_to_Terry_Fox). It reminds us to try big things and make the world a better place. Every Remembrance Day, we wear poppy flowers to remember the horrific and unnecessary deaths from war. They remind us to seek peace and avoid war. There are multiple Holocaust Museums and Holocaust exhibits in Canada that show us the horrors humanity can inflict on each other. They remind us that hate is dangerous and can lead to unthinkable actions. Some of us may visit local historical sites like the Steveston fishing village to remember our immigrant past. It reminds them of the sacrifices their ancestors made.

What monument or memorial stands out to you?

In this week's passage, Jesus turns a tomb from a monument of death to proof of the victory over death.

3. Are you FOR or AGAINST surprises (like surprise parties)? Try to convince people with the opposite view

Some people love surprises because surprises are the spice of life, and the spice *must* flow. You love the adrenaline spike when everyone pops out and yells, "Surprise!" You're so touched that people got together to plan something just for you.

Other people don't like surprises. What if they pick the wrong food or activity? Or what if they catch you at an inconvenient time? What if you want something small and low-key, not something elaborate?

The first sermon I heard Pastor Vinh preach was about John the Baptist. His illustration was of someone preparing the party guests for the arrival of Jesus, the VIP. I still remember him saying he *hates* surprise parties. So, for his birthday, nobody better decorate the church for Sunday morning, hide everyone in the sanctuary, and jump out to yell "Surprise!" when he arrives or when he goes up to preach. Seriously, guys, let's not do that. Don't even suggest it.

In this week's passage, Jesus' followers encounter the biggest surprise of their lives.

Let's Get Started: Questions to start thinking about the main themes.

4. What do people around you believe about Jesus' death and resurrection?

Only 36% of Canadians believe Jesus' death and resurrection were a historical event (<https://angusreid.org/do-canadians-believe-life-after-death-afterlife-reincarnation>). Shockingly, only 59% of Christians believe it happened. Somehow, 26% of Muslims believe Jesus died and came back from the dead, especially in light of the Quran (see below).

Only 66% of Americans believe the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection (<https://research.lifeway.com/2020/09/08/americans-hold-complex-conflicting-religious-beliefs-according-to-latest-state-of-theology-study/>). Famously, American founding father Thomas Jefferson cut and pasted his own version of the Gospels, removing all supernatural elements because he thought Jesus was only a moral teacher. His Bible ends with Jesus being laid in the tomb and the stone placed over the door (<https://americanhistory.si.edu/JeffersonBible/the-book/?view=scan&page=86#dl>).

Here are some examples of what other religions believe about Jesus' death and resurrection:

Islam. Muslims believe that Jesus wasn't crucified, but Allah made it look like He was. There's debate among Muslims as to what this means, including Allah swapping someone else (possibly Judas) to be crucified in Jesus' place.

"And for their saying, 'We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God.' In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise." (Quran 4:156-159)

Some Muslims interpret the phrase "raised him up" to refer to a "dignified and exalted" death, which would also rule out crucifixion.

Judaism. Ancient Jewish authors wrote that Jesus was a real person who was executed (Sanhedrin 43a.20). In another writing, a Jewish convert resurrects famous bad guys (like Titus and Balaam) and asks about their fates. He resurrects Jesus, and Jesus says He's being boiled in excrement as His eternal punishment (Gittin 57a). Jews generally believe that Jesus was a real person who died and stayed dead.

Hinduism. Hinduism is full of gods who are manifestations of *the* god Brahman. Many believe that Jesus is one of the avatars of Brahman, just like Vishnu or Krishna. Others believe Jesus was a man who achieved unity with god through god-consciousness, setting an example for others to do the same (<https://radical.net/article/hindus-believe-jesus/>). Their view often leaves out the concept of sin and states that other leaders have died and resurrected (e.g., <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/hindu-view-easter-yogananda-iii>).

5. Consider a non-Christian in your life. How would you explain Jesus' death and resurrection to them?

It's important to share the message of Easter with others! As the world continues to experience chaos and insecurity, the people around us are looking for stability and safety. We aren't like the gurus on YouTube peddling earthly strategies that may or may not work. Or telling people to look deep within themselves for hope. We're telling people about someone who defeated death and offers eternal life.

Of course, it's important to shape our Gospel presentation to fit who we are sharing with.

Is this person from a different religious background? We might use shared concepts or ideas to bridge them into the Gospel. For example, many religions have different ideas of earning salvation/paradise/other heavenly rewards. We can share about God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). Many religions integrate some biblical history, such as Judaism and Islam. We can talk about what makes Christianity similar and different.

Are they hung up on certain aspects of the Gospel, like sin or hell? We can acknowledge their struggle and spend more time explaining those concepts. Hopefully, we can clear up any confusion they may have.

How good is their language ability? Children or people who speak English as a second language will require easier wording. We may also have to explain the same idea a few different ways to get it across.

Is there a limited amount of time? Perhaps we can only share everything briefly and at a superficial level. Or we can share parts and find time to meet again to share more.

Are they wrestling with something in their lives? Use that as a way to bring in the Gospel. In the book *Turning Everyday Conversations into Gospel Conversations*, the authors write about listening for the problems, issues, and concerns of everyday conversations to transition into the Gospel. Their example statement (which they encourage readers to customize) is, "I haven't been through the exact situation that you just mentioned, but I have had similar problems. Can I share something with you that really helped me?"

Critically, we must also pray! Ultimately, their natural, congenital sinfulness makes them reject the Gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3-6). Just as God has to open our eyes to cherish His Good News, they need Him to, too.

Here are a few key points that are part of the Gospel presentation. Adapt these points to your audience.

God created the world (Genesis 1). He is a loving and just God who gave the people He created rules to follow so they could enjoy a perfect life with Him. Instead of following God's perfect plans, they wanted to be like God instead of obeying Him (Genesis 3). They rebelled against God by trying to do things their own way. Their actions had consequences, most importantly, separation from God and punishment for defying Him. This punishment is death (Romans 6:23). We aren't innocent, because we also disobey God whenever we choose to love something more than Him (Matthew 22:34-40). Therefore, we deserve God's punishment.

Since God loves people and would much rather sinners turn back to Him than to punish them (Ezekiel 18:21-23), God sent His Son Jesus (John 3:16). Jesus lived a perfect life and was killed on the cross. When He died, He took on all the punishment that we deserve (Isaiah 53:4-5). He was raised from the dead, proving that we can also be raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-21). If we believe that Jesus is Lord and was raised from the dead, our sins will be forgiven and we'll be saved (Romans 10:9).

Let's Dig In: Questions to discuss the passage and how we can respond.

6. What costs/risks did Joseph take to bury Jesus' body? What does that reveal about what he thought about Jesus?

Some of you may have been wondering about the lyric from the song "O Praise the Name (Anastasis)": "They laid Him down in Joseph's tomb". Now you know. It's Joseph of Arimathea. Matthew only mentions that he's rich, from Arimathea, and a disciple of Jesus. We don't know where Arimathea is.

We learn in John that Nicodemus (another religious leader who came to Jesus back in John 3) also helped to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39-40).

Time. Nowadays, the next day begins at midnight, 12:00 AM. For Jewish people, the next day began at sundown. Jesus died at 3 PM (Matthew 27:46, the Roman day started at 6 AM, so 9 hours would be 3 PM). The sun goes down around 7:00 PM at this time of year (<https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/israel/jerusalem>). Normally, Joseph and Nicodemus would have spent those hours preparing for the Sabbath by buying supplies, preparing food, cleaning up their homes, or preparing their hearts. Instead, they're handling a dead body. By doing so, they become unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11-13). They can't celebrate the Sabbath with their families or do their regular lives for a whole week.

Possible Persecution. Other Gospels note that Joseph was part of the council of religious leaders who condemned Jesus to death, but he was against their decision (Luke 23:50-51). Being part of the council gave him access to Jesus.

Normally, the bodies of crucified criminals were just unceremoniously dumped like garbage. By preparing Jesus' body and giving it a dignified burial, Joseph and Nicodemus are on the radar of their fellow religious leaders. Joseph knows this group is anti-Jesus enough to kill Him the worst way possible. What's stopping them from going one step further and killing His followers? At the very least, they risk being kicked off the council and shunned by the religious establishment. Their status and lives are on the line.

Monetary Cost. Joseph bought the linen cloth used to wrap Jesus (Mark 15:46) and Nicodemus bought 75 pounds of spices (John 19:39). The big cost would be a new tomb cut into the rock. They didn't have jackhammers, excavators, or dynamite. People had to hand-dig into solid rock. That was labor-intensive and took time. There's debate about where Jesus' tomb is, but check out what it might have looked like (<https://youtu.be/TXCZyqVK-7Y>). It wasn't cheap.

This tomb was for Joseph and his family. Back then, you'd put a body in the tomb and let it decompose. After a year, only bones would be left. The family would move the bones into an ossuary (bone box, https://youtu.be/dpJZfC02_vo), freeing up space for more bodies. As Pastor Ray said, by putting a notorious criminal in Joseph's tomb, it becomes contaminated. Nicodemus would have to get another tomb for himself and his family, or be placed in a dishonored tomb.

7. If you were with the women, how would you respond to the angel, the empty tomb, or seeing Jesus alive?

The women, along with the other disciples, had spent a chunk of their lives following Jesus. They experienced teachings and miracles they had never seen before. They met the first person in the world who did not sin. He opened their eyes about the kingdom of God and forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He loved and cared for them like nobody ever had. They loved Him in response.

Instead of coming in and installing His kingdom, they saw Him brutally executed on a cross. The cross was so vile it was scandalous to even talk about it (Cic. Rab. Perd. 5.16; 1 Corinthians 1:23). They saw Him cry out in agony and die. The blood loss, filthy nails in his hands and feet, and trauma to His body meant certain death. They saw Jesus' body placed in a tomb and rolled behind a rock. Jesus could raise people from the dead (Matthew 9:24; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:38-44), but who could raise Jesus? Their friend, Lord, and Savior was certainly dead. Their Sabbath observances used to be joyful with Jesus. But the night of Jesus' death, this Sabbath was different.

And on the morning after the Sabbath, the women want to bring more spices (Mark 15:1-2) for Jesus' body. On the way to the tomb, they wonder how they were going to get in the tomb because of the big stone (Mark 16:3). But when they arrive, their plans are completely thrown out the window. There's an angel who looks like lightning. The tomb is empty. And Jesus meets them. Boom, boom, boom. Just *one* of these events would be overwhelming enough, but they're hit with three surprises, one after the other.

Would you need to sit down to process what's going on? Would you be like that meme with the confused lady and the math symbols (<https://i1.wp.com/media.boingboing.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/bcf.png>)? Would you just follow your emotions and accept whatever's going on? Would your higher brain shut off so you can go with the flow without thinking about it? Or would you pass out from overload?

8. What are the implications if Jesus didn't come back from the dead?

Pastor Ray listed several reasons why Jesus' resurrection is *critical* for us.

- **No divine endorsement on his life and message.** Jesus said He was the Son of God and would come back from the dead. If He died and stayed dead, that would prove He was lying. God didn't have His back.
- **No meaning to his horrific death.** Jesus brutally died and stayed dead. For what? The disciples would have just scattered. Jesus' teachings would be forgotten like any other crackpot. Who would want to follow Jesus' teaching if it only ended in death on a cross? No thanks.
- **No salvation for sinners like us.** Jesus talked a big game about forgiving sins, but if He stayed dead, there would be no guarantee that sins were forgiven. How could people know for certain that Jesus took on the punishment for sins? As Paul wrote, if Jesus didn't come back from the dead, we'd still be dead in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:16-19).
- **No hope for Jesus' return.** There are plenty of cults where the leader tells his followers he'll be back. They died and never came back. Jesus would be the same.
- **No foundation stone to rest our lives on.** Jesus' death to forgive sins and resurrection to prove eternal life (1 Corinthians 15:20-23) are foundational to the Christian faith. If Jesus just died and stayed dead, He would be, at best, a good moral teacher. At worst, a delusional false teacher.
- **No hope for divine justice to right all wrongs.** Jesus dies of gross injustice. Hypocritical religious leaders win and can continue their corrupt systems. Evil wins!
- **No hope for our resurrection and reward.** Ancient Egyptians had a complex system to preserve the body so that the soul could go to the afterlife (<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/44/mummification-in-ancient-egypt/>). What I always found fascinating was how they would know *this* system worked? It's not like ordering DoorDash, where the delivery driver sends a photo of your sushi party platter #4 with a side order of poutine sitting on the front porch as proof of delivery. Egyptian families didn't receive a postcard from their loved ones, "Hey! Thanks for pulling my brain out of my nose. It worked, so I'm in the afterlife." But Jesus came back from the dead, proving the resurrection to be real and assuring the reward for those who follow Him.

9. Pastor Ray gave evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Which provides the most assurance for you?

Whether or not Jesus existed isn't up for debate. Plenty of non-Christian sources refer to Jesus as a historical figure (e.g., Sanhedrin 43a:20; Tacitus 15:44; Antiquities 20:9). Non-Christian religions also affirm His existence, like Judaism

and Islam. Even the Dalai Llama thinks Jesus was a real spiritual teacher. But what sets Christians apart is our belief that Jesus came died, and back from the dead.

Here is what Pastor Ray shared with my added elaborations.

- **The empty tomb (both religious and non-religious scholars agree on this one).** The anti-Jesus Jewish religious leaders and Roman soldiers acknowledged that Jesus' body was not in the tomb. If there were a body, the religious leaders could have easily used it to disprove the resurrection. And how could a band of cowards overpower a group of soldiers to steal the body?
- **The whole account rings true. No fabricated story from the 1st century would have women as the first witnesses. Sadly, they were not considered to be credible.** If people were to make up a story, they would use credible witnesses. If you want to sell a medication, you get a scientist or a doctor, not a pet psychic (<https://youtu.be/M3cPiCH22rw>). In Jesus' time, a woman's testimony wasn't credible (Shevout 30a.4). If this were written by a regular person in Jesus' time, manly men would have been there first. God often picks the most unlikely people to be pivotal to His mission (e.g., Jacob the liar, Moses the murderer, Gideon the coward, random fishermen).
- **The disciples, who went from being afraid to boldly proclaiming the resurrection. They died for this resurrection miracle.** The disciples all abandoned Jesus when He was arrested. One disciple even ran off naked (Mark 14:51-52). Peter denied Jesus three times, not to powerful leaders, but nobodies. After the resurrection, imprisonment, and death couldn't stop them from preaching about Jesus.
- **We have the four ancient Gospel accounts (both Christian and non-Christian scholars agree that they are historical accounts).** Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a lot in common, but also provide unique material. John brings in a lot from his vantage point. Amazingly, these four accounts all work together to tell the same overall story. And unlike many of the documents we have for other ancient historical figures written hundreds of years after their death (see below point), the Gospels have first-hand accounts and witnesses (e.g., Luke 1:1-4).
- **We have the oldest confession in Scripture, dated to a few years after his resurrection (again, even the most liberal scholars agree that it is authentic).** We have way more documentary evidence and of higher quality for the existence of Jesus than for many historical figures. Check out this article comparing the evidence for Julius Caesar versus Jesus (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/sources-for-caesar-and-jesus-compared/>).

For further research, check out Lee Strobel's research on evidence for the resurrection (<https://youtu.be/OnJKQv5XkK0>).

10. What steps can you take to give your heart to Jesus?

Pastor Ray gave a few examples of what our hearts may be like.

- **If your heart is dead, He can make it beat again.** Perhaps you have been following Jesus in the past, but that joy has died. Jesus calls people who are spiritually dead to come to Him (e.g., Revelation 2 and 3). Ask Jesus to make you alive.
- **If your heart is blinded, his divine light can shine on you.** Perhaps you can't see where Jesus is or where He's directing you. Or you've heard of the Gospel, but you don't see what makes it so special. Ask Him to shine His light and cause you to see (2 Corinthians 4:1-6).
- **If your heart is sealed shut, Jesus can gently open it.** Perhaps your heart has grown cold. You used to be excited to spend time with and worship Jesus, but that excitement has died down. Jesus is eager to come into your heart and be with you (Revelation 3:20). Ask Jesus to soften your heart (Ezekiel 36:26).

- **Even if you've dug your own grave, Jesus calls your name.** Perhaps you've lived a life in complete rebellion against God. All over the Gospels, Jesus is glad to spend time with what would be considered the worst of the worst (Mark 2:13-17). Jesus even called someone who murdered Christians (Acts 9:1-16).
- **Even if your heart is sealed by a heavy stone (an argument, a question, or a doubt), Jesus is still rolling stones away.** Many famous Christians were fervently skeptical of Jesus. But, praise God, Jesus overcame those objections and they became enthusiastic spreaders of the Gospel. These include C.S. Lewis (<https://youtu.be/ydyCqhzVZVE>), Josh McDowell (WARNING, his testimony is graphic: <https://youtu.be/FrTk72TCyzc>), Nabeel Qureshi (<https://youtu.be/MNk59C9Yg2A>), John Lennox (<https://youtu.be/haBHDekMoFU>), Lee Strobel (<https://youtu.be/tbo731FiNfE>), and Alister McGrath (<https://youtu.be/Hp6SuVaxuJ0>). If you have doubts about Jesus, ask Him to show you the truth.

Whatever your situation, **"Jesus is still rolling stones away."** Jesus *loves* to bring people to Him, so don't feel guilty or think you're a burden. Jesus died on the cross so you can be forgiven and saved to live forever with Him (John 17:3). He *wants* your stones away!