**“Linchpin” series / 18: Linchpin – Resurrection / May 8, 2022**

Okay, guys, think of yourselves as a jury … which you kind of like really are. And at the end of this … “trial,” you will cast your vote. And there is no abstaining! You will vote. But here’s what’s weird: how you vote will not determine what happens to him; instead, how you vote will determine what happens to you. I’m going to lay out some of the evidence, and you’re going to have to make a call. It’s kind of like we’re going to put Jesus on trial, and … if there is a God, and … if Jesus really is the Son of God … then how you judge Jesus will determine how God judges you, right? That’s what Jesus claims! Well, what if he’s right?

So, here it is: for the next few minutes I am going to talk about the most important thing in your life.

* You may be struggling at home. In fact, your family may be falling apart – this is more important.
* You may be in the middle of a financial crisis that is crushing you, or struggling on your job – this is more important.
* You may be tired, or hungry, sick, in love, grumpy, depressed – this is more important.
* You may be a devoted Christian, a struggling Christian, you may not be a Christian at all … yet – what we are going to talk about for the next few minutes is still the most important thing in your life.

Bottom line, you will have to make a decision about a man who leaves you with very few viable options. And if Jesus was right, what you do with him will be the single biggest decision of your life. Now, I’m talking about the real Jesus – not the fairy tale Jesus we create for ourselves sometimes because he is safe. When you understand the real Jesus, you will come to the decision that he is either an incredibly dangerous liar, toying with our souls; or he is an absolute lunatic, a pitiable madman who actually believed himself to be God; or, he is the most important thing in your life. Because, guys, Jesus made claims so arrogant, demands so outrageous, and promises so wild that you cannot treat him with apathy or condescension. You cannot simply “like” Jesus, not ignore him. You can dismiss him as a lunatic, you can turn your back on him as a liar, or you can abandon yourself to him as your Lord. There are no other reasonable options, guys.

Now, we’ve been laying out the case for God since January, and focusing on Jesus since Easter.

* Some people will tell you that maybe there was no real Jesus, at all. Maybe this whole Jesus thing was a story, a myth, a legend, a fairy tale. But that won’t hold. The historical evidence for a real Jesus is overwhelming. We unpacked that last week.
* And … some people will tell you that maybe there was a real Jesus, but maybe the real Jesus never actually claimed to be God. Maybe the real Jesus never claimed to be the only way to God, the standard by which all truth is measured, the key to real life both in this world and in the next. Maybe the real Jesus was just a nice guy, a great teacher, maybe, an inspiring … “man” … but that’s all. But, guys, that won’t hold either. We went through that. The kinds of things Jesus claimed, the kinds of things he promised, the kinds of things he demanded … he was either the most sinister liar ever, the craziest lunatic ever … or he was God … in a bod … as crazy as that sounds … because that is exactly who he claimed to be!

The evidence is clear, guys: that is who he claimed to be. And so, they killed him … brutally. And Jesus was clearly dead. And then they buried him. And all his followers were completely disillusioned. And, if Jesus stayed dead, then he was a liar, or he was a lunatic, and you need to turn your back and walk away from him. Everything we are doing here this morning is a waste of our time and money. But, folks, if Jesus is alive, then there is nothing more important in your life – nothing – than to bend your knees to Jesus. If he is alive, then what he said about himself is true, and what he demands from us is right, and what he promises we take to the bank.

So today we are going to look at the resurrection of Jesus. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is the final piece in our “God Canceled?” series. This is why I am a Christian today – because as a historian and a scholar, I believe Jesus is alive. I know that sounds crazy, but that’s where the evidence points … overwhelmingly.

Now, let me start by saying this again: I cannot prove to you, beyond any doubt, that Jesus rose from the dead. And you can’t prove to me that he didn’t. But I can prove to you logically, and historically that the resurrection of Jesus makes sense. In fact, it makes far better sense than any other explanation for the evidence we have. In the end, if you accept Jesus as Lord, it will take a leap faith. But it will take a far greater leap of faith not to believe when the evidence is this powerful.

Now, we have to start by leveling the playing field, because some of you may be tempted to cheat. A lot of guys are like, “How can you prove that God raised Jesus from the dead if you can’t even prove there is a God? And if there is no God, there can be no resurrection, right?” And, you’re right: I can’t … prove to you there is a God. And you can’t prove there’s not. But, there is way more evidence for God than against him … it’s not even close. And … if there could be a God, then you have to admit there could be a resurrection, right? He wouldn’t be much of a God if he couldn’t pull off a resurrection. I mean, if a transcendent, eternal, all powerful Creator God could pull off a “Creation,” then you’d have to admit he could pull off a resurrection, right? So, we’re just going to level the playing field. There might be a God, or not. Where does the evidence point? We’ve been unpacking that since January. If you want to catch up, you can find it all on our web page, Facebook page, or YouTube channel. And, God might have raised Jesus from the dead, or not … where does the evidence point? And can you find a better explanation for the evidence we’re going to lay out?

You see, this is the linchpin, the coup de grace, the smoking gun. This resurrection is the incontrovertible evidence that there is a God, and that Jesus is the Son of God. And I am going to lay out three lines of evidence that God raised Jesus from the dead: strong physical evidence; very credible, very persuasive eyewitness evidence; and some rather overwhelming circumstantial evidence. So here goes.

We’ll start out with the physical evidence. Here it is: On Friday they put his corpse in a tomb; on Sunday the tomb was empty. That’s not disputable. His tomb was empty. And it is simply not rational, not reasonable to believe that either his friends, or his enemies moved the body. Guys, the historical evidence that the tomb was empty is overwhelming. Listen to the facts.

Fact #1: The unanimous testimony of all the witnesses was that the tomb was empty. And this isn’t testimony coming decades later when their claims could not be challenged. These guys were preaching an empty tomb six weeks after the crucifixion in the same city where Jesus’ body was buried. Listen: all their enemies had to do to shut these guys up was to produce the body of Jesus. They could have stopped Christianity in its tracks by rolling away the stone and producing the body. And these Jesus followers are out on the streets preaching the empty tomb six weeks later! This isn’t a story they made up decades later when it couldn’t be challenged or corroborated. The fact is, the tomb was empty.

Fact #2: The reports of the empty tomb have all the marks of historical accuracy. I’ll give you three evidences that these accounts of an empty tomb are historically accurate.

* One: All the accounts tell us that the tomb was discovered by women. Now, that wouldn’t mean much today, but in Jesus’ time women didn’t count as witnesses. Back then, if you were making this story up you never have women to be the first to the tomb, or the first to see Jesus. No one back then would have “invented” a story like this.
* Two: There are just no frills. The accounts of the resurrection are so simple. There is so little drama. If you were making this story up about a resurrection you would have had more fun telling about “how” Jesus was raised from the dead, “how” Jesus escaped the tomb, “what” he looked like, and all the other stuff of legend. And it’s just not there.
* And, Three: All the accounts differ in little details. I know, that may sound strange as a mark of their credibility. But the fact is, if these accounts agreed in all the little details, we would suspect collusion. But the fact that the accounts agree on the big stuff and differ on the little stuff is powerful evidence that these are independent witnesses of the same events. That a really big deal, historically.

So, #1: the unanimous testimony of all the witnesses was that the tomb was empty. And, #2: … the accounts have all the marks of historical accuracy. Fact #3: The enemies of the church never denied the empty tomb. They simply tried to explain it away. Listen, guys, the Jewish leaders hated the church, and all they had to do to kill the church was to produce the body of Jesus. And they couldn’t. All they could do was make up a story that the disciples had stolen the body. I mean, 6 weeks later Peter and John are arrested and dragged before the same court that had had Jesus crucified. The guys who ordered Jesus killed ordered Peter and John to shut up about this Jesus being alive. I mean, all they had to do was open the tomb and drag out the body to discredit them … and us. They couldn’t.

So that’s solid physical evidence, guys: The tomb was empty. Three days later, the body was gone. And no one has come up with a better explanation of that empty tomb than God raising Jesus from the dead. They have tried.

* The Jews said that the disciples stole the body. Really?! Would you buy that?! It’s a stupid theory. If this were some kind of scam, if the disciples stole the body so they could keep preaching Jesus, something they knew to be a lie, wouldn’t they have confessed their lies once they started dying for Jesus? I’ll get back to that nonsense later.
* And there are some guys who have suggested that maybe Jesus’ never really … “died.” Maybe he was just mostly dead. Maybe he just fainted on the cross and looked dead. They put the mostly dead body in the tomb, where the cool, damp air of the tomb revived him, and then Jesus wriggled his way out of his grave clothes, and then rolled away this massive stone, overpowered the guards, and escaped on feet that had been split by nails three days earlier. Listen, guys, anyone who understands crucifixion laughs at this nonsense.
* The only other alternative would be that the Jews moved the body. But why? And if they had the body, why wouldn’t they produce it when the followers of Jesus became a thorn in their side.

The fact is, the tomb was empty. And a real God can do things like that. So … that’s the physical evidence. Now, let’s look at the eyewitness evidence. Here are the facts, guys. The risen Jesus was seen by a whole lot of people. He was seen by individuals. He was seen by groups. They saw him, they touched him, they talked with him, they ate with him. He was seen repeatedly over several weeks. He was seen by skeptics. And then he was gone. And the people who saw him alive went to their deaths, never backing down.

Let me give you a list of just some of the people who saw Jesus alive after the crucifixion.

* He appeared to Mary Magdalene; a second Mary, the mother of one of his disciples; and some other women who were with them. Again, in Jesus’ day, you would not make up a story in which the first people to meet Jesus were women. Women didn’t count as witnesses back then. Did you know that the reason ladies count today is because of Jesus? We’ll talk about that next week.
* And then, Jesus appeared to his 11 disciples … repeatedly. They touched him, they talked with him, they ate with him. He appeared to his disciples at least six times that we have records of.
* And then, Jesus appeared to a guy named Cleopas and a friend of his – in fact he walked miles with them … within days of having nails driven through his feet! And he talked with them, and he ate with them.
* And then, Jesus appeared individually to Peter, and to James – Jesus’ brother, and then to Paul.
* And then, he appeared to more than five hundred people at one time. And when these early Jesus followers were out there preaching the resurrection of Jesus, most of those people were still around to corroborate what they had seen.

Guys, these were not fleeting observances of some shadowy figure in the distance … like some Big Foot. They touched Jesus. They talked with him. They ate with him. Indoors, outdoors; in Jerusalem, in Galilee for weeks. And then he was gone. They saw him go, and these physical appearances stopped. And when these Jesus followers stepped out onto the street corners of Jerusalem six weeks after they had killed Jesus, preaching to the very same people who had put Jesus on that cross, they didn’t preach that Jesus had been a good man, they didn’t preach that Jesus had been a good teacher, they preached that he was alive, and they were willing to go to their own crosses to back it up. And they did!

How do you explain away eyewitness testimony this powerful? People have tried.

* Some have argued that all this was simply a scam. They’ll try to tell you that dozens, maybe hundreds were involved in this plot to steal the body of Jesus and then they concocted a story about God rolling away the stone. It won’t wash. How many of you old guys remember something called “Watergate.” One of the guys involved in the Watergate coverup was a guy named Charles Colson. A couple years later he became a Christian. Here’s what Colson said. He said, “I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world, and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible." Gail Mitchell sent me that. It’s pretty good. This was not a scam perpetrated by some really, really masochistic disciples!
* Others … others have argued that maybe the stories just got better and better as time went on. Maybe, they wonder, maybe it all got started with a story about some fleeting appearance of someone who looked like Jesus, and as time went on the stories grew until hundreds saw him, and touched him, and talked with him, and ate with him. But, guys, that won’t wash. These accounts go back to the earliest days of the church. These accounts were told when the eyewitnesses were still available to confirm or deny the reports.
* And, some have argued that these “sightings of Jesus” were simply hallucinations. Maybe these early Jesus followers had eaten the wrong mushrooms, or something! But, come on! That, individually and in groups, indoors and outdoors, people who were skeptical, people who had not been smoking the wrong stuff saw him, and touched him, and talked with him, over 6 weeks … and then he was gone?! It won’t wash. Those who study hallucinations tell us that the factors that produce hallucinations simply weren’t present.

So: We have physical evidence, an empty tomb. And, we have extremely credible eyewitness evidence. And no explanation accounts for these facts better than God raising Jesus from the dead. And … And …. we have some powerful circumstantial evidence. Consider these facts. Are you ready?

#1: Something changed these guys … suddenly. Listen, guys, when Jesus died these folks were discouraged and depressed. Their hopes had died with Jesus. They believed that those who were crucified were cursed by God. They believed that messiahs don’t die. God can’t die. And yet, in six weeks they were abandoning their jobs and their securities, and committing the rest of their lives to preaching this Jesus, without any earthly payoff. They went without food for him, they were ridiculed, beaten, imprisoned, and executed in the most brutal ways – for no other reason than the fact that they had seen Jesus, risen from the dead. They had no ulterior motives; they had a whole lot to lose – from a human point of view. But they had seen Jesus. And that changed everything! Immediately. Guys, this is incredibly powerful circumstantial evidence.

And it wasn’t just his disciples who were changed. #2: Skeptics turned around and followed Jesus. It’s one thing for those who loved Jesus to be convinced. It’s another for those who didn’t. Consider two of these guys,

* James was Jesus’ half brother … same mom, different dad. Well, what would it take for your brother to convince you that he was actually God, in a bod? Well, James and the rest of his family was confused by Jesus. They were embarrassed by him; they suspected he had gone mad; they confronted him. But something happened, and James did a 180. After the authorities had killed Jesus, James, his brother, saw him … alive. Well, that might change your mind, right? And James became a fierce Jesus follower, a leader of the Jerusalem church. In fact, James wrote a letter that became part of our New Testament. And, thirty years later, he was stoned because he believed his “brother” was actually his “God” … in a bod! Sudden, radical transformation.
* Or Paul. Paul was a leader of the Jews, a persecutor of the church. He hated Jesus … till he saw him alive, again. And he did a 180 … no kidding! After that, Paul traveled thousands of miles suffering from hunger, the elements, and countless other dangers. He was jailed repeatedly, whipped repeatedly, stoned repeatedly. And finally, he had his head cut off for preaching this Jesus he had once hated. But something happens to a man who comes face to face with the risen Jesus.

Powerful evidence, guys. You have physical evidence: an indisputably empty tomb. You have eyewitness evidence: a plethora of credible eyewitnesses. You have circumstantial evidence: the sudden transformation from broken, disillusioned, hopeless disciples into the fearless, tireless, missionaries who took the good news of Jesus into a hostile world where it spread like an airborne virus.

Well … you are the jury. Was Jesus an incredibly dangerous liar, toying with our souls; or was an absolute lunatic, a pitiable madman who actually believed himself to be God … but wasn’t; or, is he … your God? You see, Jesus made claims so arrogant, demands so outrageous, and promises so wild that you cannot treat him with apathy or condescension. You cannot simply “like” Jesus. And you can’t ignore him. You can dismiss him as a lunatic, you can turn your back on him as a liar, or you can abandon yourself to him as your Lord. There are no other reasonable options, guys.

So … it’s time to make a call. Remember, if Jesus rose from the dead … there is a God. Case closed. And if Jesus predicted his death, and his resurrection … and then pulled it off, then he is who he claimed to be … God … in a bod. Case closed. Which means, he can keep his promises; and what he demands in return … the surrender of our lives to him … well, that’s where real life begins … for now, and for forever.

Invitation …

Lord’s Supper

* Represents broken body and shed blood
* But meaningless if Jesus stayed dead
* When he walked out of that tomb
  + Became God’s grace, forgiveness, our acceptance
  + Because foretaste of a meal that is coming