

Making a Messiah: Unit 4 - "Verdicts"

Sermon 4: God's Verdict (Easter) -- April 21, 2019

(Many of the ideas drawn from Andy Stanley)

Wow! Glad you're here! And for those of you over in our Video Venue, and those of you who are watching us online, we are really glad you're here! Welcome to Cap City, Easter morning! If you are a guest, we'd love to connect with you. There are some Connect Cards in the chair backs in front of you. If you'd fill it out and drop it in one of the boxes near the doors on your way out, we'll send you some information about what's going on here. And if you check one of the boxes on the back side of the card, we'll make a \$5 donation to one of the organizations listed there - your choice!

Okay, we've been making the case for Jesus the Messiah since January. We've laid out ... some of the evidence (there's a whole lot more!). But we haven't gotten to the coup de grace yet! Jesus made some incredibly audacious claims about himself; he made some extraordinary demands on us; and some of the craziest promises imaginable. So, was he the most sinister liar ... ever? Or was he the craziest lunatic ... ever? Or was he really who he claimed to be: the Messiah of God, the Son of God, your Savior, and your Lord?

It's pretty obvious where we stand. We've been singing about it. And it used to be that most of the people around us believed that stuff too ... at least kind of. But that's changing, isn't it? It is becoming less and less respectable to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, our Savior, and our Lord. CNN posted an article last Saturday that says that for the first time in our history, there are more Americans who claim "no religion" than either evangelical Christians or Catholics. They call them, the "Religious Nones." That's not nuns with long black dresses; but who claim no religion. Now, there have always been agnostics and atheists in our world, in our culture; but now they seem to be winning, a lot! And some of them are not content just to reject Jesus themselves, some of them are offended when we don't reject him too. They are offended by our devotion to him. Just read the newspapers: We're becoming the bad guys! ... Okay! We've been there before.

To some, we are simply naïve, and quaint, and unsophisticated, and unenlightened. To others we are the "antis": anti-intellectual, anti-science, anti-change, anti-progress, anti-tolerance. They are offended by our insistence that there is a God, and he gets to dictate what's right and what's wrong, for all of us. That all this is on purpose, creation itself is on purpose ... his purpose. We don't hold the moral high ground any more ... they think.

These guys are smart, and they are passionate, and they are persuasive. They are militant, missionary atheists, and our kids are buying it! Can you imagine a Richard Dawkins, or a Sam Harris, or a Peter Singer, or a Christopher Hitchens up here, making their case against Jesus, against God?

- Maybe they'd start off with a blistering attack on all things Old Testament.
 - They would argue persuasively for a 13.8 billion year old universe and a 4.5 billion year old earth; and mock anyone who would entertain any alternatives.
 - They would point out all the genocidal directives of the God of the Old Testament.
 - They would pick at every weird law the Old Testament contains: If your kid is disobedient, kill him; an adulterer, kill him; gays, kill them; heretics, Sabbath violators, blasphemers, kill them.
 - They would point out the lack of solid archaeological evidence for things like the 10 plagues or the Exodus from Egypt
- And then maybe they'd move on and just tear into anyone who dares to believe in any God!
 - Just look at how many atrocities have been carried out in the name of some God!
 - And how about all the evil in the world? If there really is a God, and he really is so good, and so powerful, why would any good God permit so much evil in the world, right? At least, why wouldn't he protect his own, right?
 - And what about this weird and cruel notion of a hell?
 - And haven't Christians used their faith, their Bible to support things like slavery, and the repression of women?

Let me read for you a couple of their quotes.

- Here's Richard Dawkins: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." (The God Delusion)
- Here's Sam Harris: "It is time we admitted, from kings and presidents on down, that there is no evidence that any of our books was authored by the Creator of the universe. The Bible, it seems certain, was the work of sand-strewn men and women who thought the earth was flat and for whom a wheelbarrow would have been a breathtaking example of

emerging technology. To rely on such a document as the basis for our worldview --however heroic the efforts of redactors -- is to repudiate two thousand years of civilizing insights that the human mind has only just begun to inscribe upon itself through secular politics and scientific culture. We will see that the greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself.” (The End of Faith)

Are they right? Is what we are doing here, this morning, simply the height of superstition and folly? We actually believe that Jesus was ... God, the creator himself! We actually believe Jesus died, was buried, and 3 days later rose from the dead! We actually believe he gets to dictate why and how we live! We actually believe that, by following him, we will beat death too! Holy cow! That's weird stuff, isn't it? Why ... Why do we believe any of this stuff? ...

Northpoint Video Clip, from “Easter Matters” (7 minutes)

- Speaker 1 (Narrator): Tell me what happened.
- Speaker 2 (Peter?): I was there. They crucified Him. I can show you where they buried Him. What difference does it make at this point?
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): I understand, but just start from the beginning.
- Speaker 2 (Peter?): Well, it was amazing. A few years back, a guy shows up making all kinds of crazy claims. He spent most of his time at the river. That's where I would go to listen. Then, one afternoon He just stops, mid-sentence, points and says, "Look." We all looked. "Look," He said, "the Lamb of God." [chuckles] Just what we all needed, right? A lamb. That's the first time I saw Him, the Lamb that is. Jesus.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): You are with Jesus as well.
- Speaker 3 (Woman): I was for three years right up until, well, yesterday. It was amazing. He was amazing. The crowds, I've never seen so many people in one place. It was everywhere. Everywhere we went more crowds, they came to listen. They came to watch. Some came to criticize, others to be healed. He touched untouchable people and they were healed.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): I'm not sure I understand. He was healing people, but you seem offended.
- Speaker 4 (Pharisee): He told a man his sins were forgiven. [chuckles] People are so naive. Only God can forgive sin. His followers made mockery of the law and He never lifted a finger to stop them. He would defend them. He

would defend them and criticize us. Us. I was there the day He claimed to be greater than the temple. then the rumors started. Rumors that He would actually destroy the temple. The ignorant peasants He surrounded Himself with believed him. Worse than peasants, sinners, tax-gatherers, women.

- Speaker 5 (Woman 2): He told me about me. The part of me that shames me, but I didn't feel shamed that afternoon. Before that day, I can't remember when I haven't felt shame. That day, that day I felt alive.
- Speaker 6 (Thomas?): They knew we were coming. By that time, they knew every move we made. We didn't know who to trust, but that didn't concern Him. Off we went into the jaws of the lion, Jerusalem. The whole world was waiting for us. They lined the streets. The sound of their shouts was deafening. I'll admit, it went to our heads, but not Him. He seemed preoccupied. I would say worried, but I'm not sure if he every worried.
- Then, things got strange. He made Passover all about Him. He said, "The bread was His body and the wine was His blood." We weren't used to that kind of thing, but this seemed more unusual than normal, even for Him. Then, He announced a new covenant. We had no idea what that meant and then He gave us a new command, and we certainly didn't need any more of those.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): What was the problem?
- Speaker 4 (Pharisee): The problem? Jesus was the problem. The crowds loved Him, the crowds flocked to Him. The crowds not only believed Him, they were beginning to believe in Him. That was the problem, so we took care of Him.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): You mean, you killed Him?
- Speaker 4 (Pharisee): No, Rome killed Him. Lucky for us, it was one of His own that led us to Him. Once we had Him, well, all the other peasants scattered, as we suspected they would, but let's be clear, we did not kill Him.
- Speaker 7 (Pilate): Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. I should have made Him their king. I saw more courage, more integrity than those eyes and in the eyes of any of their high priests. They were jealous. Ask my wife, I tried to save Him, but as soon as I mentioned "King," "We have no king but Caesar," they chattered. In that moment, I realized I have no choice. Then I crucified their king. For the record, they are responsible, not me.
- Speaker 7 (Pilate): It doesn't matter now. What matters now is the Passover is over. Things will settle down now.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): What do you do now?
- Speaker 2 (Peter): We hide. We wait.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): Didn't He say He'd be back?

- Speaker 2 (Peter): Yes, He said a lot of things. More than you have room to write.
- Speaker 1 (Narrator): Do you think He'll be back?
- Speaker 2 (Peter?): Back? I don't know. I don't think so.

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We wouldn't have thought so either, right? You would have expected Jesus to do what other dead people do ... stay dead! That's why no Jesus followers were there, that Sunday morning. If you were a Jesus follower, and you expected Jesus to rise from the dead, wouldn't you be camping out ... waiting, watching, expecting, all excited like! There were no Jesus followers there, because all of us - all of us -- expected Jesus to stay dead!

(Mark 16.1-2) All the gospels -- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - all of them tell us what when the Sabbath was over, right when the shops opened up, Mary Magdalene and some other ladies purchased some spices so they could anoint the body of Jesus. Things had happened so fast, they hadn't prepared his body adequately. So they go to the tomb to doll up a corpse!

By the way, no one in that world would invent a story like this! Women didn't count in that world. No one would make up a story in which women were the first ones to ... see Jesus. But in that moment, they believed exactly like all the other Jesus followers. This ... man they loved, this amazing teacher, this miracle-worker even ... they had hoped he was their Messiah. Clearly, they were wrong. Because God would never allow the real Messiah to be crucified! They had watched him die ... They had watched their dreams die. (John 19.38-40) Can you imagine their desolation, their despair as they followed Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus when they took Jesus' corpse and put it in Joseph's tomb. By the way, these two guys had hopes for Jesus too! All of them - all of them - are in shock!

(Mark 16.3-4) Well that Sunday morning these ladies were asking each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us, because it's heavy." You see, they fully expected the tomb to be sealed, and the body of Jesus beginning to decompose. (Luke 22.2-3) But when they got there, somehow the stone had been rolled back. And Luke, who really was quite the investigative reporter, interviewing all the eyewitnesses he could find ... Luke says they went inside and they were thoroughly confused because the body was gone!

Listen guys, you need to get this. If you are a Jesus follower you need to understand this. Or, maybe you are not a Jesus follower yet; or, maybe you used to be, but you're not sure anymore - you need to get this too! Maybe you are just here because it's Easter and someone dragged you here. You need to know this: None of Jesus' closest followers ... none of them ... expected Jesus to rise from the dead. All of them expected a body; they all expected Jesus to stay dead!

(John 20.2) When Mary and the ladies who were with her stared into the empty tomb, they assumed exactly what you would assume: Someone stole the body! That's what they tell the disciples when they run back to town: "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" "We don't know who took him, and we don't know where his body is!"

(Luke 24.11) And when they raised the remote possibility that maybe he really had risen from the dead, like he said he would, the disciples didn't buy it! That sounded like absurd nonsense - to his closest followers, who had heard Jesus predict his resurrection, repeatedly. They didn't buy it!

Listen guys, if you have any skepticism at all about all this Easter stuff, join the crowd. They did too! If you are willing to admit that there really was a Jesus of Nazareth ... And once upon a time, there were some skeptics who questioned even that. But that didn't work; and no one seriously doubts that any more. But if you're one of those guys who thinks that, maybe Jesus really existed, and maybe he was a powerful teacher, and maybe he even said some things that are quite insightful, and maybe we can learn some lessons from how he lived, but ... Messiah?! Son of God?! Raised from the dead?! Really?! Well, if you're like that, you're in good company. Jesus' closest friends felt just like that ... when they discovered that his tomb was empty. None of them, nobody, assumed a resurrection; all of them assumed Jesus would stay dead!

(John 20.3-9) Well, when Peter and John heard what the women said, they had to go see for themselves. And Peter looks inside the tomb, and he sees the cloths that Joseph and Nicodemus had used to wrap Jesus' corpse ... but the body is gone. And here's what they don't do: They don't go running through the streets shouting all excited like, "He's back!" They don't go to the temple, they don't track down any of the guys who killed him and say, "You killed him, God raised him, sucks to be you!" No, John has an inkling, but the rest of them, they are just mystified!

This is huge, guys: These guys documented their own disbelief. These guys, his closest followers, and all the guys who write down the story document the skepticism and the unbelief of the very people who would lead this incredible movement that was just about to begin. These were not superstitious people! These were men and women who had lost all hope, and expected nothing more. There was no dream to keep alive, no movement to nurture back to life.

(Luke 24.36-41a) The night the disciples are still in hiding, because they are afraid the guys who killed Jesus would come for them next. They still don't buy it! And when Jesus shows up they respond just the way you might, or I might, if we saw someone we had just buried show up. Luke says they were startled and frightened, thinking he was a ghost. I think that's pretty gentle - I figure every one of them wet their pants. And they still didn't get it! None of them were like, "We've been expecting you, Jesus! About time you showed up! Let's get this thing going!"

No! This was mind-blowing! This was so new, so unexpected, so confusing, so unimaginable! I know, he'd told them before, but it was so unthinkable they just didn't get it. Messiah's don't die! Jesus says, "Why are you scared?" I would never accuse Jesus of asking a stupid question, but: "Why are you scared?" "Why are your hearts filled with doubts - still?!" "Look at my hands, look at me feet ... you know, where they drove the nails! Touch them! You still think I'm a ghost?!"

And for 40 days he keeps showing up, eating with them, teaching them, loving on them, preparing them. (Acts 1.8-9) And right before he left he told them something that change their lives forever, and ours. He says, "You guys - you guys - you are my witnesses." And they certainly were. They were witnesses to the event that changed the world. They were witnesses to the event that launched the church. Guys, it was the resurrection of Jesus, it's the resurrection of Jesus that created Christianity, and it's the resurrection of Jesus that launched the church. The church did not create the Bible and the church did not create the story of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus launched the church and created our faith.

You see, before the resurrection there were no Christians, even after he was crucified there were no believers, after he was crucified everybody gave up hope. Nobody was going to launch a movement in Jesus name. Nobody was going to repeat his teaching to anyone. Jesus claimed too much about Himself, and his crucifixion proved to them that he was not who he claimed to be. The

resurrection changed all that. Guys, the reason that we believe Jesus rose from the dead is because of the witness of these men..

I wonder how the apostle Peter might respond to a Richard Dawkins, or a Sam Harris, or a Peter Singer, or a Christopher Hitchens. Maybe he'd say something like this:

Well, guys, I've never given much thought to the age of the earth. So I can't really comment on that. I'm certainly familiar with the God of the ... what did you call it again ... the Old Testament? I know my people's history, I know what God said to Moses and Joshua - those "genocidal directives" - is that what you called them? I'm sure the reason I've never questioned those stories is because of how and when I was raised. But gentlemen, none of that ... in fact none of the stuff that bothers you ... has anything to do with my decision to follow Jesus.

You guys don't think we think well. Well, allow me to explain my reasoning. I only have one. One reason, that is. When my teacher was arrested, I ran. When asked if I knew him, I lied. When the Romans crucified him, he died. In that moment, I was like you. I had no faith. I had no reason to believe. I didn't know what to believe. When the women burst into the room early that morning to tell us the tomb was empty, I didn't assume a miracle. I'm no fool. You ever seen a crucifixion? Of course not. Let me tell you, nobody survives crucifixion. I assumed someone had stolen the body or perhaps the women had gotten confused and went to the wrong place.

But I was curious. So I went to see for myself. Before I knew it, I was running. And yes, hoping. But as John and I stared into that empty cave, we didn't know what to think. Later that day, Mary Magdalene found us and insisted she'd seen the master, alive. But I wouldn't allow myself to believe it. I'd just spent three years chasing a confused rabbi. I wasn't going to spend another season chasing ghosts. Besides, I had a price on my head. If I wasn't careful, I would end up a ghost myself.

So that night, as was our habit, the boys and me, we found a safe house just outside of town. The doors were locked and we were huddled together whispering about everything that had happened. And that's when he came. Nobody saw him walk in. I swear to you the door was locked. But we looked up and there he was. Very much alive.

Guys, I can't argue with anything you've said. But I would like to clarify one thing. My reason for believing isn't something I've heard or read or had read to me. I believe what I believe because of what I saw. I watched him die. And I know for a fact, Nic and Joe buried him. But God raised him. And guys, I saw him. That's the reason ... that's the only reason ... for my hope.

And we believe these disciples were telling the truth.

- We believe because of Matthew - the guy who wrote the Gospel of Matthew - he was there. He wrote down what he saw, and what he heard. And he spent the rest of his life telling the story ... till they killed him!
- We believe because of Mark - the guy who wrote the Gospel of Mark - he worked alongside Peter, then alongside Paul. He tells us Peter's story of Jesus. And Peter never backed down. Nero had him crucified. They nailed him to his cross upside down; because he said he wasn't worthy to die in the same way as his Lord.
- We believe because Luke - the guy who wrote the Gospel of Luke - he was about as careful a historian as it gets. He interviewed as many of the eyewitnesses as he could, and he worked alongside them, for the rest of his life.
- We believe because John - the guy who wrote the Gospel of John -- was an eyewitness of these things, and he spent the rest of his life preaching Jesus and encouraging Jesus followers.
- We believe because James - the brother of Jesus. He shows up later in the story and declares that his brother was his Lord. Listen guys, what would it take for you to declare your brother your Lord? Exactly, more than a few card tricks, right? When James met his resurrected brother, James declared his brother his Lord.
- We believe because the apostles ... to a man ... spent the rest of their lives serving this resurrected Jesus ... even though it cost almost every one of them their lives. None of them backed down, backed off, backed away.
- And we believe because the apostle Paul, maybe the fiercest Jesus hater of the early church, became the fiercest Jesus follower in the early church.

I wonder how the apostle Paul might respond to a Richard Dawkins, or a Sam Harris, or a Peter Singer, or a Christopher Hitchens. Maybe something like this:

Gentlemen, you believe religion is dangerous. I agree. I weaponized Judaism. I arrested, jailed, tortured, and oversaw executions in the name of God. You guys aren't fond of Christians. I wasn't either. But while you and your friends

are content to attack with your pens, I used a sword and a noose. I wasn't content to write about it. I got deputized and did something about it. My intent was to stamp out The Way, as we called it back then. And yes, I was absolutely convinced I was doing God's work. Religion can indeed be a dangerous thing.

But then something happened. Maybe you've heard about it. I was on my way to Damascus to do more violence in the name of religion when I went blind. But it was while I was blind that I began to see. You guys think our stories are weird? Well, this is a weird one for sure. But I'm just telling you what happened. I heard a voice. The voice asked, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" Well, I had a hunch, but I asked anyway, "Who are you, Lord?" And gentlemen, I don't expect you to believe me, but the voice said: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus, as in crucified and buried Jesus.

Long story short, I was commissioned by the God I thought I had been serving all along to take the message of Jesus to the Gentile world. Which is exactly what I did. And from what I understand, nobody in your modern world disputes that that's exactly what I did. The only thing you can dispute is why I did it. So, guys why in the world would a diehard Pharisee like me do an about-face and serve the very person whose memory I set out to destroy? What's your theory? If you're going to dismiss the Christian faith, it's not enough to discount the credibility of my Jewish ancestors. You've got to discount me!

Oh, and one last thing. For the record, there's really only one weird story that matters. The one Peter told you. The one Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John documented. And if you think about it, it's not much weirder than something the two of you believe. You believe everything that exists emerged ... out of nothing, for no purpose - go figure?! Well, Peter and I believe that the one who created everything that is raised our Savior from the dead.

Listen, guys, we are Jesus followers because of the resurrection. If a man can predict his own death and resurrection ... and pull it off ... I think we should go with what he says.

Ain't no grave could hold his body down ...