

The Resurrection Is Not Fake News

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[0 : 0 0] Sometimes in life we can be taken by surprise. John Stott, the Anglican writer of the 20th century, had a worldwide ministry and on one occasion he was flying through John F. Kennedy airport in New York and the young lady at the check-in desk saw his passport, read his name and asked if he was in a relation to John Stott. He replied, yes, that's my name.

She responded, I mean the other John Stott, the Christian preacher who recently died. Well, John replied, I suppose you might describe me as a Christian preacher, but as you can see I haven't died yet. There must be some mistake. She persisted, I'm a graduate of Wheaton College where I heard John Stott speak several times, but I understand he's meant. Eventually John Stott managed to persuade the lady that he was alive and that he was able to board his plane. Somebody who was thought to be dead, in fact, shown to be alive.

And that is how Matthew ends his gospel with this glorious account of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We're going to look at it under two headings. First, a grave side commotion and an empty tomb. And secondly, the great commission and an empty tale. And the first half of this account in verse 55 to 28, verse 10, is really told from the perspective of the different women who were involved. On Good Friday, verse 61, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, witnessing Jesus being laid in the tomb. They had been there, if you look up to verse 55 and 56, they had been there at the crucifixion when all the other disciples had fled. There were also many women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, who we met, in fact, in our study this morning. So the story is told from the perspective of the women of the ladies who followed Jesus. They saw the darkness at Calvary. They heard the Lord's final cry. They witnessed him dying a cruel and a humiliating death. And they saw this disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, taking his body and wrapping it in the shroud and laying him in the tomb before rolling a stone. The next scene is that of the chief priests, Sabbath the Saturday, making plans to seal the tomb. Verse 63 considered Jesus an imposter. They believe his ministry to be a fraud, and so they want to seal the tomb. And it's very interesting that they do so because verse 64, they knew that he had predicted he would rise from the dead, or did the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples steal his body away and tell the people he's risen from the dead. So they were anxious that no story would circulate, that Jesus' words would be shown to be false, that the last fraud would be no worse than the first. So they are to seal the tomb, and they are to set a guard. The women witnessed Jesus being buried, the chief priests then seal the tomb. And in the third scene, we have this glorious scene where the ladies go to the tomb, and there's a great earthquake, and they find the tomb empty. It's a wonderful scene, isn't it? It's told in very descriptive language, excuse me a second. Mary's see the tomb, they go to the tomb and look at all the different things they see. There's an earthquake, there's an angel of the Lord, his appearance like lightning, his clothing white as snow. The sight of the angel is so impressive, the Roman guards collapse and tremble and become like dead men. And the angel speaks to the women in verses 5 and 6, telling them not to be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus, he's not here, he has risen just as he sent. So they are to look at the place where he was laid, and they are to leave for Galilee and tell the disciples to wait for him. What an incredible and what an unexpected scene they are greeted with. The earthquake, the stone rolled away, the angel and the glad tidings that Jesus is risen. And best of all, verse 8, they see the Lord. He meets them, he says to them greetings, they fall at his feet and worship him, and he says to them, do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to meet me in Galilee. What a wonderful scene after the sorrow of Good Friday to witness the celebrations of this first Resurrection Sunday. It's a lovely thing, isn't it, to be reunited with someone? I'm sure many of us were glad to be reunited with friends and family members after

lockdown, many, many months not being able to visit people, even though they were perhaps just a few miles away or just across the Minch. It's lovely when somebody is discharged from hospital, lovely when somebody recovers from an illness from which we thought they might have died. There was a beautiful photograph a few years ago of a Spanish journalist who had been captured by the Islamic State in, I think it was, Iraq and held prisoner for an extended period and his release had been negotiated and he was flown back to Spain and it's a great photo, you can look it up online, he comes down the steps of this plane and his little primary school age son rushes out to greet him. And just before they embrace the photographer, I've got this wonderful picture, never expected to see one another again and the joy written on their faces. And so it is with these ladies, they take hold of his feet and worship him. They thought they would never see the Lord again and now they see him, the living Lord, the risen Lord Jesus Christ. As Christians we don't revere a dead leader. If you travel to Russia and go to the Kremlin, you can visit the Mausoleum of Lennon and you can look at his imbammed body and join a queue to pay homage to the revolutionary leader. We don't remember a dearly loved figure, an influential figure, every February Burns Supper comes around, is it January sorry, Burns Supper comes around and people recite don't they, they deliver the immortal memory to keep the memory of Burns and his songs and his poetry alive. We don't follow a dead leader, we don't just honour the memory of a dearly loved figure, we worship a living saviour, one who died, but is now alive and is alive forevermore. Paul in Romans says, we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again, death no longer has dominion over him. In

[8 : 52] one of his plays, and I forget which, I'm not much of a scholar of these things, William Shakespeare described death as the undiscovered country from whose born no traveller returns.

In Yerimathu chapter 28 we find there is one who has travelled to the land of the dead and who has returned victorious. And the women recognise this and they take hold of his feet and worship him. Colin Buchanan the children's evangelist has a lovely song called Boss of the Cross in which he speaks of the lordship of Jesus Christ and in simple and colourful language he has these lyrics. Sin didn't stain him, death couldn't claim him, heroes again he's the boss of the cross. It's so very different isn't it to the wisdom of this world, to the wisdom of our generation. It seems that the creed of the 21st century is the creed of the secular humanist. There is one life we have to live and this sense of just living for the here and now has become a modern day virtue that there is nothing beyond the grave and so we seek to make the best of what we have to enjoy as much as possible for as long as possible. There are some though who don't hold to that creed who hold to a vague and ill defined belief in the supernatural and of the existence of the human life beyond the grave. I went to the Shinty final last Saturday at the camera cup final in Oben and that was quite an experience but as I drove out of Oben I was stopped at the traffic lights and there was a banner tied to the railings advertising a medium night, a spiritualist visiting Oben and they booked a hotel and you could go on the medium and try and contact your dead relatives and to bring you a message from beyond the grave. A vague ill defined supernatural paganism but in contrast to that the secular humanist, the spiritualist, the Christian man or woman is somebody who has a sure and a certain hope. Jesus promised that he would be raised from the dead. See what the angel says, he has risen from the dead, he is going before you. I have told you Jesus it said to them that he would rise from the dead. Verse 6, sorry he is not here, he has risen as he sent. The Lord had promised to his disciples that he would be raised from the dead in the upper room, in John's account of the meeting in the upper room. He told them that they would have sorrow for a little while but that sorrow would turn to joy and here in Matthew 28 we see and we experience something of that joy. This prediction, this promise of his resurrection was well known that's why the chief priest go to such trouble to try and quash any potential rumours about a resurrection from the dead. Jesus promised that he would come back, he would not leave his people then or now as orphans, that he would return from the grave and would be with them forever. Jesus can be trusted and he promises to us that if you and I have faith in him we will share in a resurrection like his. John chapter 5 an hour is coming is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live and hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out. We know that was the case wasn't it at the grave of Lazarus. As he cried out in a loud voice Lazarus come out and Lazarus came out. A picture of what is the destiny, what is the promise for all who will have faith in Christ. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, writes the apostle Paul, even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Some months ago our church

was asked to host a funeral service for a local lady who had passed away. I wasn't conducting the service, it was another friend within the free church and he travelled down and it seems this lady had grown up in the Fort William area and had later moved away. She had in the middle of life come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the transformation in her life made a profound impression on many of her older friends, her former friends. And at the funeral one of her close friends gave a tribute in which she read out a letter from the deceased lady to those gathered and to those watching online. It said something like this, if you're reading these words and you're about to lay me to rest in Nevis Cemetery then you probably think that I'm dead. But in reality I am more alive than I have ever been. The years in which

I've followed the Lord Jesus have been the happiest of my life and he has seen me through everything, even death itself. She went on to share something of her testimony and she said I would love to see you again and if you trust in Jesus we will meet again in his kingdom because his words can be trusted. His words can be trusted if we are depressed, if we have a negative view of ourselves or the world or the future and life seems overwhelmingly difficult we can lay hold of and trust in his words. And his words are a comfort to us in the face of death, the death of a loved one, the death of ourselves, the death that we will all one day surely face. I am the resurrection and the life said Jesus, whoever believes in me though he die yet shall he live. Well it's great news isn't it, the graveside commotion. But it's also considered fake news by some of the people who were there.

We go on to think about this under the heading of the Great Commission and an empty tale. In our modern world we often hear that kind of language, the language of fake news, the language of conspiracy theory, the language of misinformation and at the point where even social media posts warnings about particular stories that they think are misinformation.

[16:50] And that's always been the case when we have unusual phenomena, people try and explain it in different ways. The other week I was just at a bit of a loose end and I was tired so I just put the telly on and I ended up watching a documentary about the moon landings and the documentary was arguing that these moon landings, you know 1969 I think it was, they were all fake and it was all filmed in a studio somewhere in Texas I think and the outdoor scenes were filmed in the Nevada desert. And I could tell you exactly his argument it was quite remarkable, all to do with camera angles and the light from the sun and so on.

And I sat through and I can't believe I said to myself at the end that I've just wasted an hour of my life and that's an hour I'll never see again but many people believe this, they see the phenomenon, they see the pictures from the moon and rather than believing that some clever scientist has sent a few men into space they come up with all kinds of explanations in order to explain the phenomena. And that was the case in Matthew 28, there is an empty tomb, no one can deny there is an empty tomb. And yet the chief priests don't want to face the conclusion that perhaps Jesus is risen from the dead, that God has made him whom they crucified both Lord and Christ. To him he is an impostor, to him he is a fraud. And so they come up with this empty story, this conspiracy to deceive verse 13, tell people his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep. Now that story is at many levels completely unbelievable. The chief problem seems to be that none of his disciples believed that he was going to be raised to life again despite his repeated teaching. They had all fled, the shepherd had been struck, the sheep had been scattered.

Jesus, Judas had betrayed him, Peter had denied him, the others were hiding in fear of their lives, the only ones faithful to him at this hour were the women we've already met. His disciples were in no position to act in that way. That's why I think the story is told from the perspective of the women because they were the witnesses to all that was going on. But even they didn't believe they went with spices, they thought they were going to embalm a body, not be reunited with their Lord and their friend. And they questioned how they would roll away the stone, how they would even get into the tomb and be able to anoint him. No doubt they wondered how these women would overpower a Roman guard. But there was this empty tomb. But rather than inquiring why that was the case, rather than asking where it possible that God has raised his Messiah to life, they launched this cover-up operation. They produced this story and they bribed these soldiers in order to bury the truth. Verse 12, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers. They buy their silence, they give them some hush-hush money and they tell them to spread this misinformation. And they were told in verse 15 that this story has been circulated among the Jews even to the day. To them, the resurrection was the greatest hoax in history. And they were not the last to believe that. There are

many who look at the evidence of the empty tomb or the transformed lives of Christian people or the growth of the Christian church throughout the world from the first day until now. And rather than confessing Christ as the risen law, they come up with all kinds of explanations. Islam. In Islam it is believed that Jesus didn't die upon the cross. Somebody took his place. There was a theory in the last century, the 19th century rather, that Jesus was actually revived from the tomb, in the tomb. He was badly wounded, but not mortally wounded. And a couple of days of rest and relaxation and a cool tomb brought him back to health. Maybe the women went to the wrong tomb. Maybe they found the wrong tomb, an empty tomb. But nobody checked. We know they went to see it. We know they were witnessing where he was buried. And had that been the case, the Romans and the Jews could quite easily have gone and produced the body. Maybe some argue his disciples had a hallucination different times, different places in their grief and in their bereavement they thought they saw and they heard the Lord. Well, these are empty tales. They don't account for the facts and they don't account for the overwhelming evidence, firstly, of the transformation of these same disciples. Men and women who were afraid, who needed to be repeatedly told not to be afraid, were then sent out into the whole world with great boldness and courage and love. And it can't account for the conversion of skeptics and enemies. James, the Lord's brother, didn't believe and yet he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Saul of

Tarsus, once persecuting the faith. And yet he was met by the Lord on the Damascus Road and went on to preach the faith as the greatest missionary in the history of the church. He was the Lord's chosen instrument to bring his name before the Gentiles. The Jewish leaders needed to explain the empty tomb. They needed to explain the preaching of the first Christians and they came up with this idea that it was all a hoax, all a conspiracy theory. They bribed people. They performed a cover-up. But how do you explain the resurrection? Maybe you're an agnostic. Maybe you don't like to come off the fence. You like to sit on the fence and say, well, I don't know what happened. But I don't believe that it was something supernatural. To believe that you have to go against the testimony of these eyewitnesses recorded for us. Maybe you believe it's irrelevant. Maybe you think, well, there might be something in it, but there's more pressing concerns. There's financial inequality. There's climate change. There's all kinds of other things that have a claim on my time. C.S. Lewis, the

Christian Apologist and the writer of the Chronicles of Narnia said this, the Christian faith, if false is of no importance, if true is of infinite importance, the one thing it cannot be is moderately important. The Apostle Paul says the same in 1 Corinthians 15, if Christ has not raised your faith is in vain. But if Christ is raised, well, that changes everything. There was a story told to the Jews. His disciples had come and taken his body. This was fake news. These were alternative facts. But it wasn't the only story that went out, not the only story that was published or broadcast. And we find in 20 verse 16, Jesus meeting his 11 disciples in Galilee on the mountain to which he had directed them.

[25 : 26] And when they saw him, they, like the ladies, worshiped him, but some doubt it. They had given up on the Lord, but he had not given up on them. They had failed the Lord in denying him in running for their lives. But he doesn't fail us. He is faithful to us. And they are to go into all the world, verse 17 and 18, to tell people that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that after his suffering, he has entered into his glory. After he has been humbled to death upon a cross, God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name above every name, the name at which every knee will one day bow. In Acts chapter two, we see that Peter preaching with a newfound boldness. This Jesus God raised up and of that we are all witnesses. Being there for exalted to the right hand of God, let all the house of Israel know therefore for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucify. He is the boss of the cross. And that's wonderful news, isn't it? That there is one to whom all authority has been given. There is a throne in heaven and it is occupied by one who is good. The foundations of that throne are righteousness and justice. That's why he can say to his disciples, that's why the angel can say to the women, do not be afraid because the Lord is risen, he is risen indeed. He is seated upon the throne. Maybe your life at the moment is characterised by chaos. There is one who is in control. Maybe your workplace is very difficult and every day seems like a battle. There is one who is in control. Maybe you look at world events and you think of Brexit or you think of Covid or you think of petrol shortages or wars or famines and you need to be reassured that there is one who is in control. Maybe you look at your finances and you wonder how you're ever going to get out of debt and out of the rent. There is one who is in control. One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. When he invites you to follow him and to follow him means to be sent out by him

into the world, to make disciples of all nations, to speak to them of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit which he himself will give and to teach them all that he has commanded us. The Jewish people had that story spread among them to this day. But the truth of the Gospel, the message of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be spread among all nations from that day to the very end of the age. The Lord wants people to hear and to believe the Gospel, to be baptised into the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And then to be taught all that he had commanded his disciples. The Lord doesn't just want converts, he wants disciples, he doesn't just want

hearers of the word but those who do the word and those who grow up into discipleship, those who grow up as we thought this morning into servant leadership. And he wants us to be a people passionate about sharing the Gospel with others, sharing the Gospel with all nations.

At the beginning of the Gospel the Magi came from the east to worship the Christ, these kings or rulers or Magi from afar. And at the end of the Gospel Jesus sends his disciples out to the east and the west and the north and the south to make disciples of all nations.

Few years ago we were involved in a mission in Glasgow and it was a mission among the international students of whom previously there were tens of thousands in Glasgow. And the speaker that night was an English fellow living there who had a harp for the Chinese people and had lived in China for some time and had acquired a fluency in Mandarin and he was preparing a talk on the cross as we have been thinking about the cross over this weekend. But as he was writing his talk which was to be delivered in Mandarin in Downen Vale Free Church he was compelled to say something about the resurrection. He had the sense that he just had to include more about the resurrection and so he added a separate point. And that evening I was going down with a group of students down the Bars Road and we got to a traffic light and while we waited for the light to change from red to green I noticed there was a young Chinese student standing to my side and I said to her are you coming to the international student dinner? And she looked at me rather quizzically but then she looked at the group of international students with me and she said well okay she hadn't planned to come she'd just been making away home but when she saw the other students she was reassured and she joined with us. She ate the delicious meal she listened with attention to the talk that was delivered in Mandarin and afterwards she asked to speak to the man who had delivered the talk and she said to him growing up in China I'd learned a little of the Christian faith. I knew that Jesus had died but I'd never heard that he'd been raised to life again. And it was a wonderful picture wasn't it? The message of the gospel, the message of the crucified and risen Savior going out into all the world to the East and to the

West. It's not possible to do that in our own strength or according to our own wisdom. So Jesus promises to us verse 20 his very presence that I am with you always to the very end of the age. He will be with his disciples by his spirit. He will be with us as we go out into the world and seek to gossip the gospel and share that which has been shared with us. The very beginning of the gospel it was promised that he would be our Emmanuel God with us and at the close of the gospel he promises to be with us not to be far away but to be one who is near to us, who is with us in everything. And the great hope of the gospel is that we who know Christ's presence with us now will on that last day be welcomed into his presence. That he is with us but one day like this lady from Folkwilliam we will be with him. First Thessalonians 4 the dead in Christ will rise first then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the air to meet the Lord together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord. Encourage one another with these words. The Lord is with us now as we like his anxious disciples seek to go out into the world and share with other people what has been shared with us.

[34 : 15] And the hope of that gospel message is that one day we will be with him. We will pass through that final river we will be taken through death itself and be welcomed into his eternal kingdom together with the Lord. Amen. So let it be. Friends do you think that's fake news?

Are you skeptical? Are you cynical? Are you sitting on the fence? Or do you think that's good news? Isn't that the most glorious news? Isn't that as C.S. Lewis said of infinite importance a matter of life and death? And if you believe that can I ask you what steps you're taking to share that with others? To let others know that they can have peace with God. To let others know that they can have new life. They can have freedom. They can have hope and a future. They can enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God.

They can be welcomed into Christ's church and welcomed one day into Christ's kingdom. Is that something you want to share with those you know and with those you love? The gospel is what

everybody needs and yet what so very many don't seem to want. But the Lord sends us out in his power and with his presence in order to be the messengers of the gospel.

One contemporary writer puts it like this, the power that raised him from the grave now works on us to powerfully save. He frees our hearts to live his grace go tell of his goodness.

Friends the resurrection is either an empty tale, a conspiracy theory intended to deceive weak minds or it's either the reality of the empty tomb and it is the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. All God's promises made yes and amen in him. Which side of the fence are you on? Do you think this was a conspiracy to deceive or do you recognise this as a commission given to his disciples of whom I pray that we are all numbered? There was a gravesite commotion. The greatest news in all of human history is ours to tell and there is a great commission to go into the world trusting in Christ, confident of his presence, looking for his gospel to work in power. Well it's a wonderful thing, it's a wonderful hope to reflect upon at the end of our communion weekend. We've thought of the Lord's grace, we've thought of his sufferings for us, we've thought of the glory to come about which he's spoken and having thought of his death we end thinking of his resurrection and being reminded of the resurrection which is promised to each of us that if we trust in him we will one day be transformed to be like him and we will be with him and we will see him as he is. Let's pray together. Gracious God we thank you that Christ is risen indeed, that he was not there in the tomb that he had risen, that he is the living one who died and is now alive forevermore, that you did not abandon him to Hades, his flesh did not seek corruption but instead you exalted him to your right hand and seated him far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, exalting his name above every name. We thank you that he is the one who has destroyed the power of death and become a merciful and faithful high priest in our service to make propiti- service of God to make propitiation for the sins of all the people. Thank you that we have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from us, able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, always living to make intercession for us. And we thank you that he is with us and having been exalted to your right hand, he has received the Holy Spirit and he has poured out your spirit upon all who will believe. All who will believe the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, that he will seal us for our salvation and for the day of our inheritance. And we thank you that we have in him a great inheritance. That according to your mercy you have given us an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven. And that you are guarding us by your power until the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Father, we thank you that in the midst of all the insecurity and uncertainty of our daily lives we have this hope as an anchor for the soul. We thank you that our

[40 : 12] citizenship is in heaven and we are awaiting a saviour from there who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. We thank you that we will not all sleep but that in a moment in the twinkling of an eye we shall be changed. The dead will be raised imperishable, our mortal bodies will put on immortality, death will be swallowed up in victory and the tears will be wiped from our eyes. Lord, would you help us to know the hope to which you have called us? What are the riches of our glorious inheritance? Would you help us to know in our daily experience the immeasurable greatness of your power toward us who believe? And would you give us strength to comprehend the breadth and the length and the depth and the height and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that we may be filled with the fullness of God? Lord, help us to appreciate what is ours, every spiritual blessing in Christ and give us a desire and a willingness to share that with others. Lord, those we know and love, those we live among, those we work alongside with, those we spend our time with, the words may be given us to share the message of the Gospel clearly as we shoot. Would you comfort our hearts, Lord? Would you remind us not to be afraid but to remind us that we serve the one to whom all authority has been given and that he is with us always? Lord, we thank you for this time this weekend. Thank you for our fellowship in Christ. And we pray that we would grow in him and that his church would grow in this place, bearing fruit and growing as it continues to do in every part of the world. And so we thank you for this time. Thank you that we can pray to you. Thank you that we can praise you. And thank you that we can partner in the great and the glorious work of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.