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Luke 24:36-53

The Certain Gospel: Four Responses to the Resurrection

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In **2009** the retired minister of the **First Unitarian Church of Portland Oregon, Marilyn Sewell**, interviewed one of the most famous atheists of her day, **Christopher Hitchens**.¹ Unitarians do not believe in the **Trinity** or that anyone goes to **hell** but that God is love and all go to heaven. They are considered **theologically liberal** while a church like **Cornerstone** is much more theologically **conservative**. We believe in the Trinity and that you must trust in **Christ Jesus** in order to be saved.

But Christopher Hitchens **didn't believe** in any of these things. He was an **atheist**. He didn't believe in **God** or an **afterlife**. When you're gone you're gone. Hitchens **died of cancer** in **December 2011** but at the time of the interview he was riding a **wave of popularity** from his best selling book *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. So this interview is **especially interesting** because it's between a very popular atheist and a liberal minister, not your **typical reporter**. In this interview she asked this question.

The religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a **liberal Christian**, and I don't take the stories from the scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make any distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?

In other words, she doesn't believe in things like the resurrection, so would he a **skeptic** of all religions treat her and her belief system any differently. Hitchens answered:

I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.

Christopher Hitchens understood the **importance** of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to Christianity. His is one type of **response** to the resurrection—**disbelief**. Marilyn's is the same. But how do you respond? Do you think it's **true**? Do you think Jesus **really rose** from the grave? And if so, should we have **more of a response** than just that? Today I want to **explain** the four responses we can have to Jesus' resurrection.

The eleven disciples have **received** the news that Jesus is alive. **Peter** even claimed to have seen him earlier that day (Luke 24:34); and the two men on the road to Emmaus saw him as well (Luke 24:13-35). But the other ten remaining disciples haven't seen him yet, but they are about too, and how they respond teaches us about how we can respond. In our passage today we find **four responses to the resurrection of Jesus**:

1) **Peace not fear (v36-39)**

When we hear the resurrection of Jesus, we can respond in peace not fear. What's the **first thing** Jesus says when he appears to his followers? "**Peace** be with you." Jesus is offering peace to a group of men who are really **scared**. **John's gospel** tells us they were hiding behind **locked doors** because they were so frightened (Luke 20:19). We lock our **homes** at night to feel safe, but their fear is even more real. They're afraid of suffering a **similar fate** as Jesus.

Luke says, “37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?” (NIV®) They feel fear, anxiety, and doubt—all normal responses to hearing that someone has risen from the dead. These feelings are especially relatable if you’re seeing that person you saw die standing right in front of you.

In the face of all of this Jesus offers his disciples and us today true and lasting **peace**. The Bible’s understanding of peace is based on the Old Testament word “**Shalom**” which isn’t just the **absence** of **conflict**, but the **presence** of **blessing**. It is **wholeness**, **virtue**, and **flourishing** throughout all of life. As one author writes, “Shalom, in other words, is the way things **ought** to be.”² It’s the way things ought to be **with God** and those around us. Shalom is the **opposite** of hiding behind a **locked door**.

What **door** are you **hiding behind**? What key have you **thrown away** because life is just too much? It’s too scary. It’s too hard. You can’t take it any more. You’ve locked away your **heart** from God and others. You’ve had enough. If **one more thing** happens, you’re gonna **break down**. Tonight Jesus wants to **appear** to you behind your locked door. He wants to show up with the **power** of his **resurrection**—with **shalom**, with **peace**. If there’s anyone who can bring life to your situation no matter how it feels it’s Jesus. *Our first response to the resurrection of Jesus is peace not fear.* What’s our second response?

2) **Belief not doubt (v40-43)**

Jesus sets out to **conquer** their **fear** by **inviting** his followers to **look** at his **hands** and **feet** and to **touch** him (v39). But at first they **don’t believe**. They’re too **overwhelmed**. **It’s too good to be true**. So to prove he’s not a ghost he **eats** some food. “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” (v42-43) When the disciples experienced the reality of the resurrection they believe. But can we trust their witness? Can we trust this account? Can we believe?

Back in **January 2009** I attended an **Atheism** versus **religion** debate at **CU Boulder** and guess who the guest speaker was arguing for atheism? Christopher Hitchens. There were about **600 people** in the audience so it was pretty big. The debate started and at one point that Hitchens argued that people will oftentimes believe an **illusion** because they **think it is true**. He used the example of **Christians**, **Muslims**, and **Mormons**. We believe and do all sorts of things because we think we have the truth. But believing in something doesn’t make it true. He gave the example of suicide bombers.

There was a **question** and **answer** session at the end and I thought it would be cool to ask Hitchens a question. So I got in line and when my turn came to ask him a question I said, “You said it is not unusual for people to **die** for a **myth**, an **illusion**; however, **historians** agree that the **twelve disciples** were either **maimed** or **killed** for their beliefs. How then, being **first generation believers**, would they willing die and be **tortured** for something they **knew to be a lie**?”

The point I was trying to make was that it makes sense for someone to suffer and even die for something that they think is true, but don’t really know if it’s not. But it doesn’t make sense for someone to willingly suffer and die for something they **know to be false**, especially if it doesn’t benefit them with wealth, power, or fame. If the disciples **made the whole thing up** their life of suffering wouldn’t make sense. **Lee Strobel** writes in *The Case For Christ*, “People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they’re true, but people won’t die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false.” (Chapter 14 - Page 247) You can pick up a **free copy** of this book at our **Welcome Center** if you’d like.

Hitchens answered by saying **historians** do not generally agree the twelve disciples were martyrs and left it at that. I didn’t argue with him. I just went and sat down. I didn’t know the early external witnesses off the top of my head (people from outside of the Bible). **Clement of Rome** wrote in the **first century** that Peter suffered and died:

1 Clement 5:4 “Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours; and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him.”³ (AD 96~)

Another early writer is Ignatius of Antioch who reported at the start of the second century that **the eleven** also suffered and died.⁴

Smyrnaens 3:2 And when [Jesus] came unto them who were with Peter he said unto them, Take, handle me, and see that I am not a spirit without a body; and straightway they touched him and believed, being convinced by his flesh and his spirit. On this account also they despised death, and were found superior to death. (AD 107~)⁵

In the debate the **Christian speaker** arguing for the truth of Christianity added the real question was why the disciples, or the early Christians, would **spread false rumors** they knew were lies if they knew the rumors would cost them their lives. **Agitated, Hitchens** spread his arms and said, “I don’t know why they did that. I don’t know what was going through their heads. How should I know what they were thinking?”

The **three main possibilities** for why the disciples preached Jesus was alive and were willing to die for it is: 1) A **group hallucinations** took place (which is impossible). 2) They made it up and were lying (but then their suffering doesn’t make sense). 3) Their story is true (sometimes the simplest explanation is the best).

So the fact that Jesus appeared to his eleven disciples and they were willing to **leave the safety** of locked doors and go out and suffer and die for Jesus tells us what they saw was real. Jesus did rise from the dead. *Our first response to the resurrection is peace not fear and our second is belief not doubt.* What’s the third?

3) Sharing not silence (v44-49)

Jesus again reminds his disciples like he did on the road to **Emmaus** of why the Scriptures matter (Luke 24:27). Verse 44 says, “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’” But you can **study your Bible your whole life** and **never really get it**. This is why **verse 45 is key**, “Then he **opened** their minds so they **could understand** the Scriptures.”

In order for us to share the Scriptures and the message of Jesus we need the Holy Spirit to **open our minds** and **hearts** so we can first understand them. This **doesn’t mean** that we have to understand them **perfectly**, but we need to understand them **well enough** to see our need for Christ.

It’s here in the text that Luke gives us his **great commission**. Maybe you’re familiar with the Great Commission in the gospel of Matthew (“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”), which is perhaps **more well recognized** than Luke’s. But Luke’s is just as good. Here’s **Luke’s Great Commission**:

Luke 24:46-48 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (NIV®)

Matthew’s Great Commission centers on “going” and “making disciples” but Luke’s has **five key points**:

1. **The importance of Christ’s resurrection** - If there’s no resurrection there’s no point, but if it’s true it changes everything we know and makes any hardship worth it.

2. **The call to repentance and offer of forgiveness** - The heart of the gospel is an invitation to receive forgiveness for your sins and mistakes.
3. **The gospel is for “all nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη)** - Christ sends us to all ethnicities and peoples. So every tribe and tongue that hasn't even heard about Jesus needs to hear.
4. **Christ sends his followers out** - Christ is sending us out to share the gospel with the people he's placed us in and around - **our frontlines**. We each have a place God has placed us so that we can share.
5. **We need the Holy Spirit to empower us** - Luke's commission is entirely dependent on the Holy Spirit. We can't spread the message of Christ without the Holy Spirit working through us.

As followers of Jesus we are called to share, not be silent. My **sense** (based on **my own life**) is that **silence** is our **normal mode** of operation. After a while we get **so comfortable** not sharing Jesus it becomes difficult to imagine sharing him. I want to challenge us each to get **uncomfortable with our own silence**. **Pray** Christ will help you **truly believe** in his **resurrection** so that you will share.

So our first three responses to the resurrection are peace not fear, belief not doubt, and sharing not silence. This all leads to our final response...

4) Praise, praise, and more praise (v50-53)

Forty days after his resurrection Jesus takes his disciples to the **Mount of Olives** just outside the town of **Bethany near Jerusalem** (Acts 1:3, 12). He blesses them and the **ascends** into heaven to **rule and reign** until he comes again. The only proper response is worship and praise.

Luke 24:52-53 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (NIV®)

As we think about our responses to the resurrection I hope it will fill us with peace not fear, belief not doubt, sharing not silence, and praise, praise, and more praise. When I'd finished writing all but the **end** of my **sermon** I stumbled upon this story on preachingtoday.com and I thought it made for a really nice conclusion.

The publicist for the late author and debater Christopher Hitchens asked Christian author Larry Taunton to arrange a series of debates between Hitchens, an outspoken atheist, and Christian thinkers. Over the ensuing years, Hitchens and Taunton developed an unlikely friendship. Hitchens stayed in Taunton's home, and prior to Hitchens' death from cancer, the two friends took two long road trips across America. Here's how Taunton describes what happened on one of those trips:

My mind goes back to the Shenandoah. The skies are clear, the autumn leaves are translucent in the early afternoon sun, and the road ahead of us is open ... In a strong, clear voice, Christopher is reading from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John. Reaching the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth verses, his face lights up with recognition.

John 11:25-26 says, “Jesus said to [Martha], “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”” (NIV®)

[Hitchens] stops [reading]. "I know this one too," he says. "I did not recall its connection with the resurrection of Lazarus."

"It's a great verse," I add, sensing we have reached a defining moment. "Yes, Dickens thought so," Christopher says, and then, taking his reading glasses off, he turns to me and

asks: "Do you believest thou this, Larry Taunton?" His sarcasm is evident, but it lacks its customary force.

"I do. But you already knew that I did. The question is, do you believest thou this, Christopher Hitchens?" As if searching for a clever riposte, he hesitates and speaks with unexpected transparency: "I'll admit that it is not without appeal to a dying man."⁶
([Christopher Hitchens Considers Christ's Resurrection](#). Copyright Christianity Today 2016. Date accessed 5/2/2019.)

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to [sermons](#) or to read [our story](#).⁷

- ¹ The Hitchens Transcript. Liberal Believer. Published 12/17/2009. <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/articles/2009/12/17/christopher-hitchens> Accessed 5/2/2019
- ² Plantinga, Cornelius Jr. *A Breviary of Sin: Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*. 1995. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, MI. Page 10.
- ³ Logos Bible Software. The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Fifth Edition. Volume IX. New York: The Christian Literature Company. 1897.
- ⁴ *Did the Apostles Really Die as Martyrs for Their Faith?* By Sean McDowell. <https://www.oneplace.com/ministries/bible-answer-man/read/articles/did-the-apostles-really-die-as-martyrs-for-their-faith-by-sean-mcdowell-17589.html> Accessed 5/2/2019.
- ⁵ There are plenty of good reasons to trust in the resurrection and the disciples witness of it. We call them apologetics.
- ⁶ Christopher Hitchens Considers Christ's Resurrection. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/july/3070416.html> Accessed 5/2/2019. Quoting *Larry Alex Taunton*, *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens: The Restless Soul of the World's Most Notorious Atheist (Nelson Books 2016)*, pages 168-169
- ⁷ All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.