

A Tangible Kind of Faith

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Date: 17 April 2022

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[0 : 00] Let's talk about the word literally. Literally. Now, I, over the years, I have changed about my views on how language works. There's like different schools of thought about language.

You can be a prescriptivist and you have to demand that words work in certain ways. And there are descriptivists that just say like, no, this is how language works and how people use it. And so there's this word literally that, you know, Rob Loeb made famous in Parks and Rec.

But it's had this two different meanings over the years. Do we have the slides of literally up on the platform? There we go. There we go. Okay. So there's two different ways that we can use the word literally. We can use it in a metaphorical sense, which we'll give some examples of you're saying the word, but you just mean like especially, strongly. Or you can mean it in like a physical, I dare say literal sense, like you actually mean it to be true. So, you know, things like the phrase, my head literally exploded. Well, that would be a problem if it were physically true, because you would not be able to speak to us, correct? But you might mean it in a more metaphorical sense. My mind was blown. I was shocked. I was surprised. It's like I was literally there. Now, this one's complicated because you got like, it's like I was literally there. So is it a metaphor? Is it not? But, you know, I like, you know, if you've ever tried like VR headsets and you're like go mountain climbing or go like in space or something like that. It's like I was literally there. Well, you weren't. You just had, you know, an Oculus on you, but whatever. How about I was literally speechless? Were you though? Really? Like, if you're telling me that you're speechless, are you speechless? Which reminds me of the Pinocchio paradox. Anybody know about the Pinocchio paradox?

Says my nose will grow now. Think about that one. Yeah, okay. Yeah. So if it grows, then if his nose doesn't grow, he's lying. If his nose does grow, he's not lying. So it doesn't need to grow. Anyway, all that to say that you can't say you're literally speechless, right? How about that? Now, there's two different ways you could talk about this, okay? Oh my God, I literally died, okay? And it's like this picture conjures up the type of person who might say that. Now, that phrase comes across very differently if it's Jesus saying it, right? Next slide. Oh my God, I literally died.

I came up with this joke at 9.50 this morning and had to add it to the PowerPoint. Okay. All that to say, when things are said, we usually want there to be some sort of physical repercussion to what was said. When I graduate, I want my diploma or my transcripts. When your partner says, I love you, you usually want that to be followed up with some sort of action, right? Are you with me? And so, just so you don't think I've forgotten about the topic of today's sermon, if someone tells you Jesus rose from the dead, you usually want there to be some sort of actual, literal, physical, tangible ripple effects of a statement like that. Somebody rose from the dead?

[3 : 34] There ought to be some way that we can know that to be true. There ought to be some way that we can feel that in the world today. Now, this was, used to be the expectation that when someone said things like, Jesus rose from the dead, which is the whole idea behind Easter, that people expected that to have physical repercussions in the world. There was this woman back in the 1650s. Her name was Elizabeth Key. Let me all you hear you say Elizabeth Key. I want you to remember this name. In the 1650s in America, she was a slave and she sued for her freedom. And part of the basis of her lawsuit for her freedom from slavery was her baptism in the Christian faith. In her mind, she was baptized, which is this physical symbol of death being lowered into the water and resurrection being raised up. And so if she was a baptized person who would experience the death and resurrection that Jesus had experienced, then that should have, yes, spiritual effects on her soul about being released from being captive from sin and the powers of death. But it should also have physical repercussions in the real world. And so she put a lawsuit that said, hey, I am a baptized Christian.

You, no one can enslave me. And she won. She won the lawsuit. She won the lawsuit on the basis of this reality of being a baptized person, baptized into Jesus, into the resurrection life of Jesus.

Now, of course, the white slave-owning folk wouldn't have any of that for long. And so a few years later, laws came down that said we have to break this connection between faith and freedom. What happened in Jesus and happens in baptism and happens in resurrection and its effects on the real world.

And so next slide, yeah, you can see this on the slide. Here is an act declaring that the baptism of slaves does not exempt them from bondage from the laws of Virginia in 1667. There was a different slave owner who actually wrote this vow, baptismal vow that slaves had to recite before baptism, that they vowed to not use their baptism as a argument for their freedom. Now, what I find deeply fascinating about this is that the assumption was it would have set them free. Elizabeth Key, she won her lawsuit at first before this law came down. The assumption was baptism, identification with Jesus, his resurrection life was a powerful enough effect on the world that it could even set slaves free until the demonic powers of white slave-owning legislators said otherwise.

Now, perhaps some of you are thinking, Anthony, this is supposed to be a happy Easter sermon. We'll get there. We'll get to that old-time religion. As in the words of Ira Glass, stay with us. Now, there are two kinds of faith. Asterisk, there's lots of kinds of faith, but there are two kinds of faith that we're going to talk about today.

[6 : 55] Who has time to talk about all the different kinds of faith? The first kind of faith is a faith that is only spiritual, only private, only personal, only intangible, only invisible, and it's moderate and apolitical.

It doesn't engage much in the world. And this is the kind of faith that sometimes, oftentimes, it offends no one. It challenges nobody because it really doesn't need to. It's about me and my personal relationship with God. And some might use the phrase, it's a little woo-woo. It makes me feel good.

It makes me feel good about myself, but I don't need to possibly offend or affect others. It's just me and my faith. That's one kind of faith that we can believe in. And it's the kind of faith that says things like, you do not have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body. And this is often attributed to C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis never said this. He said actually something opposite of this. It's a phrase that came from the 1800s. And so you can see the point that a phrase like this is trying to make.

It's trying to say, you are a soul. The most important part about you is your souliness. And you just have a body. The body is this temporary thing that really it's secondary in God's economy. And so there is this dualism, this separation, this bifurcation between soul stuff and body stuff. And in the end, it's the soul that really matters. There's a kind of faith that says things like this. There's a kind of faith that says things like winning souls is more important than feeding bodies. Some terrible website, which I will not recite to you.

There is a kind of faith that says, hey, if you have to choose, push your energy into winning souls, saving souls, but the whole taking care of body things, it's secondary, it's low priority. Don't sweat it. I remember sitting in a missionary class in college and the professor saying something along these lines of saying, you know, if you're going to go out there and the gospel is not proclaimed in word, if you're not saving souls, well, then it doesn't matter how much bread or how much stuff you give away. It doesn't really matter. And I remember arguing with this professor saying like, well, maybe you should take that up with Jesus because Jesus would go around and he would heal and he would cast out demons and he would feed people and sometimes not say a single word about the gospel, the kingdom, in any sort of soulish spiritual sense. So there's a kind of faith that separates these two things. There's soul stuff and there's body stuff and the soul is more important. Now, this is the kind of faith that in my opinion is okay with police killing a thousand people each year in America and black and brown people at twice or more the rate of white people. It's a kind of faith that sees that reality and says, yeah, but as well as we're winning souls, it's fine. That's not our problem to deal with. It's the kind of faith that allows for 500,000 or more people to have no homes in our country, but refuses to allow for things like an increase in welfare or taxes or affordable housing in the name of Christian values. Well, if you don't work, then you shouldn't eat and you probably shouldn't have a home, which is a deep irony in that phrase. Quick aside, there's this phrase in scripture. It says, if you do not work, you shall not eat, which is used by, dare I say, Dave Ramsey types of people to say, hey, the poor does basically deserve to be poor. They're not working hard enough.

[10 : 45] Here's the irony about that phrase. In Paul's day, and I don't know if it's all that different today, in Paul's day when he wrote that phrase, in Peter's day when he wrote that phrase, if you do not work, you shall not eat, that was directed towards the rich because the rich didn't have to work. And so they would sit around and they would be waited upon and then they would enter into places like a church and they would expect that same sort of attitude to be carried along.

Hey, if you're a rich person, you know, I don't need to work. I don't need to lift a finger. And so Paul is saying to the rich, hey, if you're not going to lift a finger, don't expect to get food for it. Interesting. There's a kind of faith that separates soul and body, and it's okay with police brutality. It's okay with homelessness. It's okay with the kind of faith that would rather have trans people commit suicide or attempt suicide at 10 times the rate of the rest of America than for them to experience gender affirming care. Because the soul, well, the soul is more important than the body. And it's okay if those bodies are dying, at least they're going to heaven, right? There's a kind of faith that says things like that. It's a kind of faith that, in my opinion, leads to this disembodied and in some ways toothless, but in some ways poisonous religion that often offends no one and makes little difference or makes so little effort to bring healing into the world that people will die. There's a kind of faith that's so passive and so bodiless that allows for or even actively creates the conditions by which others will suffer. The kind of faith that makes laws to make sure that baptism doesn't accidentally set someone free. The kind of faith that says, well, the poor should stay poor because God's going to reward them in heaven. It's fine. And the rich, well, they earn that. They deserve that. We wouldn't want them to part with their riches unfairly. Now, fortunately, this is not the kind of faith that was started with the resurrection of Jesus and that was passed down by the early church. So at last, we finally get to the Easter story. If you want to, I invite you to open up your Bible to the book of Luke chapter 23. A book of Luke chapter 23. It's also going to be on the screen. So if you don't feel like it, no sweat, but if you want to follow along, you can. And over this past week, we have been remembering the death of Jesus and him being laid in a tomb. And then we get to this story in Luke 23, verse 50. It says, now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council and he was a good and righteous man. And he had not agreed with the plan and the actions of the council because he was from the Jewish city of Arimathea and he eagerly awaited God's kingdom.

So this man, Joseph, went to Pilate and asked for Jesus's body. And he took it down from the cross and he wrapped it in a linen cloth and he laid it in a tomb carved out of the rock in which no one had ever been buried. It was preparation day for the Sabbath. So just hours before sundown on Friday.

And the Sabbath was quickly approaching and the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph. They saw the tomb and how Jesus's body was laid in it. And they went away and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils. And they rested on the Sabbath in keeping with the commandment. Then very early in the morning, in the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And they didn't know what to make of this. And suddenly two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground. But the men said to them, why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here. He has been raised. Remember what he told you all. He was in Galilee that the human one must be handed over to the sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again. And then they remembered his words. When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and to the others. And it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary, the mother of James, and the other women with them who had told these things to the apostles. Side note, if anybody ever tells you that everyone abandoned Jesus, don't believe them.

[15 : 20] The women stayed. And the word struck the apostles as nonsense. They didn't believe the women.

Peter ran to the tomb. And when he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home wondering what had happened because he didn't believe the women. And while they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood, we're skipping ahead, by the way.

So verse 12, skipping ahead to verse 36. And while they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, peace be with you. They were terrified and afraid. I love the repetitiveness there at Luke. Terrified and afraid. Oh dear. They thought they were seeing a ghost. And Jesus said to them, why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me. Touch me and see. For a ghost does not have flesh and bones like you see I have.

And as Jesus said this, verse 40, he showed them his hands and his feet. And because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, boy, there's a line. Wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness. I've been there.

He said to them, do you have anything to eat? And they gave them a piece of baked fish. Taking it, he ate it in front of them. Now listen, here's a list of all the physical, tangible words in this passage. They wrapped a body. They laid it in a tomb carved of rock.

[16 : 56] Fragrant spices, perfumed oils, a stone rolled away. Peter ran. Peter bent. Peter saw. Jesus stood in their midst. He said, look at my hands and my feet. Touch me and see.

I am flesh and bones. Do you have anything to eat? And they gave him a piece of fish. The stories that the first Christians told about Jesus and the resurrection were deeply sensual.

I don't mean sensual like the Bridgerton sense, okay? Sensual. Using the senses. Get your minds out of the gutter, friends.

They were deeply sensual stories. They talked about things happening with flesh and blood and bones. And now there are some people, and they try to argue, that the first Christians had no intention, no intention whatsoever of saying that Jesus literally rose from the dead.

That the spiritual experience was just so powerful, it was like he rose from the dead. But if that's what the first Christians wanted to communicate, they did an awful job.

[18 : 05] I mean, look at this, the first letter from John to an early church. It says, from the very first day we were there, taking it all in. We heard it with our own ears. We saw it with our own eyes. We verified it with our own hands.

The word of life appeared right before our eyes. We saw it happen. And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was incredibly this.

The infinite light of God himself took shape before us. We saw it. We saw it. We heard it. And now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us.

If the first Christians were trying to make this out to be a merely spiritual experience, they did a bad job. This tangible, physical faith had real-world implications.

The church completely rethought how they lived and how they were embodied in the society that they were part of. They rethought their economics and their relationship with money, holding everything in common with another, selling their property so that they could lift up the poor and the lowly.

[19 : 15] It made them change the relationship with the military police state that they lived under, to the point that many of them would rather be labeled criminals and die like a criminal than pretend like the military police state they lived under was okay.

It made them consider women as equals, which was unheard of in their culture and their geography. Women as capable of leadership and of wisdom and of teaching to their embarrassment of their culture.

It made them treat children with respect, redefining the child-parent relationship. It changed the way they treated other nationalities, calling all equally the children of God.

It changed the way they treated the sexual other, declaring that there was nothing in the way of them being part of God's family. It changed their posture to slavery, declaring that slaves ought to seek their freedom and that masters ought to set their slaves free.

Yes, this is all in Scripture. And if anybody has told you otherwise, they've been holding the truth back from you, what some might say lying. Then when the first Christians experienced a physical risen Savior, it changed their physical, tangible relationship with everyone and with the world itself.

[20 : 40] This faith was the second kind of faith that we'll talk about. It was spiritual and physical. It was private, yes, but also public and made a difference in society.

It was personal and it was communal. It wasn't just about me and my personal relationship with Jesus. It created beloved communities of equality and justice.

It was both intangible and tangible. Yes, it did things in our soul and our spirit that are difficult to put words to, that we leave it up to the poets and the musicians to do for us.

But it also was tangible. It made the poor not poor. It made the slave not free. It made the women equal, the children equal. It changed the relationships on the ground. And no one, at least in their day, would have described them as moderate and apolitical.

Everyone would have described them as a threat to Caesar and to the empire, a movement that must be shut down and stomped out and killed if need be.

[21 : 47] This was not a toothless, bodiless faith. This was a faith that made a difference in the world. This was the kind of faith that Mary, the mother of God, the mother of Jesus, wrote about in the Magnificat.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty handed.

This was a faith that made its positions known. This was a faith that made it stand in the ground. This was a faith that knew what it was about and what it was against.

It was a faith that made a difference in the world. And it started, it launched with the resurrection of Jesus, that the God, a man who died on a cross, did not stay dead.

And this emboldened the first Christians to have hope and possibly believe that, hey, if you kill me, if you kill my friends and my family in an effort to stop this movement, we won't stay dead either.

[22 : 57] That was the hope that the resurrection brought. This made a radical, physical, tangible faith only made possible by a radical, physical, tangible resurrection.

A tangible faith without a tangible God will eventually run out of steam and power. And the first Christians knew this. They staked their entire lives on it.

St. Paul, in his first letter to the Church of Corinth, put it this way. He said, if there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless and our faith is useless.

If the dead aren't raised, then Christ hasn't been raised either. If Christ hasn't been raised, then your faith is worthless. You are still in your sins. And what's more, those who have died are gone forever.

If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else. Now, I know in this room, watching online, there's a variety of beliefs about the resurrection.

[24 : 00] About what, if it's a story or a myth, if it's true or not true. And what I love about the table church is that the table church has long been and will continue to be a place where that variety of beliefs is welcomed and enjoyed.

But I will say for me, for me at least, and I would argue for the first Christians as well, The resurrection of Jesus was what every hope and expectation and effort was pinned on.

They believed it was literally true. And then it empowered them to, quote, one mob who wished to murder some early Christians, to turn the world upside down.

This sort of radical, tangible, physical faith did not leave things the same. It was not merely about what was happening on the inside.

It was about the effects it was making on the outside to create beloved communities of inclusion and justice in cities around the world where people could go and know that they were loved by God.

[25 : 13] Now, I know that that narrative took a turn. That narrative took a turn towards a sort of disembodied faith that somehow finds it okay to say, Hey, you're not welcome here.

A disembodied faith that says, Hey, we're not going to make an effort to make sure that you are cared for and loved in a real sense. And for that, we have some choices.

We can repent from that.

It's so threatening to the powers that be that they try to shut it down. But then God vindicated Jesus and then sent his church to continue the work.

This kind of faith that empowers the transformation of lives and of neighborhoods and of cities and of the world itself.

[26 : 36] This is the kind of faith that the early church had. It turned religious zealots and killers into those who went around and said, Welcome. You are embraced and loved by God.

It's the kind of faith that Elizabeth Key had. That when she entered into baptism, she knew in her bone of bones that it set her free.

And it's the kind of faith that we all can have today and tomorrow and for forever. And so in a little bit, we're going to do communion.

And as always, that communion invitation is open to all. But if you are in a place where you say, I want to have that kind of faith. I want to see that kind of effect in my life, both personally and communally.

Both in the invisible parts of our hearts and the visible parts of our lives. I invite you to come and pray with myself or one of our prayer team members. And we can make that step today.