

It Seems to Be True

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[0 : 0 0] Hello, Table Church. It's Anthony Parrott here. Happy New Year. I hope you had a decent holiday season as best as you can, making your way out of 2020 into 2021, and hopefully lots of lights at the end of lots of tunnels.

I am glad you're here with us today. We're hopping right into a new series to kick off the new year, and it's called Why Bother? Because it is one of the most common questions I have heard, especially since I've moved here to Washington, D.C.

Why bother with Christianity? Why bother following Jesus? Why bother with the church and all of this? And I've heard this question for one of three reasons.

Number one, Christians have the same amount of pain and sickness and tragedy and heartache as anybody else in the world. Christians are not particularly immune to bad things happening to them, so if following Jesus doesn't make life any easier, why bother?

Reason number two people might ask this question is, look, if God's love is unconditional, if God is always working for the good of everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike, if either hell doesn't exist or hell isn't like the fire and devil with a pitchfork and red tights cartoon that we've been brought up with, or if we can always leave hell whenever we want in the afterlife, if it's none of that brimstone kind of stuff, if God's always good, then why bother following Jesus? We might as well just do what we want now, right?

[1 : 3 8] And the third reason people ask this is that it seems like lots of non-Christians, maybe most non-Christians, seem to be more ethical, more moral, more just, to put more good and beauty and justice into the world than Christians.

So if being a Christian, or if being part of a church, or if being a Jesus follower doesn't actually help you become a better person or help you make the world a better place, why bother?

We're going to be answering this question in three ways over the next three weeks. Now, let me tell you what this sermon series is not going to be. First, it's not going to be an exhaustive summary of all of the philosophical and archaeological and scientific and historic proofs of Christianity.

Sometimes this discipline is called apologetics, not that you're apologizing for Christianity. Oh, I'm so sorry, I'm a Christian. Apologia, Greek word meaning to make a case for, to defend.

We're not going to be necessarily doing a lot of that. We just don't have the time and apologetics, that kind of apologetics, is rarely all that helpful for people.

[2 : 4 8] Like, it can be. I'm not saying it's not. But it's often relationships that does that work more than apologetics. The other thing we're not going to be answering during the sermon series is whether or not Christianity is somehow better or more true than other religions.

Personally, I'm willing to say I think Christianity best answers, describes reality. It answers the most important questions that people throughout the ages, throughout geography have had, and answers those questions in the most accurate ways.

And I think it leads to the best possible way to live. But I also recognize I'm like a Midwestern white kid who grew up in a Christian home. I have a lot of biases when I come to this question.

And I've spent lots of time, like, studying other philosophies and religions. And I have my own conclusions. But I'm not going to spend enormous amounts of time trying to convince you that Christianity is the most true or the best religion.

I recognize that there are folks part of the table, you follow a different religion than Christianity. You appreciate the community and all that that the table brings. But maybe you don't personally believe that Jesus is the Messiah or something like that.

[3 : 56] Keep doing that, okay? I'm not here to convince you. Otherwise, I don't really think that's much of my job. But I will talk about the reasons why I think Christianity is the best possible way for me to live.

Here's what we'll be doing instead over the next three weeks. Number one, this week we're going to talk about bothering with Christianity because I think it's true. Number two, next week we're going to talk about bothering with following Jesus because it seems to make the most sense of the world and where the world is going.

And then in week three, Pastor Richard is going to answer the question of why he bothers with following Jesus with Christianity because it seems to make a difference for the better.

So this week, I think it's true. Now, what exactly are we talking about when we say it? What is the it of it's true?

What exactly is true? So what we're talking about or what we're going to be talking about today is the gospel, the good news. In the Greek, it's euangelion.

[4 : 58] It's where we get the word evangelize to tell others of the euangelion, to tell other people about the good news. It's a word that was used in Roman times and Greek times to talk about military victories and the news about Caesar and the king and who was in charge.

Good news that, hey, Caesar won another battle, another war. We need to tell you about it. And Christians eventually began to use this word for what they believed about Jesus.

So what the key word here is news. Good news, euangelion, good news means that something happened. An event occurred.

Now, lots of people confuse the gospel, good news, with good advice. That's why you see lots of sermons like six ways to improve your dating life or four keys to success in the workplace or seven ways to set goals for 2021.

We're not going to do that. We're going to talk about the news instead of something that happened. So let's go to the scriptures.

[6 : 07] We're going to take a look at 1 Corinthians chapter 15. It's in the New Testament. And it's a letter from the Apostle Paul to the church of Corinth. And he is going to tell this church, remind this church of the good news.

So here's what it says. Verse 1. Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel, euangelion, good news, that I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

By this gospel you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you've believed in vain. For what I received, Paul says, I passed on to you, this church in Corinth, as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.

And after that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. And then he appeared to James, and then all the apostles, and last of all, he appeared to me as to one abnormally born or born out of time.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So let's just do a little bit of verse by verse with this passage here in 1 Corinthians 15. First of all, verse 1, Paul says, let me remind you of the gospel.

[7 : 31] So we're about to get a gospel definition. Paul is going to remind the church of Corinth. This is a place that Paul had been to. He went to the city of Corinth. He formed an ecclesia, a community of people from all classes of society.

He formed this ecclesia, this gathering of people, and taught them the euangelion, the good news. The thing that the Romans said, well, good news is that Caesar is king. He's won another battle.

Paul says, no, I've got a different euangelion. I've got a different good news to tell you, which you have received, Paul says in verse 1. There is a tradition, a set of teachings that was passed on from one generation to the next, from one teacher, Paul, to the church of Corinth.

And we'll talk more about that in a second. Verse 2, Paul continues. By this gospel, you are saved. We're about to get this summary. Now, quick reminder. The word saved in our day has been spiritualized a lot.

Saved today often means something merely private, merely spiritual, merely personal, merely internal. And I suppose that all of that is true.

[8 : 38] Being saved is something that is personal and internal. But it's also more than that. To be saved, in Paul's mind, and what the Corinthian church would have heard, to be saved means literally to be rescued, that something bad was going to happen, but then this news, this event occurred, and now that bad thing is not happening anymore.

Your body was about to experience danger and harm and trauma, and then, good news, something has changed, and you're not about to experience that. We hear this phrase, by this gospel you are saved.

And we hear something like, If you give mental assent to this list of philosophical truths about the divine and the world, then your soul will experience inner peace.

But what Paul's original hearers would have heard is, The events, the news that I'm about to tell you, has already happened, and it has already permanently changed your life.

That's what, by this gospel, you are saved means. Not just a list of truths to give mental assent to, something has happened, something has occurred, something is different now.

[9 : 51] Verse 3. Pay attention to this phrase. This is what Paul says. He says, What I received, I passed on to you what was of first importance. So Paul's actually using a technical educational term here.

The word is paradidomi, to pass on, to hand off. Paradidomi is taking a body of knowledge, of information, of wisdom, of technique, of ideas, and passing it on to someone else.

And it was more to do, it wasn't just to do with like doctrine and theology. It could also be like a carpenter training a carpenter, or a fisherman training a fisherman. And if you grew up in the Catholic tradition, it's the idea of catechesis.

We've got this body of knowledge that we want you to learn, of training up a generation, used of crafts and trades and theology, all sorts of things. And so Paul in verse 3 says, So, I'm going to remind you of the gospel.

By this gospel, you are saved. What's the news, Paul? What is it? And this is what Paul says is of first importance. That Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.

[11 : 11] That he was buried. That he was resurrected. That he appeared. That's it. Notice like the studying lack of like theological jargon that contains.

Recognize the studying lack of like beliefs and ethics and morals and like all sorts of peculiarities about this denomination versus this denomination and who can touch who.

Like notice that is not what Paul says the gospel is. Christ died. Christ was buried. Christ was resurrected. And then he appeared. In other words, the gospel, the good news, is news.

Something happened. Something occurred. When you turn on the news, if you watch the news or if you pick up a newspaper, please don't just get your news from social media, I beg of you. If you pick up or watch the news, what are they doing?

They are telling you stuff that happened. Now like there's some news that's more like advice-y. Like here, you should eat 36 things to lose your belly fat in 2021. No thank you. That's not really news.

[12 : 18] That's advice. We want news. We want somebody to tell us what has happened in the world today. And so Paul has given the euangelion, the good news, the gospel to the church of Corinth.

Christ has died. Christ was buried. Christ was resurrected. Christ appeared. Now that news has implications. It changes things.

When we watch the news, when we read the news, we're not just hearing stuff that happened and forget about it. Stuff that happens has implications in the world.

And so Paul presents this news, the things that have occurred, and they will have the ripple effects out into the world. And so when we ask a question like, why bother?

Why bother with this whole Jesus thing, this whole Christianity thing, and with the church and church people and all of that. When we ask a question like, why bother? We have to make sure that we are specific about what exactly it is we're bothering with.

[13 : 17] The core question of whether or not to believe the good news is not if the church is 100% a source of good in the world. It's not.

The question is not whether or not people who call themselves Christians are always wonderful and folks that we want to be around. They're not. The question is not whether or not believing in Jesus will somehow protect us from all harm and bad in our lives.

It won't. These questions all bring with them an assumption of utilitarianism. Does it have utility? Is it something that only has value or has worth or is true insofar as it is useful?

That's what utilitarianism is. But deciding whether or not something is true based solely off of its usefulness can have absolutely disastrous effects. Look no further than a surprisingly large population of people who refuse to accept the results of the presidential election.

Why do they refuse? Because it's not useful to them to believe in the results of the presidential election. It's utilitarianism run amok. Look at a group of people who refuse to wear a mask or refuse to socially distance themselves to stop the spread of COVID.

[14 : 36] Yeah, well, I won't get sick so I don't feel the need. Again, utilitarianism strikes. Again, it's only true so far as it's useful. So I don't need to wear a mask.

It's not useful for me, too. In the same way, friends, we cannot decide whether or not we should bother with the gospel, bother with the good news, based entirely on whether or not we find it useful.

Now, I certainly hope that the gospel is useful. Like I said, good news has implications. We would hope that the good news has good implications, that it brings justice and goodness and beauty into the world, that it shapes human beings into being a more human and authentic version of themselves, that it somehow does something good with my life.

Those are all useful things that I want to believe about the gospel, but that cannot alone be the sole thing that I decide whether or not it's true. Whether the core question of whether or not we believe the good news is, is it true?

Did it happen? That's the question that we ought to be asking. So is it? Anthony, tell us. Is it true? Did it happen?

[15 : 49] Well, it's not going to be a shock to anyone to hear me say, yeah, I think it's true. I mean, we're all gathered here at a church, and I'm a pastor of that church. I have my assumptions that the gospel, the good news, that Jesus was born and lived and died and was buried and was resurrected and appeared and ascended, I believe it's true.

Of course, not everyone agrees. And of course, I do not have the perfect knowledge of everything, and neither do you. We come at this world with a certain amount of humility, of what we think is true.

I think truth exists. I think reality is a real thing that is out there in the world. And I think we have a pretty good idea of what reality is, but I need to be open to be corrected.

And that's why the title of this sermon is, It seems to be true. It seems. As best as I understand from my particular perspective and biases and all of that, I think the gospel is true.

Most, many, many people agree with me. A heck of a lot of people don't. But I think it's true. So why? Why do I believe it's true? Well, let's make a list of bullet points underneath the heading, Something Happened to Make.

[17 : 11] Something Happened to Make. And then a bunch of bullet points. So, something happened to make first century Jews, who largely believed in one general bodily resurrection for all people at the end of time, something happened to make those Jews believe that one particular human being named Jesus of Nazareth experienced resurrection in the middle of history.

Something happened to make Gentiles, who thought that resurrection was laughable, impossible, the stuff of fairy tales, something happened to make those Gentiles believe that Jesus of Nazareth, a real historical person, experienced bodily resurrection.

Something happened to make first century Jews, who thought their Messiah would come and win a military victory against the Roman Empire, something happened to make them believe that Jesus, who suffered a humiliating death by the Roman Empire, something happened to make them believe that this Jesus was actually their Messiah after all.

Something happened to make Gentiles, who were largely polytheists and idol worshippers, abandon their polytheism for what was previously thought to be the laughable monotheism and deity of the Jews.

Something happened to make first century Jews, who were fiercely monotheistic monotheistic and anti-idolatry to the point of martyrdom and avoiding any physical representation of their God.

[18 : 43] Something happened to make them begin to call the human being named Jesus of Nazareth divine and to call Jesus Emmanuel, God in the flesh. Something happened to make these first century Jews, Peter and Paul and James, Mary of Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus.

Something happened to make them, who were fiercely loyal to the temple, to food purity laws, to regulations concerning contacts with non-Jews, something happened to make them abandon those principles to the point of death.

Something happened to make Jews and Greeks, who were trained to believe in the so-called natural order, that males were better than females, and children were worse of all, and slaves were worse than masters, and that there were different natural orders to which ethnicities were better than which.

Something happened to make this group of people form local ecclesias, gatherings, assemblies, churches throughout the ancient Near East and gather all of these men and women and children and slaves and masters and people from different countries and nations into one home and call each other equals and be known for their radical equality and actually be persecuted for this radical equality because to claim that women and male were equal and that slaves and masters were equal and that Greeks and Scythians were equal, that was worthy of death.

Something happened to make men and women, who were in relatively stable stations of economics and class, abandoned those stations to proclaim news that was known to be anti-empire and anti-Caesar and pro-kingdom of another world to the point of persecution and death.

[20 : 33] Something happened to make those ecclesias form the first hospitals and the first fostering and adoption centers and the first safe houses for escaped slaves in the ancient world, despite each of those actions keeping huge amounts of shame upon each individual and family and ecclesia.

Something happened to make. What was that something? There are many ways I could think about my own allegiance to Jesus and Christianity and name all the ways it's been useful to me.

I've got a great job, a job that puts me in some position of authority, some level of income. I went to a Christian college. I made some of my best friends there. I met the love of my life, Emily, there.

I like history and humanities and philosophy and so studying Christianity and religion and getting paid to do so, great outlet for that. There's also some ways that my faith lacks some usefulness.

It doesn't always make sense. First few years of my life were awful. Living with a mentally ill mom who was abusive and neglectful. I grew up poor.

[21 : 42] I had open heart surgery. I was part of the foster system. As an adult, I've been hurt by the church, by which I mean people who go to church. Christians can suck and they can suck the life right out of you.

And as a pastor, you aren't insulated from that fact. In fact, pastors tend to get the blunt force trauma of Christians and all of their hypocritical and self-righteous glory. I'm a pretty smart guy.

I probably could be getting paid a heck of a lot more or doing something else. I chose to do this. And I've had my share of tragedy in my life, not prevented by this supposedly all good God that I put my trust in.

So why freaking bother? In 2017, I preached an Easter sermon called Comeback Stories. Jesus, of course, in his resurrection was the ultimate comeback story.

And I also told the story of my brother David, who was still alive at the time and had been in and out of jail, but had beaten his alcoholism, put his life together, got married, had a daughter.

[22 : 48] What a great story. And the following year, he died in a car accident. What a sick, dark, cosmic joke, right? And so I went searching for answers.

And I'm not going to regale you with my bibliography and historical research, as my five-year-old daughter likes to say every time my face appears on the television to preach. Boring. But I will say this.

I am utterly convinced that on April 22nd, 33 AD, 1,988 years ago, a real human being named Jesus of Nazareth walked out of a tomb and told some women to go tell some others, who told some others, who told some others, that he was alive, he would never die, and he would come back again to set the world right.

And until then, we all were meant to act like divine images, continuing Jesus' work of merging heaven and earth into one.

Which means for me, someday I will see my brother again, and all those who have died before me. I will see this world as God intended it to be, as a place where justice can make her home.

[24 : 06] And all the tragedy, and all the evil, and all the bad churches, and all the bad people who go to bad churches, and all the bad living inside of me that rears its ugly head, all of that will not change my mind about why I bother following Jesus.

Because friends, I think it's true.