

Easter 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Hi Table Church, my name is Anthony Parrott. Happy Easter, happy Resurrection Sunday. Thank you so much for joining us today. I know that you may be joining us for any number of reasons, like it's Sunday and you go to church and that's just the thing you do, or maybe you got bribed by your mom to just watch a service and then you'll get the Easter ham.

Wherever you are on that spectrum, you are welcome and we are glad that you are here today. Today, we're here to talk about Jesus and we're here to talk about the fact that we believe that Jesus came back to life, that what happened on Good Friday, what happened at the cross was not the end of the story.

We're here to talk about Jesus come back to life, about God reaching into history and relaunching creation in the person of Jesus Christ. But before we get to all of that, let me ask you a question.

Who do you know who to trust? How do you know who to trust? What do you trust? There are so many sources of information out there in the world that it's something that we have to wrestle with constantly.

Now, I know in my family who I can trust and who I should not trust. When I ask my daughter, Audrey, Audrey is five, she's in pre-K and she's doing it all virtually, of course.

[1 : 2 3] And so I work downstairs in the basement. My wife is helping Audrey do virtual school on the computer. I come upstairs for lunch or for dinner and I ask my five-year-old daughter, hey, how has your day been?

And Audrey will say something along the lines of, it was great. It was wonderful. It was a good day. I did everything I was supposed to do. I didn't have any problems. It was great. And I turn to my wife, Emily, and she's like, mm-mm, mm-mm.

And so me and Emily go to a different room and I hear the rest of the story, the true story about the breakdowns and shutting the laptop lid and all of those kinds of things. I know in my family that if I want the real story about how the school day went, I'm probably going to ask my wife.

Now, there are lots of questions about where we're going to get our information. What about the news? What websites and papers and social media do we go to?

And what about medical advice? Do we trust the doctors and the nurses and the scientists? Or do we, you know, trust the person who has like a really popular YouTube channel? Who do we trust for all of this information?

[2 : 2 5] Now, in the ancient Near East, about 2,000 years ago, in the nation of Israel and Palestine and Galilee, it was a lot easier at least to know who not to trust because everyone agreed to not trust women.

Now, I'm not saying we go back to those days, but this was what was widely held to be true, that women were not trustworthy. I'm going to read to you a couple of things to kind of prove my point here.

So there is this law book called Justinian's Institutes, and it comes out of Roman culture, the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago. And this is what Justinian writes about the writing of wills.

He says, a father or a son under his father's power or two brothers under the power of the same father. They can be witnesses when it comes to writing a testament or a will.

But women and persons under the age of puberty and slaves and madmen and those who cannot speak or cannot hear and prodigals who are restrained from having their property and their power and persons declared by law to be worthless, they are incompetent to be witnesses.

[3 : 36] They cannot be witnesses. So women are at the top of that list of people who you cannot trust. There is a Jewish historian named Josephus, and he has a book called Antiquities, and this is what he says.

He says, this is who can be a witness in a trial, but let not a single witness be credited, but three or two at the least, and those such whose testimony is confirmed by their good lives.

But, Josephus says, let not the testimony of women be admitted on account of their levity and the boldness of their gender, nor let servants be admitted to give their testimony or on account of the ignobility of their soul, since it's probable that either women or servants will not speak the truth, either out of hope of gain or fear of punishment.

There's a religious text called the Mishnah, and in one of its sections, it says four times, it is not based on the statements emerging from a woman's mouth that we base our lives.

It is not based on the statements emerging from a woman's mouth that we base our lives. In fact, there's a whole chapter in the Mishnah dedicated to the question of whether or not a woman's testimony can be accepted on this particular question, if their husband is dead or not.

[4 : 55] Sometimes yes, but usually no, they can't be trusted. Now, why am I bringing this up? Well, historians today have access to these four ancient biographies of a man named Jesus of Nazareth, and these biographies were all written within a generation of Jesus's life, and each of these biographies make the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman Empire.

He was buried in a sealed tomb, and then each of these biographies claim that Jesus came back to life, that his body, which had been pierced and dead, rose again to some new form of bodily life, the result of which was Jesus's kingship, lordship, rule and reign over the entire world.

Now, ancient people weren't stupid. They knew how ludicrous and absurd this sounded, and at least whoever would put these biographies together and make these outrageous, dumb-sounding claims, well, at least they wouldn't be so silly as to make their primary eyewitnesses come out of the mouths of women, right?

Wrong. In fact, all four of these ancient biographies, which later Christians would call Gospels, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each of them have women serve as the primary principal eyewitnesses and testimony givers to this outrageous claim.

For example, let's take a look at Luke chapter 24. This is the story that the early Christians put together talking about what they believed about Jesus of Nazareth, and it says in verse one, now on the first day of the week, some translations say day one, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

[6 : 56] Now, why do they have spices? Well, they're not cooking. They're going to anoint a body for burial. They didn't have time on Friday because in their culture, from Friday sunset through Saturday was Sabbath, and so they were not allowed to do any tasks, and so they come back on Sunday, the first day of the week, to anoint Jesus's body for burial.

Now, who are these characters? The women. They didn't appear out of nowhere. They had been persistent characters within the biography of Jesus. So if you have an image in your mind, maybe you've heard some of the stories of Jesus, and you have this idea of Jesus being followed around by 12 dudes, get that image out of your mind.

Now, Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper actually has done tons of damage in helping us imagine what Jesus's life was like. It's quite inaccurate, Da Vinci's painting.

Rather, we're told early on in Luke's biography of Jesus that, I'm quoting from Luke 8 here, Jesus traveled around from one town and village to another proclaiming the good news of the gospel of the arrival of God's kingdom.

And now there were 12 men with him, and there were also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Mary, who's called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out.

[8 : 13] Joanna, who's the wife of Chusa, a manager of a ruler's household named Herod. And there's Susanna and many other women. And these women, listen, were helping to support Jesus financially out of their own means.

So it's not just Jesus and the 12 disciples, Jesus and the 12 dudes. It's Jesus and a whole lot of people, men and women. And it's the women specifically who are the ones who are financially supporting this preaching and traveling ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the book of Luke, we meet lots of women. We meet Mary and Martha, who are called disciples of Jesus. They sit at his feet and learn, which is something that women typically weren't allowed to do in those days.

There's the woman who anoints Jesus's feet with expensive perfume. At the cross, we see the women who are there, while nearly all of the men have abandoned Jesus to die.

Luke writes, all the people who had gathered to witness the crucifixion went away, but the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance, watching and weeping. Now, the 12 disciples, we know from some of their stories that some of them were actually very wealthy, successful businessmen, fishermen, tax collectors.

[9 : 26] And they did nothing after Jesus died. It's actually left to some secret follower of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea, who takes Jesus's dead body, wraps it in expensive cloth, and places it in an expensive tomb out of hewn stone.

And again, Luke writes, it's the women, not the 12 disciples, who follow Joseph and see the tomb and how the body was laid in it. So anyway, back to our main story, Luke chapter 24.

The women, they get up early, they go to the tomb to anoint the body for burial. And verse two, they find the stone rolled away. So tombs would have had large stones put in front of them.

The stone is rolled away. And when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And while they were wondering about this, wondering, wondering, because they didn't expect this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood before them.

And in their fright, the women bowed down their faces to the ground. But the men said to them, why do you look for the living among the dead? He's not here. He has been raised.

[10 : 33] Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee. The son of man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners. Jesus must be delivered over, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.

And then the women remembered Jesus's words. And when they came back from the tomb, the women kept telling the, it's the imperfect tense in the Greek. It means that they're trying and they're trying and they're trying repeatedly.

They keep telling the men, the disciples, all of these things, but the 11, it's used to be 12, but now it's 11 because Judas betrayed Jesus and committed suicide.

The 11 refused to believe. Again, it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary and the other women with him who told this to the apostles, but listen, they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

Because remember, ancient people weren't stupid. We shouldn't think of ourselves as these 21st century people who know better that dead bodies don't come back to life, but those really dumb ancient people, well, they believe anything.

[11 : 39] No, they knew that this story was nonsense and geez, it was women telling the story, so we especially know not to trust them. Now, there are two ways to kind of look at this story.

We can look at it from above as 21st century participants looking back on this story and wondering, could it be true and why would they tell it in this way?

But I want to start with looking from the story from within of what would it be like to be there in those moments. The first thing I want to point out is that it's the women who show up to do the work of burial, of grieving, of handling a corpse, of looking at their failed, pierced, crucified, beaten Messiah.

they show up and they do the hard work of facing their loss and facing their grief and facing the reality that everything that they had hung their hopes on was dead and gone.

It's the women who take the risk of being associated with a man who was just put to death for insurrection because the thing hanging over the cross was this is Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews, which was the Roman Empire making fun of this theoretical insurrectionist from a backwater country in a backwater city, Galilee, Nazareth.

[13 : 13] And the women know that if they get associated with this Jesus character, well, the Roman Empire might just come after them as well. Why did Judas betray Jesus to save his own skin?

Why did Peter deny even knowing who Jesus was to save his own skin? Why is it that we read in these biographies of the disciples hiding in a room with the door locked because they knew that being associated with Jesus could cost them their lives and yet, it's the women who show up and say, no, I'm willing to have my name attached to his name even if it costs me my life.

It's the men who stay back scared, who don't take the risk, who don't go through the work of grieving and loss and handling the dead things in their life.

And we notice it's the women who meet the miracle, it's the women who meet the angel, and we know from the other biographies it's the women who first meet the risen Jesus out of the grave, out of the stone, out of the death and the darkness they meet Jesus.

And so as we live and breathe within this story for a moment we notice it's those who go through the work of grief and loss and all of the pain that goes with that who are willing to face the fear, who are willing to face the loss, who are willing to risk their lives for the sake of being attached to Jesus, they meet the miracle.

[14 : 52] They meet the resurrected Lord, they meet Jesus. And maybe there's a lesson in there for us where there are I'm sure lots of easy Easter sermons I could preach right now about how glorious and happy and wonderful things could be and yet I think that misses the fact that Easter came out of a place of pain, that resurrection came out of death, that it's only when we face the things we don't want to face where we meet miracle.

The women confront their loss head on and receive a profound earth-shattering, life-changing message of hope. There are no shallow Easter's, there are no Easter's that don't begin with a cross and with Good Friday and with death.

There is no place for toxic positivity which ignores everything bad and everything wrong and treats it like it's just fine. No, instead we're better served if we're like the women who come bearing spices ready to anoint a dead body.

Because it's then when we meet our pain that God shows up. The other thing I think we can notice as we live and breathe within this story is are we paying attention to who we're not paying attention to?

Are we paying attention to who we're not paying attention to? The men refuse to engage and they get lost in their cynicism and it's understandable.

[16 : 36] They had risked their lives, they had spent the past three years, they had given up their households and their families and their ways of life and their jobs to follow this Rabbi Jesus who they thought was going to bring about the end of the empire, who was going to bring about the rule and the reign of God.

Of course they're stuck in their cynicism, they are hurt and they are wounded and it looks like they were wrong. But cynicism is untreated pain, masquerading as wisdom.

them. And it hides in a locked room missing out on the miracle. Their hurt and their skepticism caused them to refuse to believe in the gospel for a moment.

How many times have we refused to believe because of our own hurt or pain or cynicism or because of the cultural blindness and attitudes that have been handed down to us?

How many stories of abuse have we refused to believe because we don't think the witness is trustworthy? How many stories about race and racism and the pain that it's caused in this country and around the world because we don't believe that those people are worthy of our attention?

[18 : 00] How many stories from the sexually marginalized, from gay and lesbian, queer, transgender people, how many of those stories have we refused to listen to, refused to believe because our culture has taught us, well, they're making it up.

It's all in their head. We all know that they can't be trustworthy witnesses of their own lives. How many stories of the pain or the truth or the beauty have been ignored because what is truth that has been spoken we will call nonsense because we've been led to believe that some are just more prone to nonsense than others.

Those are the lies that those men were brought up in in that culture and that time and I'm afraid it's not all that different today, friends. So the women, they meet the resurrected Jesus, they meet the miracle in their pain, they go, they proclaim the gospel, what the church has called the apostles, those women go to those men who are close to Jesus and they say he's back, he's returned, he's alive, and they say I don't listen to people like you.

And they miss the miracle for a minute. Now if we look from outside the story, if we look from our perspective back on it, I'll bring this up every Easter, if you wanted to invent a religion that was certain to get you ridiculed and kicked out of the marketplace and your social circles and your families and make you believe things that no Jew would believe, no Greek would believe, no Roman would believe, the first Christians did an excellent job.

It would have been really nice if these biography writers, the writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, had given us an eyewitness account of the actual resurrection, not just a glancing reference to a stone rolled away.

[20 : 03] It would have been really nice if they had made the witnesses not the least trustworthy witnesses that that culture could think of. It would have been really nice if all the little details between Matthew and Mark and Mark and Luke and Luke and John, if all those little details matched up perfectly and got them all straight.

But that's actually not the story that we get. Instead, we get one that actually messes up some of the details. Who got there first? Who saw Jesus first? Were there one angel, two angels, more than two?

Instead, we get one that makes women, the most untrustworthy people of that day, the primary eyewitnesses, and it makes the eleven apostles who are left out to be non-believers, people who failed in their faith.

Makes the founding members of the church sound doubtful and skeptical and dismissive of these apostles to the apostles. In other words, it doesn't sound all that made up.

It sounds like it could possibly be true. It sounds like what would happen exactly if you thought that messiahs don't die and nobody is resurrection, nobody actually believes in that, and then it happens and you're surprised and you weren't expecting it, and you're trying to get your story straight, and you're trying to gather all of the details, and yeah, you might mess up a little bit because you weren't journaling through that day, you were grieving that day.

[21 : 32] It sounds like a story that might actually be true. Friends, Easter is not some like bonus addition to the story of Christianity.

Jesus was not born to die. In Christ and in the resurrection, God breaks into history to relaunch the cosmos, to relaunch creation, and that same power that brought Jesus out of the grave can live inside of you.

It can relaunch your life, and it can meet you in your pain, and in your pain you can meet the miracle. no matter who you are, where you've been, and what you've done, and the pain that you're feeling, the turmoil that you've gone through, the lack of belief that you've had, the spices that you are carrying to anoint the corpses in your life.

No matter what, God wants to bring redemption and resurrection power to you. Now, I want to be explicit about a couple things, because I know we've got visitors today, I know we've got people who haven't been to church in a long time, and I know we've got people who are used to these kinds of messages, they're used to hearing this kind of unconditional with a big asterisk attached to an invitation, and also knowing that it probably doesn't apply to me.

So let me be clear. At the Table Church, we believe that LGBTQ individuals are unequivocally part of the image of God. We believe that white supremacy or any ideology that says that you've got to look more like me in order to be more holy is evil.

[23 : 22] We believe that nationalism is wrong, and when I say that God is inviting you into a relationship so you can experience God's transforming power, God wants to transform you, yes, into a more loving and joyful and peaceful person, not a whiter or straighter or manlier or more American person.

Easter shows us that God is transforming us to become more fully human, more fully who God has always intended and created us to be.

And that resurrection power does not come from the halls of power and privilege, but from broken open tombs of the marginalized and the voices of the unexpected.

And so if you want that power to be part of your life, then all you have to do is ask. You can contact me, you can click the little link in the chat, or you can just be wherever you are right now and talk to God for a moment.

Because I believe that God meets us where we are. I believe that God can break into our lives in unexpected in new ways, even in the places where we least expect it, even in the places where we expect to find a corpse, even in the places where we are holding tight onto our cynicism and unbelief.

[24 : 53] God can break through into your life. God. And so if you want to make that resurrection power, that relationship with the divine, the soul of the universe, with Jesus, part of your life today, would you pray with me?

Almighty God, I give the whole of myself to you because I know that you are a good and loving and kind God.

And I believe that what you did in Jesus, you want to do in me. That the resurrection and the new life that you gave to the Son of God, you want to do in me as your child.

And so I give myself to you. Make me new. Wipe my tears. Heal my pain. And even if it takes the rest of my life, I trust that you will bring it to a good and holy end.

Thank you, God. Thank you, Son, and thank you, Spirit, for Easter's, for resurrection and for the promise of a world made new.

[26 : 16] May you empower and anoint each and every one of us to join you on your mission, to relaunch creation, and to make heaven come down to earth.

We pray these things in the unity of your Spirit in the name of Jesus. Amen.