

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Easter Sunday

Sermon Series: Following Where Jesus Leads

(studies in apprenticeships to Jesus from the Gospel of Mark)

A House of Cards, Unless...

(lots of New Testament passages; really)

Introduction: Foundations, houses of cards...

The bell-tower of Pisa, Italy, is famous for its leanings.

Construction of the tower took about two centuries and was completed in 1372. The tower's tilt began a full century before it was completed.

I learned from Wikipedia this week that the tower's 4 degree tilt is due to unstable soil conditions, an insufficient foundation, and a design that was flawed from the beginning.

There are continuing arguments as to who was the architect behind the faulty design. The descendants of the Pisano brothers (Guglielmo and Bonanno) and those of a Mr. Diotalvi are still pointing fingers at each other, shouting, "He did it!"

That the Tower of Pisa started its lean during construction highlights that the foundation of every building is crucial.

Without a solid, well-built foundation, every building is a house of cards, liable to collapse with the slightest wind or vibration.

I've heard that in San Antonio's Tower of the Americas, there is as much concrete underground as there is above ground - a comforting thought as you ride up to the observation deck.

What is true for buildings is also true for a life. Everyone benefits from a solid foundation of family, a larger community and general mental health to stabilize us at times like these when economies stagger and health is at risk and cultural storms rage.

It's just as true that faith needs to be built on a solid foundation. So, on what foundation is Christianity built?

The professor who taught my course in World Religions in college got it right one day in class.¹

Dr. Magruder wasn't a Christian. He wasn't religious at all. But he made a comment I have remembered from those days in college.

After teaching us about Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam, he told us, "*Christianity and Judaism stand unique among the world's religions for being based on history and not on philosophy.*"

It was an astounding statement - but he was right.

If you take away certain historical events from Israel's history, Judaism falls apart.

If there was no historical Abraham or a real Moses or a real King David, Judaism crumbles. If there was no crossing of the Red Sea, no giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, no conquest of the land of Palestine - there is no Judaism.

Judaism exists because of stuff that happened and the same is true for Christianity.

Christianity didn't originate in the minds of some theologians or even in the amazing teachings of Jesus.

¹ I graduated from Stephen F. Austin State U. (Nacogdoches, Texas) in 1978. My diploma could have combined at that time with \$.25 to purchase a great cup of coffee, as I was an English major with minors in Philosophy and German.

The Christian movement began because of events that really took place in the first century AD involving the Man, Jesus.

The movement began because Jesus lived an exemplary life, taught as no man ever taught, performed miracles that lots of people saw, and died a hideous death.²

And there's one more. The movement started because He didn't stay dead.³ That's a crucial part of the Jesus narrative.

And, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is less stable than that tower in Italy. It's a house of cards. According to the writers of the New Testament, if there's no resurrection, then the Jesus Way isn't worth living.⁴

What I am going to do this morning is provide you with what I think is the best evidence for Jesus' resurrection. It's the evidence that convinces *me*.

The evidence I'm putting forward today is intensely personal and it revolves around the lives of Jesus' first followers. To begin with, what do we know about the men and women who followed Jesus, anyway?

The Disciples BEFORE Jesus' Last Trip to Jerusalem

The First Followers

We know that they were all Jewish.

² Jesus lived, a fact that is uncontested by serious historians. His existence is affirmed by the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, and the Roman historians, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger.

³ The letters and books that make up the New Testament affirm that the heart of the movement that revolved around Jesus was born out of what happened on the weekend including a Friday we call "Good" and Easter Sunday.

⁴ The Apostle Paul says as much in his first letter to the church Corinth. [*1 Corinthians 15:17*] and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. [*18*] Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. [*19*] If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

Several of the men were fishermen. One collected taxes for the hated Romans and another was a Jewish political zealot. (Fascinating relational dynamics, no doubt, between those two.)

Several women followed Him. Some of them were women of means and supported Jesus and the rest from their personal wealth. Some weren't at all wealthy.

They all came from Galilee - except for one (Judas Iscariot) - and they each had their own distinct personalities. They all were, for the most part, exceptionally normal, remarkably average for the day in which they lived. They were your next door neighbor.

For most of three years these followers lived with Jesus, much of it on the road as He traveled from place to place.

Their Exposure to Jesus

They heard Him teach and preach. They saw Him perform miracles. They saw Him act and they heard Him speak with authority.

They *began* to follow Him because He did what Jewish rabbis of the day never did. He invited them to follow. They said "Yes!"

They *stayed* with Him because they experienced something compelling about Him. His truth-telling and love and compassion and courage were irresistible.

After Jesus died and the Jesus movement took off - and it took off like a rocket! - some of these followers wrote down the stories of their life with Him.

Matthew and John wrote accounts of Jesus' words and works. Peter told the stories of Jesus to Mark who wrote his own Gospel.

Most everything we read in what they wrote were first-hand, eyewitness accounts. Clearly, they knew Him very well.

And as they got to know Him, there was a growing excitement about what they expected would happen as they followed Him.

Their Expectations of Jesus

Over the course of their growing relationship with Jesus, they became increasingly impressed with Him. They came to believe that He was a king (albeit without a throne) and they expected Him to take the throne in Jerusalem and set up a kingdom.

They expected that Roman domination of their beloved Israel would soon be a thing of the past and that under Jesus' reign, their nation would return to the glory days of David and Solomon.⁵

They also expected that in this soon-to-come kingdom, they would each hold positions of honor and leadership.⁶

Those hope-filled expectations rose to the status of rock-solid certainty as they entered Jerusalem with Jesus for the third annual, week-long Passover celebration since they had started following Him.

The Disciples DURING Jesus' Last Visit to Jerusalem

Great Expectations

Triumphal Entry

As they neared Jerusalem, with Jesus riding on a donkey's colt, the crowds laid down their cloaks in the road and shouted "*Hosanna!*" and "*Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!*"

That kind of praise, poured out on the Man upon whom they had pinned their hopes for royalty, caused their hopes to soar.

In the minds of His followers, Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday was a huge step in the direction of kingship. They all believed that this was "it." Jesus was going to claim the throne and the crown.

⁵ Yes, there were the occasional warnings of hard times to come, but these were mostly ignored or totally misunderstood.

⁶ There were discussions, which in hindsight, the twelve disciples would have found embarrassing, when they argued with each other about who would be "first" and who would have the best places in Jesus' kingdom.

Temple cleansing

And I'm thinking that on the next day, when He cleansed the temple of the corrupt markets, the disciples would have seen that, too, as an encouraging sign of Jesus' move to take over.

Battles won

When, on the next day, He engaged in verbal skirmishes with scribes, leading rabbis, Pharisees, and Sadducees, the disciples might have been surprised.

But His victory in each one would have left them giddy with confidence, because they viewed everything that was happening through the rose-colored lenses of Jesus' coming kingship.

They thought, "*Of course, His victories were simply Jesus putting other leaders in their places.*"

Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we see that their read on what was happening was warped. It was classic confirmation bias.

Psychologists warn us of confirmation bias. It's a way of thinking where everything that happens oozes through an interpretive grid to further strengthen an appealing narrative.

The disciples saw the events of this Passover week as trending toward a throne for Jesus because they wanted Jesus to sit on a throne.

However, as Thursday of Passover week rolled around, even the disciples may have started to recognize cracks in their expectations.

Specifically, they might have been caught off balance by what Jesus had to say during the Passover meal, which was held in an upstairs room in a Jerusalem home.⁷

⁷ Granted, the meal began awkwardly, with Jesus washing all twenty-four of the disciples' filthy feet. (John 13:1ff...) But things smoothed out and the time transitioned into rich fellowship and wonderful food.

Great Hesitations

Dark sayings

The downward slide into uncertainty began when Jesus predicted that one of the twelve would *betray* Him (John 13:21-30). It continued when He explicitly predicted that Simon Peter would *deny* Him (John 13:36-38).

The disciples may have been thrown more off-balance when He spoke repeatedly about ***“going away”*** (John 13:31-33; 14:1-6, 18-19, 27-29; 16:5-11, 16-22) and when He warned them that since the world hated *Him*, the world would hate *them*, too. (John 15:18-21; 16:1-4)

Uncertainty grew when they left the house where they had eaten Passover and walked out of the city to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Garden prayer time

Jesus selected Peter and James and John to go with him to a corner of this secluded garden. He told them to watch and pray and left them to go a short distance away to pray to His Father.

They saw that He was deeply distressed. This would not have made sense to the disciples, believing as they did that He was about to grab the crown.

When they saw that He was praying so fervently that the sweat was pouring off of Him like great drops of blood, they would have wondered, *“What’s up with Jesus?”*

After praying, Jesus led the three back to where the other disciples lay sleeping.

Betrayal and arrest

Then, He was arrested, right there in the Garden of Gethsemane. And that’s when the narrative they had believed about Jesus for three solid years came apart at the seams.

Led by Judas Iscariot, who identified Jesus with a kiss of friendship, Roman soldiers and Jewish temple guards grabbed Jesus.

The scene was wild. Peter struck out with a short sword and cut off the right ear of the High Priest’s slave. There were torches and lanterns and weapons.

Jesus asked only for safety for His followers as the soldiers led Him away for a night of horror.

In His Gospel, Mark wrote, thanks to eyewitness testimony from Peter, ***[Mark 14:50] And they all left Him and fled.***

As the narrative kept unravelling, things went from bad to worse for Jesus AND for His shell-shocked disciples.

The Disciples AFTER Jesus’ Arrest

The Trials of Jesus

Trial by trials

The apostles Peter and John⁸ watched Jesus stand trial before the Supreme Court of Israel, known as the Sanhedrin.

These two listened as Jesus was interrogated. They watched as He was physically struck by an officer of the court.

And here, we’re brought into the story of Peter in this scene.

This is the same Simon Peter who had confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God *and* who just hours earlier had sworn that even if all the others denied Jesus, he sure wouldn’t.

Well, Peter was so undone by what was happening that when he was explicitly asked by a nearby servant girl, he denied three times that he even knew who this *“Jesus”* was.

⁸ John had access to the courtyard because he was known to the High Priest.

Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy and was then led to Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate convicted Him of sedition, the punishment for which was death by crucifixion.

Trial by scourging and crucifixion

We don't know if any of the disciples were eyewitnesses to what Jesus endured at the hands of the Roman soldiers, or if what we read in the Gospels was given to them by those who saw it happen.

But all Jews in those days knew what happened to a man sentenced to the cross.

Jesus was mistreated in every way. In His case, a crown made from thorns was jammed into His scalp. He was mocked and "scourged", scourging being a beating so terrible that it often killed the condemned before he even made it to the cross.

The disciples would have known about Jesus' condemnation by Pilate, would have known about His sufferings and scourging, and would have listened as their fellow Jews cried out early on Friday morning, "**Crucify Him!**"

I suspect that some of them would have seen Jesus carrying His heavy cross to the place of crucifixion.

These would have also watched as He was crucified and as He suffered for six hours on the cross. They would have watched Him take His last breath, and then watched as a Roman soldier thrust a spear into Jesus' side, the flow of blood and water proving that He was truly and thoroughly dead.

Some of these - mostly the women who followed Him - trailed after Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea to Joseph's tomb, where His broken body was laid. They saw the stone rolled in front of the tomb's entrance.

And that, late on a Passover Friday,⁹ was the end of the disciples' hopes that Jesus was going to usher in a kingdom.

⁹ Which also happened to be a sabbath on that year.

It's tough to even imagine what life was like from that Friday night forward for the disciples. But, let's try.

The Trials of the Disciples

Their emotional devastation

They had known and loved Jesus, so they would have been grieving, just like anybody grieves the loss of a loved one.¹⁰

But Jesus was more than someone these disciples loved. He was their life Mentor and Lord. In Him they had placed their hopes and dreams for a bright future.

Now, those dreams are dead. Just as dead as Jesus was dead.

From the arrest in the Garden, all through Friday night and into Saturday and all Saturday night into the early hours of Sunday these men and women were utterly lost and hopeless.

The Gospels are silent about this emotional devastation, but I believe it was present in all of them.

And they were afraid.

Their physical danger

They had been Jesus' closest companions. Now, He has been crucified as a traitor to Rome, making them co-conspirators. They were arrestable, potentially liable to the same fate Jesus suffered.

Rome would have held them guilty by association. The Jewish leaders would have wanted them punished for aligning with Jesus, the blasphemer.

¹⁰ Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would have entombed Jesus with the utmost respect. But I wonder how Nicodemus, especially, processed the death of this man whom he had believed to be Messiah.

Their behavior

Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us that the disciples **“rested according to the commandment”** (Luke 23:56) from Friday night through the rest of that weekend.

My guess is that they rested alone. They socially distanced from anybody in Jerusalem who might have identified them as Jesus’ followers. They were hiding out, trying to stay under the radar.

So, to sum up, these disciples were scared, devastated men and women. Their hopes for a great future had been thoroughly dismantled in less than twenty-four hours.

The curious thing is that if you fast-forward even a few short weeks, you see something startling. You see a growing excitement among these same people about spreading the message of Jesus.

The Disciples’ Eventual Lives and Deaths

How the Disciples Lived

Within a month or so of Jesus’ death, one hundred and twenty disciples of Jesus were gathered together in Jerusalem. They were praying and choosing a new apostle to take Judas’ place. They were behaving as if the Jesus Movement had never even had a hiccup. It seems like they’re preparing to take the world for Jesus.

Beginning fifty days after Jesus was crucified, Peter the Denier preached bold messages about Jesus. Through these messages, thousands of people believed in Jesus.

When arrested for spreading the news about Jesus, they told the authorities they weren’t going to be quiet. They would keep on talking about Jesus.

When some of them were released from a time in jail for spreading the “Gospel” (good news) about Jesus, they re-committed to God to keep sharing.

Every one of the disciples, men and women who had been crushed by Jesus’ Passover death, were on mission for Him, telling anyone who would listen about Jesus.

And this excitement about Jesus didn’t fade. It wasn’t a phase or a flash in the pan. It continued for all of them for the rest of their lives.

How the Apostles Died

Most of their lives ended because they wouldn’t stop talking about Jesus.

- Six of the original twelve apostles were crucified for preaching about Jesus (Peter, Andrew, Philip, Simon, James the son of Alphaeus, Bartholomew).
- At least three were executed by sword, spear or arrows for preaching Christ. (Matthew, Thaddaeus, Thomas, probably James the son of Zebedee)
- One was exiled to the island of Patmos following imprisonment and torture **“for the testimony of Jesus”**. (John)¹¹

Why...?

What explains men and women giving their lives to spreading the message of a Man whose death had totally disappointed them?

Did they all get together after His death, remind each other of Jesus’ great teachings and decide to “man up” and teach what He taught? Did they gather back in Galilee, remember the great times they had together and agree to replicate that “fellowship” in honor of Jesus?

No. The only explanation that rings true to me is this.

Devastated, disappointed, scared people turned on a dime and became bold, articulate, courageous and committed missionaries for Jesus because SOMETHING happened.

¹¹ Of course, Judas Iscariot took his own life, overwhelmed with guilt for having betrayed Jesus.

That's what they all said, too. And what they all said "happened" was that Jesus rose from the dead.

The best evidence for the resurrection of Jesus I know of is the changed lives of the men and women who had followed Him in life, were broken by His death, and were utterly surprised by the Sunday morning empty tomb and then by actual, physical encounters with the risen Jesus.

Conclusion: Jesus is alive!

Close encounters with a resurrected Jesus...

- Mary at the tomb

Mary Magdalene (from whom Jesus cast out seven demons) went to the tomb on the Sunday morning after that terrible Friday.

She and others (Mary, the mother of James, Salome) had gone to the tomb with spices to finish the hastily done embalming process that had started on Friday.

These three women knew that Jesus was dead. They had been there at the crucifixion. They watched Him die.

They had watched the men place His body in Joseph's tomb, roll the stone over the entrance, set a Roman seal in place to protect against grave-robbers.

When these women arrived at the tomb, they got the surprise of their lives. The stone was rolled away. Angels appeared to them.

Later, Mary was weeping, believing that someone had stolen the body of Jesus - when Jesus appeared to her. She ran from Jesus to where the other disciples were gathered and announced, **[John 20:18] "I have seen the Lord!"**

Peter and John ran to the tomb to check out Mary's story.

- Peter and John at the tomb

When they arrived, they saw only an empty grave and evacuated wrappings. They went away, believing (John 20:8) and marveling at what had happened. (Luke 24:12)

- Two disciples on the road to Emmaus

Later that day, two unnamed disciples who had been trudging their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, were joined on the road by a Stranger. He turned out to be Jesus - and they ran back to Jerusalem to tell the others, **[Luke 24:34] "The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon."**

- The disciples in the upper room, then with Thomas

Then, on that first Sunday night, Jesus appeared to the disciples, locked doors notwithstanding and ate fish with them.

Thomas wasn't there and didn't believe the others' report. But when Jesus appeared to them again, eight days later, Thomas saw and responded to the risen Jesus, **"My lord and my God!"**

- At the Sea of Galilee

Jesus appeared to the whole group on a morning on the Sea of Galilee. He fixed them breakfast and then fixed a wrecked Simon Peter.

- On a mountain-top in Galilee.

He met with them again on a mountain-top in Galilee, and gave them marching orders to **"make disciples of all the nations"**.

By the time we come to that gathering of one hundred and twenty disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem fifty days after Jesus' crucifixion, these disciples were like a coiled spring ready to explode with the message of Jesus.

They were ready to share Jesus because they knew He was alive.

Clear affirmations of a resurrected Jesus...

The resurrection wasn't a peripheral part of the reason the first disciples moved from despair to joy and from hopelessness to mission.

The resurrection was THE reason.

At the beginning this morning, I told you about my college professor's observation that the foundation of Christianity is history. Stuff that happened concerning the Man, Jesus.

It's true. Christianity didn't start because of a philosophy.

It didn't start because of a book we refer to as the New Testament. The books that make up our New Testament were written *after* the start of the Jesus Movement.

Christianity started because and it is based on the historical event of Jesus' post-crucifixion resurrection from the dead.¹²

Every time these early disciples spoke about Jesus, they spoke of the resurrection.

The overwhelmingly central theme of their message was, *"Jesus isn't dead anymore. Jesus defeated death. Jesus is alive."*

They stuck to the story that Jesus rose from the dead. Nothing - not even the threat of death - could shut them up.

They all said they encountered a resurrected Jesus.

So maybe we should consider the possibility that this is exactly what happened. And if that is exactly what happened, that means something for all of us, today.

Clear implications of a resurrected Jesus...

If Jesus rose from the dead, He was unique among anyone who has ever lived. He successfully defeated death. That means He is Lord: THE LORD.

If He is THE LORD He is uniquely able to keep promises He has made. Like a promise to forgive sin, to give eternal life, to give abundant life, here and now.

It means that Jesus really is the One you've been hoping for, looking for, longing for. He is the source of life and peace and joy and meaning.

If you want all of this, there is something you must do, and it's something no one can do for you. And it has nothing to do with going to church or walking an aisle or even praying the right formulaic prayer.

What is it you must do? You must believe in Jesus.

You thought I was going to say something else? You thought acts of penance or giving money or climbing a mountain or crossing a river was required? Nope.

The Apostle John records this in His Gospel - ***[John 3:16] For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.***

Please don't stumble over this simple and sole requirement for eternal life.

To say, "Believe in Jesus" doesn't mean that it's easy to have eternal life; it means that for you and me, eternal life is a gift.

It was anything but easy for Jesus to provide salvation for us.

¹² Following college, I attended Dallas Theological Seminary, where I took a class under Dr. Walter Bodine, a brilliant academic who knew more dead languages than you could shake a stick at. In class one day, he expressed his belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. But, he went on to say that if an error was found in the Bible his faith wouldn't be destroyed. However, if it were to be proven that Jesus didn't rise from the dead...Dr. Bodine never finished the sentence, except to say, *"I don't know quite what I would do, where I would turn..."*

He had to live a perfect life and die a perfectly awful death. He had to endure suffering beyond anything we can imagine to provide forgiveness for your sins. It wasn't easy for Him.

But, having done the work, He's offering you a gift. This is the way gift-giving works.

Your friend gives you an expensive gift for your birthday. It cost your friend dearly to buy that brand-new car for you. It wasn't easy. But your friend wanted to gift you with a car. He offers you the title to the car and you say... - well, what will you say?

Will you say, *"No, I can't accept it because I didn't put the car together?"* or *"No, I can't accept this car because I didn't have a hand in paying for it?"*

Well, you could say that. But your friend just wants you to accept it. He wants you to receive the gift.

Jesus paid it all. He's offering you a priceless gift. It's something you could never provide for yourself.

He wants you to put the treasure of your trust in Him, this once-dead and now alive Jesus.

Believe in Jesus and become God's daughter, God's son.