

I. Introduction

A. I want to **keep playing** the association game. **You saw it on the screen. You know how it works.**

1. When I say word, I want you to note what you think of first. For instance, when I say, “Chicago,” what do you think of? Michigan Avenue? The sky-line? Bad traffic? Da Bears? Something else?

2. Or Spring Break? Do you think: Cancun? The sand and surf? A wild college beach party? Hectic travel? Most of the time someone suggests this game they are setting you up. At some point they ask: So, what do your answers say about you? Or, what would Freud say your answers say about you? You can relax. I’m going in a different direction.

3. OK, one more practice, Christmas. When I say “Christmas,” do you think: presents? time off? Santa? The Mall? *It’s a Wonderful Life*? Food?

B. So here’s the word. Drum roll please: Easter. No surprise there. What do you think of when you hear the word Easter? **We scrolled some options.** Eggs? Brunch? Spring Break?

C. For me, Easter prompts two words: opportunity and challenge. Yes, I also think: Jesus, resurrection and empty tomb. But the two words that jump out for me are: opportunity and challenge. It’s an opportunity because: hey, you are here. You may not be happy about being here. But you’re here. And so are lots of other people who haven’t shown up at church since Christmas – or maybe since last Easter - are here. And that gives me a chance to talk about something I think is really important – which is a great opportunity.

D. But it’s also a challenge:

1. For starters, many of you are not inclined to listen. You think the Easter claims are crazy.

2. It’s also a challenge because whoever you are, you are likely sitting next to someone who thinks very differently about Easter, who lives at the other end of the spectrum. Some of you dismiss the resurrection, and some of you are betting your lives on it.

II. Let me frame things this way. **GRAPHIC #1 HERE**

A. At one end of the spectrum we have those who reject the claims of Christ generally, and the resurrection specifically. It didn’t happen. Religion is a refuge for the weak. It’s a collection of superstitious blather crafted by pre-scientific people in a desperate effort to explain a confusing world or to control other people.

B. At the other end are those who reorient their lives around the empty tomb. For them, the resurrection not only confirms Christ’s claim that He is God – it’s a foretaste of what is coming your way. In the 15th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth – a passage focused on the resurrection – Paul argues that Christ’s resurrection is a prototype of what follows; a preview of coming attractions. Those who are right with God - forgiven, justified, reconciled - will live again after they die.

C. And by the way, in the middle - between those who reject the resurrection and those who are re-orienting their lives around it, are those who are rethinking their views – perhaps in response to new information.

1. Perhaps because of a spiritual hunger. Perhaps because they – you? – have woken up to the fact that Christianity is not principally a religious, a philosophical or a moral claim, but a historical one. The New Testament is not a book that reads, “a long time ago in a faraway land” – but one that makes very specific claims about time and place.

D. There might be some other reason why you are rethinking your views. The point is, one of the challenges people like me face on days like this is, people walk in all over the place. **So I am going to call on you to examine your options and double down.**

III. So let me explain what I am going to try to do. My goal today is to give each of you something to take-away - a reason to pay attention. Not by saying anything new or novel. My argument is an old one. But it’s a big one. My claim is that, one way or the other, everything pivots around the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A. If it happened that means Jesus really is God – not just a nice guy, not just a moral reformer, not simply a first century sage – but God. And we need to pay attention to everything He says.

B. But if he didn’t rise from the dead, then He isn’t who He claimed to be. Forget whatever nice things you might think about Jesus - he needs to be filed alongside Mother Goose and Peter Pan, or, if not them, next to David Koresh and Jim Jones. If he didn’t rise from the dead, then his claims are the stuff of fairy tales, or the rants of a dangerous, crazy, deluded megalomaniac.

C. You might think I’m being harsh. You might want to promote a third option – argue that Jesus should be grouped with Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammad, the Dali Lama and other religious and moral reformers. If you hold to this view, you’d have company. But not among those who are paying attention to what He said. The others I mentioned did not claim to be God and Jesus did. In his book *God in the Dock*, C.S. Lewis writes:

1. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him ‘Are you the son of Brahma?’ he would have said, ‘My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.’ If you had gone to Socrates and asked, ‘Are you Zeus?’ he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammad and asked, ‘Are you Allah?’ he would first have rent his clothes then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, ‘Are you Heaven?’ I think he would have probably replied, ‘Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.’ The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man.

IV. Again, let me stress this point: I am simply setting a 2,000-year-old argument in front of you.

A. From the very earliest days, there have been people who have wanted to say that Jesus was a good guy but not god. But that was rejected. In fact, the argument is so old that it initially was voiced in Latin: *Aut deus, aut homo malus*. Which translates, Jesus is God or a Bad Man.

B. If you are trying to camp in the middle of the spectrum – hold to the idea that Jesus is a great person just not god - you need to realize that this isn’t like living in the flyover zone, it’s like trying to live in the De-militarized Zone – the DMZ .

1. Those who live in New York and LA often refer to those of us who live in Chicago – to say nothing of those who live in Peoria or Tiffin, Iowa – as the fly over zone. They can't imagine why anyone would want to live there. But, they're wrong. Don't tell them or they will move here and we'll have to listen to them tell us how much more important New York is or how much cooler LA is. They do not like "the fly over zone" but it's a great place to live.

2. But the DMZ is nothing like the Fly-over Zone. The barren, heavily armored no-man's-land between North and South Korea is not a place to camp.

C. Choosing to say that Jesus is a good moral leader but not God makes as much sense as saying, "I'm going to build my home in the DMZ."

D. But some do. For instance, there are a lot of folks who say: I'm spiritual but not religious. By which they mean, "I am deep but not crazy. I'm thoughtful but not one of those who flies planes into buildings or tries to force their values on others." But those who have bothered to actually read what Jesus says have always understood that he shut down the middle option.

E. He wasn't a nice, reasonable, milquetoast kind of guy. He wasn't like you - someone who thinks and votes like you only nicer. Jesus is not a cross between Mr. Rogers and an Eagle Scout. That may be what you want to think. But that image doesn't line up with the Jesus we find in the Bible.

V. I lead some book studies over the course of the year. It's my effort to create a thoughtful, safe, place for people to think out loud about Jesus. Ask questions. Express doubts. Interact with the real Jesus – to look at the things he said and did.

A. One of the places where people sit up and say, "Wait a minute. Do you mean..." is over the things he taught. It tends to be different than they think. Especially this one thing: his favorite topic is... himself. Yes, He tells us to be kind. To care for others. And that is his example. He is always reaching out to those who have been pushed to the margins. He is always befriending the ones everyone else looks down on. His example often models what people think he spends all his time teaching. But when you look at what he says, it is often about who He is and what He has come to do.

VI. Let me frame the claim. The Christian faith is not whatever people think it is. It is a specific set of claims. For our purposes this morning, I have summarized it into six points.

A. Claim One: Jesus is God.

1. Two thousand years ago, at the incarnation (which we celebrate at Christmas), Jesus – who was and is eternal (who has always existed as God, but who up until that point had only existed as God) added humanity to deity and showed up on earth.

2. The claim is that Jesus – God the Son – had always been God. Fully God. Every bit as much God as God the Father. But, according to the plan, in the fullness of time, Jesus stepped out of heaven to show up on earth. It was a demotion. It was shocking. People aspire to be gods. Gods do not aspire to be people. But this is what Jesus did.!

B. Claim Two: He became one of us in order to step into our place.

1. It's hard to do justice to this idea in less than a few hours – and do not panic, I know that I do not have a few hours, just two. So let me summarize it this way: the Bible is made up of two parts:

a) Thirty-nine books that make up the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and twenty-seven that make up the New Testament. The way this breaks out is: three-fourths of the Bible describes things before Jesus is born – before He is conceived in a virgin’s womb and enters the world in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. This backstory is important. You cannot understand the story without it. You cannot understand who Jesus is or what He did without it. It’s like walking into a two hour movie with a half hour to go.

b) The second part of the Bible – the New Testament, opens with the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – which tell us about Jesus. They start with his birth, which is really important because it was so unique. After all, His life doesn’t begin at conception like yours and mine. So they start with his birth.

c) And then they mostly skip to the last week. There is a bit in between. We get a bit about his childhood and we do get some about the last three years of his life, but they focus on the last week of his life – which includes his death and resurrection.

C. Claim Three: The Crucifixion of Jesus is the hinge point in history. If you read the whole book, you come to understand that:

1. **GRAPHIC 2:** The entire Bible has been leading up to Jesus. The Old Testament is pointing ahead to the New Testament.

2. **GRAPHIC 3:** The New Testament keeps referring to the Gospels. The New Testament has four Gospels, the Book of Acts, 21 letters and the Book of Revelation. For the most part, the rest of the New Testament is pointing to the Gospels.

3. **GRAPHIC 4:** And the Gospels are pointing to the crucifixion and resurrection – which go together. You seldom see one without the other.

4. The claim is:

a) Jesus was born to die, his death – his crucifixion - was substitutionary. Jesus didn’t just die for us, but instead of us. And His death changes everything: it fulfills prophecy, it defeats evil and it satisfies the demands of justice and love.

b) I really do need a few hours here to show you how all the pieces fit together. It is stunning. A few years ago, when I was on sabbatical, I spent three months studying the life of Christ – which I had been doing for thirty years. But when that was all I did, and I had access to this great theological library in Cambridge, I was amazed to see ways the puzzle fit together that I had never seen before. I do not have time to dive into those details.

c) But let me simply say this: sin creates a huge gap between God and us. God’s justice demands that sin be accounted for. God’s love is such that He accounts for it for us by sending his son to die in our place.

5. Those who understand what is going on on the cross look at Christ’s death as the most important thing ever done for them.

D. Claim Four: Jesus rose from the dead. He defeated death.

1. **He did this physically. The Easter miracle is not spiritual in nature. This is lost on some. But the big point here is that He won. And his victory over death is a confirmation of His claims. The resurrection is a big exclamation point. A big “I told you so.”**

- a) It is offered as proof that Jesus is God. After all, anyone can die. You and I both will. But it's a very different thing to die and then come back to life. And it's an even bigger thing to say: I am going to be killed and then come back to life, and then do it.
2. For the record, the resurrection is hardly the only miracle associated with Jesus. During the three years of his public ministry, he did all kinds of things: walked on water, raised Lazarus from the dead, multiplied food. And the big thing was to heal people. It was almost as if he couldn't help himself. He made things better. He brought health and human well-being wherever he went.²
3. If you read the book, it turns out that the resurrection is not that much of a surprise. Given everything else he said and did, you sort of expect something to happen. It's not like your or me rising from the dead. It's the most amazing person of all time, who teaches with profound insight, who loves in profound ways, who demonstrates supernatural power over creation, sickness, evil and death. And who claims to be God sent to defeat death. So, it's not a total surprise, but it's a big point.
4. You cannot talk about Easter – or summarize the Christian faith – without talking about the resurrection.
- E. Claim Number Five: The whole thing is presented as a rescue operation.
 1. Jesus came to do a lot of things. To teach, love, set an example, fulfill the Law, reveal the Father. But the big thing was to rescue us.
 2. In John 3:16 we read Jesus explaining, “For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have ever lasting life.”
 3. In Luke 19:10, He defines his principal mission: to seek and save the lost.
- F. Claim Number Six: We have to opt in.
 1. The Gospel – the essential message of the Christian faith – is that we can be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God on the basis of the work that Jesus has done. We do not earn our way into God's favor, it's a free gift. To quote Paul, salvation is by grace through faith, and not something we do. We cannot boast about it, because it has nothing to do with us.
 2. There are a variety of different metaphors used to describe how things unfold – we are born again, rescued, saved, adopted into the family of God, become children of God. They all point to things being done to us or for us.
 3. But, we have to opt in. The Good News assumes bad news – that we are cut off from God because of our sin. And to do nothing is to opt out. We need to receive, to embrace, to follow, to “opt in.”

VII. OK, so those are the six claims that make up The Claim. There are other two things I need you to hear before I give you a challenge. The six points I just mentioned frame Christianity in general and Easter in particular. I want to be sure two things are really clear:

- A. One: Christianity is not a religion. It is not a religion. I am highlighting this because there is a lot of confusion here. I am going to go right after this in our study of Galatians – which starts in two weeks. I cannot wait. Your life will be better if you understand the points Paul makes in Galatians.
- B. But let me take one minute now to say: They view it as a religion. But it's not. Classically defined, religion refers to our efforts to please God. To be good enough to earn his favor. To do certain things and not do certain things that he (or she or it) approves of, so that we find favor with him and he blesses us. Christianity says right out of the gate: we cannot do that. God is too good – too holy – and we are too broken – sinful – to pull that off.

- C. Two: Christianity is either true or it's not. Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn't. He either provides you with the best offer you're ever going to get, or He doesn't.
1. In the last fifteen years, Western culture has moved into something philosophers call postmodernity. And one of the aspects of post modernity is the idea that what is true for you may not be true for me. Or more to the point, Jesus may be God for me, but not for you. He is not part of your truth, and that is OK.
 2. I understand why our culture is pushing back on modernity. There are downsides to it. But you need to hear something: One of the things Jesus does is claim to be universally true. He claims to be the metanarrative that supersedes all narratives. He doesn't make a small, postmodern claim.
 3. Let me frame it this way: Everyone agrees on a handful of things:
 - a) Jesus was taken off the cross and put in a tomb on Friday afternoon.
 - b) On Sunday morning, the tomb was empty;
 - c) The disciples later claimed that they saw him alive again, and clearly believed he defeated death;
 - d) The belief that Jesus rose from the dead led to the spread of the Christian faith.
 4. Everyone agrees on those points. Down through the ages, different theories have been put forward to explain what happened – how the tomb ended up empty. Some have said he didn't die; some have said someone stole the body, and some have said everyone went to the wrong tomb. All of these theories have big problems. But the point is, he either rose from the dead or he didn't. Jesus is either God or a bad man. *Aut Deus, aut homo malus*. The one thing he cannot be is a good person.

VIII. All of which leads up to this question: which camp are you in?

- A. Do you reject the resurrection – deny the whole thing. Think it's crazy-wishful-pie-in-the-sky thinking? If you do, let me challenge you to read Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Easter*. After graduating from Yale Law school, Stroebel took a job as an investigative reporter for *The Chicago Tribune*. And life was rolling along just fine until his wife became a Christian.
1. I am not saying, "she became religious, or good." I am saying, she decided Jesus was who he claimed to be and decided to follow him.
 2. Strobel was horrified. He wanted his old wife back, so he set out to disprove Christianity. He relatively quickly deduced that the way to do this was to undermine the resurrection. But in the process of trying to do that, he joined a long list of those who were won over by the evidence.
 3. You should have a look for yourself. Take the challenge. We'll give you the book for free.
- B. Perhaps you are in camp two: you're a bit unsettled; you're rethinking your views.
1. Maybe what I said today was a bit new. Maybe you realize that living in the DMZ doesn't make much sense. Maybe you are no longer sure what you believe? OK, that's fine. Just don't camp there too long.
 2. If this describes you, the challenge is to read a book I wrote that lays out the life and death and claims of Jesus. We'll give you this for free as well. And here's my offer, if you are seriously trying to figure this out, write on your card that you'd like to meet about this and I'll make it happen. This is too important to note attend to.

- a) Jesus is the most important person – the most influential person who ever lived.
- b) And he gave us the greatest ethical system ever
- c) And he has more followers studying his life and death than anyone.
- d) And he not only claimed to be god, he claimed to be able to reconcile you to his Father, forgive you of your sins, and grant you eternal life. His life and claims deserve a serious grown up look. And you do not want to stay parked in the DMZ.

C. The final camp is Recharging. You walked in here today believing in the resurrection.

- 1. You have already given your life to Christ. You know him, and you know you know him. I am about to give you a chance to sing – to worship. Before I do, I want to remind you of what a big difference the resurrection makes.
- 2. I want you to be encouraged. Christ died for you. The empty tomb confirms that He rose from the dead, and His resurrection confirms that He is God. Which means, we can bank on his promises.
- 3. If you have put your faith in Christ, your sins are forgiven. We live in a punitive society where our sins are not easily forgiven or forgotten. But that is not how God responds to you. Peter was guilty of a terrible sin. He repeatedly denied Jesus. For his disloyalty he deserved to be abandoned by Christ, shunned by the other disciples and stripped of his leadership responsibilities. But after the resurrection, Jesus forgave Peter for his denials and restored his stature and friendship.
 - a) The world wants to label us according to our sins and failures, but the resurrection confirms that Jesus has paid our debt. Jesus sees more than our mistakes. We are more than the worst things we've ever done.
- 4. Secondly, I want to remind you of the promise of eternal life. We live forever.
 - a) Jesus is described as the first fruits – his resurrection is the prototype of those to come. We will follow Jesus in climbing out of the tomb. We are going to live forever, and eternity changes everything.
 - b) Rejoice in Christ. Be recharged this morning.

IX. OK, so in a moment we are going to sing a final song. Right now, I want to ask you to fill out the card. There are three things I want to key in on:

- A. Let me know where are today. Which camp are you in?
 - B. Secondly, let me give you a second to fill out any prayer requests you'd like the leaders of the church to pray for.
 - C. And finally, let me note that you can check the box for a Spiritual Check In. This is an opportunity for anyone who wants to sit down with someone for a one-hour, confidential discussion about the state of your soul. In the last few months about 400 people have done Spiritual Check Ins. I did. It's a great opportunity you do not want to miss.
 - D. **We need music here. Then after 60 seconds. I will close in prayer.**
- X. Campus pastors : In wrap up mention:
- A. Mike had you fill out a card. Let me state the obvious, if you are freaking out about turning in a card, do not do it! But if you want help thinking about next steps, want us to pray for you or want to schedule a spiritual check in, then there are boxes on the way out.
 - B. **WE NEED INSTRUCTION HERE ABOUT PICKING UP BOOKS.**

¹ The resurrection is viewed as part of the proof that Jesus is God. It's worth noting that in the Book of Acts (23, 24 and 26) Paul refers to the resurrection as justification for his views.

² The Bible is not a book of miracles. Fewer than most people think. There are some at the beginning, a few around Exodus, and a few others here and there. But mostly they surround Jesus. And that is because miracles had a particular purpose – and that was to get people to look at Jesus.