

The Building Blocks of Belief:
We Believe in Jesus Christ

John 20:19-31

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“We believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he arose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” We believe; may God help our unbelief and our struggles to believe. Christ, Himself, is Christianity.

HE IS THE SON OF GOD.

John says in today’s text, *“These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”* Behold the mystery of the God-man among us. Fully human, says our doctrine: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” He got tired, grew weary, felt pain, wept, was forsaken by friends and tempted by the evil one. Fully divine: “I and the Father are one.” “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

Herein lies a mystery that has baffled believers forever. Between the second and fourth centuries every conceivable option to the dogma was advanced and entertained. In 366, Arius argued that Jesus was not the Son of God. As early as the first century the Gnostics argued He only appeared to be human, that He was actually an alien in our midst. By the Middle Ages, Christ was replaced by Christendom and the institution of the Church, not the person of Christ became the central focus of the Christian religion. In recent months, several of our own bishops have made religious news by arguments for and against the traditional interpretations of Christ.

It never has been simple; maybe it was never intended to be. Had God sent a set of ideas, we could debate them and agree or disagree. Had God sent a system of beliefs, we could accept them or reject them. Instead, he dared to send us His own Son, *“For God so loved the world he gave us his only Son.”* He asks all of us even here today, ‘What are you going to do with Me?’ That changes the formula dramatically.

Pontius Pilate asked, *“What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?”* I suppose the responses to that would be multiple. Interviewer Larry King of *Larry King Live* was asked, “If you could select only one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?” He replied, “Jesus Christ.” “And what would you ask Him?” “I would like to ask Him if, indeed, he was virgin born. The answer to

that question would define history for me.” What are you going to do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

The world honors Him. The Muslims consider Him to be a great prophet. Jews consider Him to be a reformer of Judaism. Hindus consider Him to be a virtuous man of great compassion. Buddhists consider Him to be an enlightened leader. But it is more than interest and honor that He wants from us. He comes asking us to fall on our knees and worship! Can you say with Thomas, the disciple who struggled for his own faith, “*My Lord and my God*”? Down in the depths of your soul where you live and move and have your being, has he become your Lord and your God. Jesus said to Thomas, “*Because you have seen me, you believe.*” To the rest of us He said, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” Christ, Himself, is Christianity.

HE IS THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD.

For my entire lifetime, it has been there, a bright neon sign on a country road up against an old, white barn. Its light pierces the darkest night with these simple words: **Christ is the Answer.** As a child I wondered, did God write it there with a magic pen? As an adolescent, I pondered in a rather cynical way, if Christ is the Answerer, then what is the question? As an adult, I look for it every time I travel that road on dark nights. Not long ago, I drove by it. It is still there. **Christ is the Answer.**

To what is Christ the answer? Christ is the answer to our problem with sin. Christ is the answer to our pardon for wrong doing. *God sent his Son; they called him Jesus. He came to love, heal and forgive. He lived and died, to buy my pardon. An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.* Have you ever been pardoned for anything? Do you know what it is to be pardoned?

Several springs ago, I was fishing one Saturday morning on the lake behind my cabin. The sun was bright, the sky was blue, for a few moments it seemed I had nothing better to do than enjoy the beauty of the earth and the warmth of a beautiful spring day. As I basked in the sunshine with a fishing line in the water, a game warden stepped from the woods. Somehow, I knew I was in big trouble. No, I had no identification. No, I had not yet purchased my current fishing license. Yes, there were a couple of blue gill in the bucket. No, it didn't matter that I owned property on that private lake. How quickly the serenity of that Saturday morning slipped away. I had broken the law. I was guilty. What was worse, they published my name in the little county paper. Howard Olds was fishing without a fishing license.

An attorney friend was teasing me for my neglect. He said with a twinkle in his eye, “Give me the citation.” A couple of weeks passed and I got this letter from my friend, “Dear Howard, You are no longer a fugitive from Owen County justice.

Please go buy your fishing license.” I received a pardon. Just like that, I was pardoned. And then I thought, we err and stray from God’s ways like lost sheep. We do those things we ought not to do. We leave undone those things we ought to be doing. We really don’t have much of an excuse. But through Jesus Christ we are pardoned. Do you know what it is to be pardoned?

His is the answer to our addiction to sin. The reality is we can’t break our habits and shape up and do better. We are just addicted to the wrong that lies within us. But, He came as a great Emancipator to set us free. Christ is the answer to our slavery to sin. He breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free.

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation that all persons held as slaves in any state, or any part of a state shall be thenceforward and forever free. Lincoln was the great liberator. When he was carried from Washington to Illinois for burial, thousands lined the railroad tracks to honor the emancipator. The story goes that when Lincoln's body was shipped through one New York town, an African American woman grabbed her son and holding him high above her shoulders said, “Take a long look, Honey. He died for you.” I say to you today, take a long look. Our Savior died for you.

Thomas said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Why did the risen Christ have scars? If God was powerful enough to reach down into the grave and put new life into His dead body, it would only take a little plastic surgery to make Him look a little better. But, no, He leaves the scars. What possessed the early Christians to embrace the cross as the central symbol of our faith so that we put it in our sanctuaries and tower it from our steeples saying to the world, “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering over the wrecks of time”? Maybe Christians have always known:

But drops of grief could ne’er repay the debt of love I owe

Here Lord I give myself away, tis all that I can do.

Christ, Himself, is Christianity.

HE IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.

Popular author and speaker, Ravi Zacharias, is a man of great spiritual perceptions and integrity. Lee Strobel asked Dr. Zacharias one day how he came to be such a profound Christian. Dr. Zacharias replied, “I was raised in India in a nominal Christian family. At 17 I found myself under a lot of pressure. In our home, academic performance was of supreme importance. I couldn’t quite make the grade and I became deeply depressed. One day at school I checked out some poisons from the science lab, put them in a glass of water and swallowed them. I was rushed to the hospital. A friend came to see me and read me Jesus’ statement from the Bible which says, “*Because I live, you will live also.*” After the friend left, I lay on my bed and prayed: ‘Lord Jesus, I don’t know much about You, but if You are life, I want all of You.’” The rest, as they say, is history.

Jesus said, *“I am come that you may have life, life in all its fullness.”* Life now and life forever.

In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree,

In cocoons a hidden treasure, butterflies will soon be free.

In the cold and snow of winter, there’s a spring that waits to be,

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

Natalie Sleeth wrote those words in the Hymn of Promise. She wrote them for her husband, Ronald, a professor of preaching at Iliff School of Theology, who lived only 21 days between the diagnosis of his malignancy and his death. Natalie was no stranger to suffering. Fighting with life threatening MS, herself, she knew what it was to look into the darkness of the night and know that there was a dawn.

How can we live, how shall we die, how can we bear the cross of grief who have not yet the eyes of faith or the courage of belief? *“I am the resurrection and the life, and those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live.”* Christ, Himself, is Christianity.

HE IS THE WAY AND TRUTH.

Jesus said to Thomas, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* This statement sounds rather arrogant, exclusive, narrow-minded and bigoted. I know of no statement more hotly debated today in Christendom than this question: Is Christ the way to salvation? After all, isn't everyone trying to get to the same place?

No, not really. Buddhists are trying to get to Nirvana which is total discontinuance of personal existence. Muslims are seeking the joys of paradise where they can enjoy the full delights of the flesh that are denied in this life. Christians hope for a personal resurrection into the presence of the Lord.

After all, aren't all religions equally the same? Well, not really. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic. Hinduism and Buddhism are polytheistic. Muslims and Christians believe it is appointed to a person once to die and after that, the judgment. Hindus, in the name of reincarnation, keep coming back until they get it right. Christianity is the only religion where God comes down to save us by grace through faith, which is God's absolute gift to us. In all other religions you are saved by works, hoping somehow to climb the ladder until you finally get into the presence of God.

Sandy and I attended a funeral several years ago out in the country where an uneducated preacher got up and said of the deceased: “Ed is dead. Nobody is going to help Ed. Time has run out for Ed. He is in the hands of the righteous and merciful judge. As for the rest of you here, there is still time left to claim Jesus as your Savior.” Then he leaped into an acrobatic 45 minute sermon on

how people present had better accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and start on a journey of faith before it was too late.

As we assembled to our cars, I was irate. I said to Sandy, "How could a pastor say such things at a funeral? Didn't he know anything about pastoral care? How would the family feel?" After I had run down a little bit in my litany of wrongs, Sandy spoke up and said, "And worst of all, he was right!"

It is appointed unto man, once to die and after that the judgment. If I make Christ the way, it's one thing, but if it happens to be the truth, well that's another matter. In my attempts to settle the case, I need to remember that the Maker of all people and the Judge of all humans is the only One who has the final say.

We believe in Jesus Christ. Lord, help me where it is hard to believe, for Christ, Himself, is Christianity.

What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

Amen.