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With So Much Solid Evidence for the Resurrection,
Why Don't More People Believe?

a sermon on John 16.4b-15
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In 2003 Fortress Press published a book by N.T. Wright called *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It easily makes my list of the top five books ever written. I ordered the book weeks before it came out. I waited impatiently for my copy to arrive. When it did, I devoured the 738 pages of text in a week. In the book Wright goes into detail, showing what the first Christians believed about the resurrection of Jesus. He makes a solid case that the only thing that can account for, not only the faith of the apostles, but also the shape of their beliefs, is the bodily resurrection of Jesus. By shape I mean things such as they worshiped Jesus as divine. This was not something that came naturally to Jews. Quite the contrary, it must have taken something amazing to cause them to do this.

Anyway the book was as good as I had hoped. I put it down satisfied. And then I waited. The weeks went by. Then months. Something strange happened – or rather it didn't happen. The whole English speaking world did not convert to Christianity overnight. And I struggled to understand why not. My confusion only deepens when you consider all the other books that make a compelling historical case for the resurrection of Jesus. Lee Strobel has written several excellent books making a case for Christ. William Lane Craig has written *Reasonable Faith*. And these are just a few of the many well-written books that show what good reasons we have to believe God raised Jesus from the dead. And yet, to my great consternation, the unbelieving world goes right on unbelieving. I want to know: If the evidence is so solid, why don't more people believe?

That question has two parts. Let's take them in order. We have to start by wondering: Is the evidence really solid? Maybe the problem is quite simple. Maybe more people don't believe because the evidence is not compelling. But I am convinced that is not the case. The evidence really is solid. We do not have time for great detail, but consider the following.

You can make a strong case for the resurrection based on four simple historical facts that are not controversial. Even most scholars who are skeptics and unbelievers acknowledge the historical truth of these four facts. This means that you do not have to convince someone that the Bible is the Word of God, or even trustworthy, in order to make a strong case for the resurrection. Of course, we Christians do believe the Bible is the Word of God and trustworthy, but our unbelieving friends do not. If they did, they

would be believers. So we meet them where they are, and we say, "Look at these facts, and see if you can explain them." The four facts are: Jesus died by crucifixion. He was buried. His tomb was found empty. His followers claimed to have seen him alive again after these events, and they began proclaiming God had raised him from the dead.

Again, these facts are not controversial, but explaining them proves difficult, unless you believe the apostles were right. So far, all attempts to explain the empty tomb and the faith of the apostles, apart from the resurrection of Jesus, have failed. Likewise, all attempts to impeach one or more of these facts have proved unconvincing. What explains the empty tomb and the faith of the apostles, except the resurrection of Jesus?

In addition to the difficulty posed by the basic facts, we confront a number of secondary clues. Jews in the first century did not place much value in the testimony of women. They were not usually allowed to testify in court cases. Yet the gospels record that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. The gospels also record that the disciples did not believe them until Jesus appeared to some men. Jesus always had a high view of the worth and dignity of women during his ministry, and he continued that in his resurrection. Why would the gospel writers, if they were making the story up, make women the first witnesses?

Or take another secondary clue: The first people who tried to disprove the resurrection message claimed the apostles had stolen the body. That was the official position of the Jewish religious authorities. Never mind whether the apostles had motive or opportunity, you see how this attack presupposes the tomb was empty. Still another secondary clue is the conversion of Jesus' brother James and the Christian-persecutor Saul of Tarsus. I would expect the last person to believe you are the Son of God would be your own brother. The apostles might conceivably have fooled many people with an elaborate lie, but Jesus' own brother, who never believed in him until after his death? What else but the resurrection could account for that? Likewise with Saul.

In addition to many other secondary clues, the specific shape of Christian beliefs proves that the first Christians really believed God raised Jesus from the dead. Instead of looking for a new leader, they went on calling Jesus the Messiah and Lord after he was crucified by the Romans. That made no sense. They might have called Jesus a prophet. They might have said his spirit went to heaven. They might have said God would raise him with all the righteous on the last day. But instead they changed what they had always believed about resurrection. Jews who believed in resurrection thought it was what God would do for all the righteous at the end of history. History obviously had not ended, but they called what happened to Jesus "resurrection." Although they were Jews, they worshipped Jesus as God. Although Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, they changed their day of worship to Sunday.

I'm just getting warmed up. I could go on like this all day. I won't, but I must mention evidence beyond the historical. That is, the evidence of Christian experience. Many people, and I am one of them, claim to have encountered the risen Jesus – not physically, of course, but spiritually. They claim he has made a difference in their life or their community. An article in the most recent issue of *Beeson Journal*, from Beeson Divinity School where I study, tells about the amazing things happening in Rwanda. Rwanda was the scene of civil war and horrific genocide just 15 years ago. The details are too gruesome to mention in a family-friendly environment like this one, but perhaps you recall them. The truth is worse than you can imagine. Anglican Bishop John Rucyahana tells how the gospel is making a difference today, how lives and communities are being healed by the power of Jesus Christ. In some cases, those guilty of atrocities show their repentance by building houses for victims, sometimes laboring side-by-side with those whom they wronged. In another case, a perpetrator and victim have traveled the country together, preaching about Christ and the reconciling power of the gospel. The apostle Paul believed that compelling evidence for the truth of the gospel was its power to bring together Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, and people of different races and languages – uniting them as one family in Christ. That's what I call evidence from experience.

Now, take all of this together, and you tell me: Is the evidence solid? Should people believe that Jesus lives and reigns today? I think so. ... So why don't they? Why doesn't the evidence convert the skeptics?

One reason is: They don't know about it. I am sure if more people knew what Christians really believe and our reasons for believing, many of them would believe. Getting the word out is our responsibility. We do not convert anyone. Only God can do that. But he has given us the job of telling people the truth. If we don't do that, they are not going to know.

That answer is only a start, however. Often when we do get the word out, and people do understand clearly what the gospel is and why it makes sense, they still do not believe. And why is that?

Two reasons. First, the evidence is only compelling if your worldview includes God. If you believe in God, especially in a God like the one you read about in the Bible, then the story of Jesus makes sense. You can see God's fingerprints all over it. The pieces fall neatly into place. But if you do not believe in God, or you are not sure what he is like, you may not see how the pieces go together. An atheist may not be able to explain the empty tomb and the apostles' faith, but he will simply brush the evidence aside without seriously contemplating that Christians might be right, because it just seems too improbable to him. His way of looking at the world doesn't allow for something like the resurrection to happen. Everything he has been taught, all his values, his whole way of navigating through life are at stake. If God raised Jesus from the dead, the skeptic will have to change his whole worldview. We're not talking about a bit of paint

here and there. We're talking a complete tear-down, rebuild job. That's scary. That is something no one does without the strongest motivation, and historical evidence (no matter how good) is rarely sufficient motivation.

Second, besides changing the way a person looks at the world, conversion radically changes how a person lives. If God raised Jesus from the dead, there are all sorts of practical consequences for how we ought to live. Just a few examples: Traditional Christian sexual morality is the right way to live. Love for others must trump selfishness. You must forgive those who wrong you. Even Christians struggle to live the way Jesus told us to. You can see why an unbeliever might find it unappealing. An unbeliever is free to live any old way she wants. Why would she give up that freedom? C.S. Lewis described himself as a reluctant convert to Christianity. He had been an atheist. He came to believe Christianity is true, but he expected it to suck all the joy out of life. He learned he was wrong, but initially he came to Christ unenthusiastically.

Thus, the unbeliever may have strong reasons not to believe. His worldview and his way of life are at stake. The resurrection of Jesus turns everything upside down, and people tend to resist that. We tend to resist God. Christians can testify to this tendency. Even we who believe find it frustratingly easy to choose our way over God's. We find Christ's teaching challenging, and not always a joy. That's part of our sinful nature. Deep down we are rebels, and that tendency dies hard. This makes believing the gospel and surrendering to Christ very difficult.

I would say impossible, except for one thing; and that's the power of God. I have made an exciting discovery. Frankly I am shocked I did not see it sooner. I guess my own worldview caused me to overlook it, but now that I have been introduced to it, it seems so obvious. It is: the witness of the Holy Spirit. Coming to faith in Christ is always more than evidence and reason. It is even more than our own experiences. At the heart of it is the witness the Holy Spirit gives to us as God calls us to faith. The Spirit works within us to open our hearts and our minds. The Spirit bears witness and persuades us of the truth.

If you will forgive me a crude illustration that does not begin to do justice to the witness of the Spirit, we can perhaps think of it this way: Imagine a page with lots and lots of dots printed on it. A colorblind person sees only random dots. A person who can see color recognizes a pattern within the dots—letters that spell words. It is as if we are all colorblind, and the Spirit gives us the power to see the colors. Again, that's my own crude analogy. If it helps you, good. If not, throw it away.

In our scripture reading, Jesus describes the witness of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that when the Spirit comes, he will "convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." There are other ways to translate the word behind *convince*. We could use "convict" or "prove wrong," but the idea is the same: The Spirit shows people the truth. They recognize the truth because the Spirit works in their hearts and minds.

Jesus also claims the Spirit will “guide you into all the truth.” Just as Jesus did not speak on his own authority but rather on the Father’s authority, so also the Spirit will speak with the same authority. His purpose is to glorify Christ. That is his work: to make Christ known.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica: “Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. ...In spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” [1 Thess 1.5-6]. The New Testament witness is consistent on this point: The Holy Spirit works in the hearts and minds of people as God calls them to faith. The Spirit bears witness and helps us recognize the truth. Without the witness of the Holy Spirit, could anyone believe the gospel? I doubt it.

Historical evidence and other kinds of evidence for the truth of Christianity can never give you complete certainty. They are strong enough to make you realize your faith makes sense and is well grounded. Evidence cannot give certainty, but the Holy Spirit can. In Romans 8, Paul wrote about the witness of the Spirit: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” [vv. 15-16]. You see how the Holy Spirit makes things personal. The Spirit bears witness not just to historical facts, such as God raised Jesus from the dead, but also to you personally that God’s promises are for you – that you are a child of God. Thus, the Spirit’s witness is very personal. The Spirit helps you know God – not just know *about* God – and that kind of knowing brings certainty.

Let me back up now and explain why I was at one time hesitant about this witness of the Holy Spirit. Other religions use this sort of argument. You ask them, “How do you know you are right about your religion?” And they claim divine illumination or the witness of God’s Spirit. When I was in high school, I had friends who had left the Mormon Church to become Christian. That got me interested in Mormonism and how you can judge between religions. Mormon missionaries will tell you to pray to know whether the Book of Mormon is true. They claim a burning in the bosom, the result of the internal witness of God’s Spirit, that they are right. I understand some Muslims make a similar kind of claim concerning the Koran. And you can see the dilemma this creates. Mormonism, Christianity, and Islam are three very different religious systems. If one of them is essentially right, the others are wrong to a large extent. Either God is sending terribly mixed messages (in which case probably none of them is right about God), or a lot of people are kidding themselves. They think the Holy Spirit is telling them they are right, but he’s not. Possibly all are wrong; certainly some are. In this confusing situation, what good is the witness of the Holy Spirit? I can tell you I know Jesus is alive because of the Holy Spirit, but what good is that to you? Twenty other people can claim the same kind of experience for their beliefs.

That is why I was wary about the witness of the Holy Spirit, but I should have been less wary. Scripture urges us to test the spirits to see whether they are of God. That's why the evidence I talked about earlier is important. You may think the Spirit has spoken to you when he has not. How do you know? Look at the evidences. The witness of the Holy Spirit is not an excuse to quit thinking.

You also need to keep in mind the important distinction between *knowing* Christianity is true and *showing* it is true – that is, demonstrating its truth to someone else. My own experience of the Spirit helps me to know Jesus is alive and the gospel is true. My experience is not likely to do much to convince you. That's where evidence comes in, and hopefully the Spirit is at work in your heart and mind also. You can know with certainty that Jesus lives and reigns, even if you cannot prove that to the skeptic in a way that's he is forced to accept it as true.

Just because some people are wrong when they claim illumination by God's Spirit does not mean the Spirit cannot work in our hearts and minds. Jesus says he does. So while we need to be cautious in claiming the Spirit's witness, we certainly ought to be open to it. We need to recognize the important role the Spirit plays in bringing anyone to faith in Jesus Christ. Without the witness of the Holy Spirit, no one would ever come to faith. Because of the witness of the Holy Spirit, you can know not only that Jesus is alive, you can know that he has made you his own.

I would love to go on. I am excited about how I have seen the Spirit moving in my life and the life of people I know. But I fear I have taxed your attention sufficiently for one sermon. I began by asking why more people do not believe the gospel when the evidence is so solid. A quick survey found the evidence is indeed solid. I gave several reasons why people persist in unbelief: Some do not find the evidence compelling because it goes against so much they have always thought is true. Believing would change their whole worldview. Some do not want to believe. Believing would force them to change how they live. Some simply have not heard the story of Jesus or the evidences for it. They have never seen lives he has changed or felt the love of his people. This last group is on us. Our job is to tell the story and to live it out.

I also talked about the importance of the witness of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, no one can come to faith. Because of the Spirit, anyone can. So we tell the story. We live it out. And we pray for God to work in the hearts and minds of our friends and neighbors. We trust him for the rest.

On the other side, if you are not a believer, you owe it to yourself both to pray for God's guidance and to examine the evidence with your mind as open as possible. You don't have to start by believing in God or the Bible, just be open to the possibility that God exists, and if he does he might possibly act in our world. From that humble beginning, look at the evidence. May God's Spirit guide you into all truth. Amen.