

Sermon 4-5-26
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Based on the Gospel Lesson for The Resurrection of Our Lord, Easter Sunday,
Matthew 28:1-10.

Two Tombs

After church on Good Friday, a most interesting video popped up on my YouTube feed that led me to an episode of “Decoding the Ancients.” Stupidly, the episode made several sensational, speculative allegations against the four gospels that were easily debunked by material from within the episode itself. However, to the unwary viewer, it can seem like the allegations are real — allegations that are designed to create doubt. That kind of sensationalism is what gets the views and clicks.

Nevertheless, the episode presented several facts that I was unaware of or have forgotten. First, it seems that workers building a park outside of Jerusalem in 1990 accidentally dug into a 2,000 year old burial tomb. This kind of thing happens all the time around Jerusalem. The Israeli Bureau of Antiquities went to work and discovered that the tomb contained twelve limestone bone boxes of the type used in the first century A.D. One of them had the name Joseph, son of Caiaphas inscribed on it. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, mentions a Joseph son of Caiaphas in one of his writings. The bone box was ornate. There was another, much plainer box, that simply had Caiaphas inscribed on it. The name, Caiaphas is quite rare. And it was eventually determined that this was the tomb of the family of the high priest, Caiaphas, who presided at the trial of Jesus.

This discovery in itself is very significant. It proves that the Caiaphas of the gospels was a real person and not some literary figure made up by the gospel writers.

The records of the archaeological dig tell that five artifacts were found in the tomb along with the bone boxes, all of them typical of first century burials. But two of them intrigued the journalist so much that he developed a whole episode devoted to his pursuit of them. Two Roman nails of the kind used in crucifixion were found in the tomb — one inside the plainer bone box, the other on the floor of the tomb. The journalist found the bone boxes on display in a museum. But the nails were nowhere to be found.

Researchers have determined that it was a first century Jewish practice to use nails from crucifixions as talismans. It was believed the nails had great magical power to ward off evil and bad luck. The fact that such nails were found in Caiaphas’ tomb indicates that crucifixion nails may also have had significance for the afterlife.

In the episode, the journalist finally located the nails. Both of them were bent over. A nail hammered straight through the flesh of the hand will not hold up a body on a cross. Apparently, Roman crucifixion crews bent the nails over the outer edge of the hand and hammered the head of the nail into the wood. That way the bones of the hand would support the body. The pain must have been excruciating.

So, the big, sensational question was this. Were the nails found in the Caiaphas family tomb the ones used to crucify Jesus? Of course, the episode couldn’t answer the question. But they did make various speculations, some of them quite faulty. Regardless, I learned

from the episode that we now possess archaeological evidence that Caiaphas was a real person.

Other researchers have found sufficient, reliable documentation from the ancient world that proves Jesus was a real person and that He was crucified and executed by Rome. Therefore, the speculation of the late 19th and early 20th century scholars that the gospels were myth has now been proven to be a myth itself. And on top of everything, it is now recognized by a large majority of scholars that it's historically accurate to say that the church was preaching Jesus of Nazareth crucified, dead and resurrected from the dead within two years of the events. In 2026 even non-believing scholars are willing to accept this as historical truth. And it debunks the late 19th century and 20th century theory that the resurrection of Jesus was a myth added to the gospels centuries after the event.

All this makes my job easier. When I look back at my written sermons from twenty years ago, I see that I spent a lot of time arguing against the new atheists who came to prominence after the 9/11 attacks. Their allegation that Jesus is nothing but a myth has now been proven to be a myth itself by contemporary scholarship.

And I can't tell you how absolutely important this is. For, unlike other religions, Christianity depends on historical fact. Justification by Grace through Faith in Jesus Christ cannot be preached as reality unless there was a real Jesus who really died on a Roman cross and who was really resurrected from the dead in a real, immortal human body. It also cannot be preached unless there was a real Adam and Eve who fell into real Original Sin that causes the entire human race to be really in need of salvation.

So, it's time to tell a gallows humor joke I've used before. The first Martian to visit earth has an audience with the pope. The pope asks the Martian if they know about Jesus. The Martian replies, "Oh Jesus. He comes to our planet twice a year. When He does, we gather up all the chocolate on the planet and give it to Him. This pleases Him greatly and He keeps coming back." To which the pope replies, "Chocolate? Jesus has only come to our planet once and we've been waiting 2,000 years for Him to come back." To which the Martian asks incredulously, "Really? Only once? What did you guys do to Him the first time He came?"

Indeed, what did we do to Jesus? We rejected Him and made Him the man of sorrows predicted 700 years before He came in Isaiah 53:3, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

On the night of Jesus' trial, Caiaphas was a sworn enemy. Torah says that a man cannot be put to death unless two witnesses agree in their testimony against that man. At Jesus' trial false witnesses were coming forward. But their testimonies did not agree. Finally in frustration, clever Caiaphas confronted Jesus, saying in Matthew 26:63, "... 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.'" Because the high priest had charged Jesus to tell the truth under oath to the living God, Jesus could not refuse. He responded in Matthew 26:64, "... 'You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'"

"You have said so." By saying this Jesus made it quite clear to Caiaphas and all the Sanhedrin that He had made no claim up till then. He would do so now only because they had raised the subject and put Him under oath. Jesus also put them on notice that since they had raised the subject of Messiah, they were now the ones on trial. They would have to bear the consequences of their reaction to His claim.

“You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” By this answer Jesus not only declared Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God, He doubled and tripled down on the declaration. For Jesus invoked two of the most powerful predictions found in Messiah’s life script.

The Son of Man — a most important title — and the clouds of heaven come from a vision the prophet Daniel had. We’ve looked at it often. But here it is again. Daniel 7:13-14, “13 ‘In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (NIV).

The Ancient of Days is Yahweh the Father. The one like a Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven and is presented to the Father. The Father bestows on the one like a Son of Man His own authority, glory and sovereign power so that all the peoples of earth worship this one like a Son of Man. Worship! Now, it’s most clear in Deuteronomy 6:13, “. . . Fear the LORD your God, serve him only. . . .”, (NIV) that worship and service belong to Yahweh alone. Therefore, if the Ancient of Days confers the worship due Him upon this one like a Son of Man, then the one like a Son of Man is also Yahweh. Thus, by invoking Daniel 7:13, Jesus certainly doubled down on being Yahweh, the Son. And Daniel 7:14 confirms this. The Ancient of Days confers upon the one like a Son of Man a Kingdom and Dominion that is absolute and eternal. Therefore, the one like a Son of Man is King over that Kingdom.

Then, Jesus tripled down on His claim by invoking Psalm 110:1, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” The one sitting at the right hand of a king is second in command to the king. Thus, Jesus declared Himself to be the Father’s right hand man.

So let’s ask this question. Does this one like a Son of Man who has been given Yahweh’s authority and power — the King who sits at the right hand of Yahweh, the one Yahweh has declared worthy of worship — is this One also the judge of all the earth? Quite clearly yes. Therefore, in His reply, Jesus actually threatened Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. It was not Him on trial that night. It was them. He, the great judge appointed by Yahweh, was sitting in judgment over them as they responded to His claim. Jesus put them on notice. If they refused to acknowledge Him as Messiah, He would condemn them to the eternal wrath of God.

But it would not happen that night. As Jesus had said to the crowd that came to arrest Him in Luke 22:53, “. . . ‘But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.’” And so they condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. As I’ve often said. Someone blasphemed at the trial of Jesus. Was it Jesus or the high priest, Caiaphas? Perhaps, sometime long after, Caiaphas realized what he had done and repented. Perhaps that’s why those nails were in the tomb of Caiaphas.

But now we get to the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. It has never been discovered for a very simple reason. Jesus is not in it. Even the Jewish leadership admitted this when they gave the soldiers guarding the tomb instructions to spread the story that Jesus’ disciples had come and stolen His body while the guards were sleeping.

As I have often pointed out, everyone in Jerusalem had evidence that there was no body in the tomb where Jesus had been laid. So, notice. The authorities organized no search party for the disciples who had supposedly stolen the body. They did not bring them in for

questioning and torture to reveal where Jesus' body really was. Indeed, the book of Acts tells us that Jesus' apostles openly preached Jesus resurrected from the dead in the Jerusalem temple on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. and afterward. Neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities ever forced them to confess where they had hidden Jesus' body. This is another proof that the authorities didn't question Jesus' resurrection. They knew it had happened.

I often speak of the 600 eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection — the 500 mentioned by St. Paul in 1Corinthians 15 plus the 120 that Acts 2 says was in the upper room on Pentecost. I round it down to 600. But there was another group of eyewitnesses that we read of this morning — the guards at the tomb. They didn't see Jesus bodily resurrected. But they saw an angel appear during an earthquake, roll back the stone from the tomb and then sit on it. These guys passed out in fear. Apparently when they came to, the angel was gone. But some of them ran into Jerusalem and reported their experience to the Sanhedrin. Therefore, we have to count them as eyewitnesses. For it was through them that the Jewish leadership knew that Jesus' resurrection was real. However, despite the testimony of the guards, the leadership remained intransigent about Jesus. We read about this in the book of Acts. For the leadership continually persecuted the apostles for preaching the Gospel of Messiah Jesus.

Now, on Easter morning, the apostles and other disciples were no better off than anyone else. Jesus bodily revealed Himself to the women who had come to the tomb thinking they would further anoint His body in burial. When the women saw Jesus alive, they didn't quite know what to think. After the report of the women, Peter and John ran to the tomb, found it empty and didn't quite know what to think either. In the afternoon, two disciples walked with a disguised Jesus from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Along the way, Jesus opened up His entire life script to them from Moses and the Prophets. Even when Jesus revealed Himself to them alive in the breaking of the bread, they didn't quite know what to think either.

It wasn't until everyone except Thomas was gathered in the upper room on Easter evening that Jesus made His move. We read in Luke 24:44-49, "44 Then he [Jesus] said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.'"

Jesus opened their minds so that they would finally understand what He had been teaching them. Up until that point they just couldn't get it. How did Jesus do it? Of the same event on the same night we read in John 20:19-22, "19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Lord Holy Spirit is how Jesus opens closed minds to the Truth.

To this very day, only Lord Holy Spirit can open the minds of those seeking the Jesus of the New Testament in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Only Lord Holy Spirit can give the New Birth necessary to repent and believe in the Jesus of the New Testament. Only Lord Holy Spirit can save us from following Satan right into the eternal Lake of Fire. Only Lord Holy Spirit can enable us to follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God. Only Lord Holy Spirit can show us for sure that those who truly repent before the Lord have their sins paid for by the blood of Messiah Jesus, and are truly forgiven. Only Lord Holy Spirit can lead those who have been forgiven into the life of righteousness that begins in this world. Even though we still have to struggle against sin here, Lord Holy Spirit Himself is the power to prevail in that struggle.

All this is ours through the victory Jesus won by becoming obedient to God unto death, even the horrible death of the cross. All this is through the sign of Messiah's absolute victory — His bodily resurrection from the dead by the power of God.

As Jesus told Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, one day He will return on the clouds of heaven from the right hand of God. At that time He will judge the living and the dead. Therefore, in a resurrected body that can never die, will you be following Him into the righteous Kingdom of God, or will you be following Satan into the pure evil Lake of Fire? By the power of Lord Holy Spirit, repent and receive the one who lovingly gave His life that you might live. For through Word and Sacrament the Lord Jesus comes to you this day alive and with the power to forgive your sin and make you His own. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV except where otherwise noted.