

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: 1 Pet. 3:15; 1 Cor. 15

"Why the Resurrection?"

THE GOD DELUSION

Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and atheist, is well known around the world for his attacks on Creationism and the belief in God. He has received numerous awards from many universities and scientific organizations. In his recent bestselling book, *the God Delusion*, Dawkins contends that a supernatural creator almost certainly does not exist and that belief in a personal God qualifies as a delusion, which he defines as a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence. According to Dawkins, the evidence is overwhelming that there is no God.

Whenever asked about considering faith in God, he asks, "What god do you mean? Zeus, Apollo, Thor? Belief in them is no different than belief in Jesus Christ." For Dawkins, faith is irrational, it is belief without evidence. And since there is no evidence for a Higher Power in the universe, believing in Jesus is no different than believing in the tooth fairy. And when people talk about miracles or any supernatural experience, Dawkins quips, "It must be an hallucination."

BE READY TO MAKE A DEFENSE

Now some may say why waste your time dealing with such an individual? There are two main reasons: First, our faith is not a blind faith. It is based on evidence. And we are called to defend it. Listen for a moment to **1 Peter 3:15**: *"But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense for the hope that is within you, yet with gentleness and reverence."* As believers, it is imperative that we know what we believe and why we believe it.

Second, Dawkins does raise a very important question: What makes Jesus any different than Zeus or Apollo or, dare we say, the "tooth fairy?" In fact, what makes Jesus different than any great religious leader like the prophet Mohammed, or the Buddha, or even Moses? It is an essential question.

And there is one distinct answer: The Resurrection. It was the hope the Apostle Peter was talking about in 1 Peter 3:15. Hope in the Bible does not mean a kind of wishful thinking hope, but rather it is looking forward to something that is certain and real but is waiting for us in the in the future. And make no mistake, our entire faith is dependent upon the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the resurrection, this Bible becomes just a book of stories, opinions, and morals. In fact, the Bible states clearly, if there is no resurrection we might as well *"eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."*

The Apostle Paul writes in **1 Cor. 15:12-19; 32b**:

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised."

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men....If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

The writers of the New Testament, time and time again, contend that they are eyewitnesses. They present the evidence and then we must make a decision. Jesus asked his disciples as recorded in three of our four Gospels, "**Who do men say that I am?**" And they gave our Lord all sorts of answers, but then He asked them, "**Who do you say that I am?**" That is a question all people must answer. Who is Jesus for you?

Even as Jesus died, a decision was called for. Remember how Jesus was crucified between two criminals as recorded in **Lk. 23:39-43**? One curses Him but the other asks for mercy. Whenever it comes to Christ, a response is required. Will you believe God or will you believe man? It is no different today. There are voices who say Jesus is a hoax and then there are those who say He is the truth. Which is it? Whom do you believe and why?

JESUS MORE THAN A PROPHET? INDEED

Just yesterday, one of our members told me about something he witnessed just a few weeks ago. It seems that as he was visiting a local church in downtown Buffalo and a teenage girl was there from Europe, and she told the Pastor, "I believe in God, but I just don't get all the stuff about Jesus." To which the Pastor replied, "That's ok, dear, we are all on different spiritual journeys." What a missed opportunity! We can't have a true lasting spiritual journey unless we know the One who made us, died for us and saved us – Jesus Christ.

Why do I believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life? Why is Jesus different than any other god or prophet or religious leader? **Five reasons:** First, **His teachings;** Is there any other work that is as simple and straight forward that a young child can understand, and yet so profound and deep to keep the most learned individual thinking? Teachings that are just as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago? Words which speak to matters of the self, of relationships with others and God, of stewardship, of love, of service, of forgiveness, of death and eternal life. Or how about **His example?** Jesus didn't just practice what He preached, He preached what He already practiced. He led by an incredible example of service and compassion. He washed His disciples feet on the night before He died to give them an example that if one wants to be great in God's eyes, He must be servant of all. He reached out to the poor and the sick and the downtrodden. He associated with sinners, and not just sinners but the lowest of the low - tax collectors, lepers and prostitutes. And then there were **His miracles** - wherever Jesus went He healed the sick, He demonstrated power over spiritual evil and defied the limitations of natural physical laws. And yet, He didn't want people to get hung up over the miracles or follow Him because of them. He said they were only signs to point people to God. Fourth, we can't forget **His trial and crucifixion.** Why did the authorities seek to kill him? He was not a threat to Rome, but he was a threat to the corrupt religious leadership of Israel. They convinced the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate to kill Jesus, even though Pilate found nothing wrong with him. His crime? He committed

blasphemy by saying He was the Son of God and One with the Father. And then, of course, there is **His resurrection**. It is Christ's resurrection that seals the deal.

And why do we believe the resurrection? Remember **FEAT**? A few years ago I gave an Easter Sunday sermon on the "Feat of Jesus" - a way to help remember why we believe the resurrection is true.

"F" is for Fatal Torment - Jesus really died - crucifixion was a terrible death that you did not survive. The Roman soldiers made sure of this. Jesus didn't come back to life as some Gnostics contended in the early days of the church or as some liberal theologians believe today and Moslems accept as reality (to Moslems Jesus is a prophet who would never have suffered such a disgrace).

"E" is for Empty Tomb. Jesus rose from the dead. There is no tomb, there is no body. The Jews and the Romans wanted to make sure that the body was protected from the disciples stealing the body, because they knew He preached that he would rise from the dead. So a crack unit of the Roman army was sent to guard the tomb. But between an earthquake and the arrival of an angel those soldiers fell as dead men (ie. they fainted). And Jesus walked out of the grave. In fact, when you go to Jerusalem today in one of the two possible sites for His burial, it says, "He is not here. He is Risen!" In other words, it doesn't matter where the actual location is, there is no body.

"A" is for Appearances. Jesus appeared to literally hundreds of believers. **1 Cor. 15:3-8**: *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."* This discredits any attempt to purport that everyone was just seeing hallucinations. Jesus appeared to multiple people during different days over a forty day period. Recall how Jesus said to Thomas, one of the Twelve who doubted, *"Reach here your finger, and see My hands, and reach here your hand, and put it into My side, and be not unbelieving but believing."* (Jn. 20:27).

"T" is for Transformation. Men and women who once were despondent and downcast suddenly were changed, transformed into bold witnesses of Jesus; servants of God willing to lay down their lives for the truth and love of Christ, not in battle, but peacefully. Moreover, as a result of the resurrection, entire families, nations, empires, even civilization itself, have in many ways been changed. Zeus, Apollo, And Thor have been relegated to the story books today. But we are still talking about Jesus of Nazareth.

REPENTANCE

Now we have all heard of the three "r"s of education – reading, writing and arithmetic. I want to talk for a moment about the four "r"s of the resurrection. The first words out of Jesus' mouth were *"Repent for the Kingdom of God is near."* Do you remember what repentance is? It is turning away from self and turning to God. It is turning from the sin that plagues every human heart. It is not about just following God's law but dealing with the sin in the deepest recesses of our person. Jesus said in **Mk. 7:14-23**, "It is not what goes in that

defiles (ie. unclean foods) us, it is what comes out of the heart that defiles the man." Jesus also taught in His Sermon on the Mount, "Don't think if you follow all the commands on the outside you are a righteous person." (Mt. 5-7) You still have a sinful heart. In fact, why does the world hate Jesus? Jesus told us in **Jn. 7:7**: "*The world hates me, because I testify that what it does is evil.*" People don't want anyone to tell them what to do. But Jesus tells us that we will be held accountable and we need to turn from self to God.

Notice, too, what Paul said in **I Cor. 15:17** "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*" There would be no hope for our world, only death, despair and despondency. In fact, Paul states in verse 19, "*We are of all men, most to be pitied!*" Why? because we believed a lie. But the truth is He did rise again and His resurrection confirms that our world has a sin problem because it vindicates why he died in the first place. *The Bible says "He was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification."* No resurrection, no Savior. No Savior, no forgiveness.

RECONCILIATION

Why did Jesus die and rise again? Not only to confirm who He is and who we are, but so that we could be reconciled to God. So we can have a personal relationship with the Living God. On the night before He died, Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit. "*I will give you another comforter to be with you forever.*" Jesus paves the way for every person to have a relationship with their Father in heaven. The truth is people don't need religion, they need a relationship with Christ.

New agers speak of the god within, Deists speak of the God far off, Jesus speaks of the one True God who is not just far off but is near and Who seeks to live in us so that He can transform us, empower us and be with us forever. And that's what happens when we are reconciled to God. A relationship has been restored. God is seeking people to turn to Himself. That is how He designed us and the void won't be filled in the human heart until we turn to Him.

REPRESENTATION

Once we know Jesus we are to represent Him. We are called by the Lord to be His witnesses. We are called to be His ambassadors. We are given the mission to let our light shine, to make disciples of all the nations to teach, and preach and baptize, to have compassion, to forgive, and to give to the poor. We are to be that representation of Christ to our world. And we need to make sure we don't fall back into the old ways of sin. Notice what St. Paul says in **I Cor. 15:33-34**: "*Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning.*" The question for all of us is this: How are we representing Christ to our world? Do people know that we believe in the Risen Lord? And are we living accordingly. Someone has wisely observed, *What we do with our bodies is what we do with the Body of Christ.*

REWARD

And finally there is reward. And our reward is our resurrection. The Bible is clear - all will be judged by the Lord. We will be held accountable for how we lived our lives. We heard from **Acts 10:41**: "*And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by*

God as Judge of the living and the dead." Jesus Christ is the righteous judge. Jesus said in **Rev. 22:12**, "*Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.*"

For those who are in Christ, they have passed from judgment to life. But their reward won't be fully received until the resurrection at the end of the age. And the reward is our resurrection bodies; the same kind that Jesus rose with.

Look now at **I Cor. 15: 50-58**. The Apostle Paul writes, "**(I) declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**"

That is the beauty of the resurrection. It confirms all that we have believed and lived for.

The Apostle Paul wrote earlier in the chapter: "**How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?**"...*It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*" Praise God!

THE FOOL HAS SAID IN HIS HEART THERE IS NO GOD

You know in this life there will always be naysayers and doubters and atheists. It will be so until Christ returns. But that doesn't change reality. In fact, there are only two of the 150 Psalms in the Old Testament that are exactly the same: **Psalm 14 and Psalm 53**. Do you know how they begin? "*The fool has said in his heart there is no God.*"

My friends, God is not a delusion, He is real. Jesus is not a delusion, He is the Risen Lord, and knowing Him is the greatest gift anyone can ever receive. So have you made your decision? Is Christ your Lord? Are you ready for your resurrection? I pray your answer on this Easter 2010 is a resounding "YES!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!