



“Peter’s Proof”

Acts 3:11–26

An eyewitness to the truth speaks -- Jesus was resurrected and lives!!

Today, we begin a three-week series examining the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. We begin with Peter, who had denied Jesus three times on the morning of the crucifixion. In Acts 3, after healing a beggar, Peter rises to preach and offers his personal eyewitness testimony to the truth of Jesus’

resurrection. But before we get too far with Peter, we need to spend some time considering notions of truth and belief.

The truth?

Christians hold that there is such a thing as truth, that some notions about the nature of reality correspond to reality and some do not. But for many people today, the notion of truth itself is troubling. They are more into “my truth” and “your truth,” slowly losing grip on any objective knowledge of reality, i.e., the truth. For example, they somehow want to hold in their minds the idea that Christianity and Buddhism both tell us much about reality, just from different perspectives, and that, in some mysterious way, both can be true. This is sentimental nonsense. Truth is that which corresponds to reality, i.e., truth is that which is so.

The worldview¹ held by Christians could correspond with reality, with things as they are, or not. The Buddhist worldview could correspond with reality, with things as they are, or not. But, because the fundamental worldviews of Christianity and Buddhism are so diametrically opposed, they cannot both correspond to reality - they cannot both be true, for there is only one reality -- and you and I are living in it.

More specifically, it is either true that there is a creator God who made this world, gives it purpose, and is actively involved in the acting out of that purpose -- or it is not true. It is either true that all the world is an illusion (maya, as in Hinduism and its offshoot, Buddhism), or it is not true. It is either true that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily resurrected after his crucifixion or it is not true. It happened or it didn't happen. A video camera would have captured it on tape - or it would have captured something else that explains the empty tomb or perhaps it would show that the tomb was never empty.

Similarly, for two thousand years Jews and Christians have told competing stories about the nature of god. People often say that Jews and Christians worship the same god, that the only real difference is what they believe about Jesus. This is superficial, because the Christian understanding of Jesus changes everything about our understanding of God. Christians proclaim that Jesus is not merely a prophet, nor merely that he was touched by God unlike any other person who ever lived, nor even merely that he was Israel’s Messiah -- but that he is God himself, fully God and fully human. For the fiercely monotheistic Jews who still await the fulfillment of their god’s covenant with Israel, the Christian proclamation of Jesus as deity is blasphemy, taking Christians into the realm of polytheism and paganism. It is logically possible that one of these two competing stories told by Jews and Christians is correct and that the other is wrong. It is logically possible that they are

¹ Each of us carries around in our head and heart a story about how the world works, a story that explains all that is, a story that claims to make sense of all of reality. This story is a key part of what I mean by a worldview. A worldview explains things. It makes sense of it all. It is the way we organize all of reality. It tells us who we are and where we are. Though no two persons have identical worldviews, worldviews can be similar enough to enable us to speak of a Christian worldview, a naturalist worldview, a Hindu worldview and so on. Though no two Christians are likely to agree on every detail of what constitutes the Christian worldview, they can agree on a lot. Generally, they can agree on the “lock-nuts” that hold the worldview together, the essentials that constitute the common affirmation of the Christian worldview. Indeed, the purpose of most Christian creeds and statements of faith such as the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster confession, is to identify the “lock-nuts” of the Christian worldview.

both wrong and that the Hindus, or others, have been right all along. But it is not possible that the Jews and the Christians are both right. And we do both religions a disservice when we try to paper over these fundamental differences.

Having said all this, there are a few points about truth that we need to consider.

First, our lives are built on what we believe to be true, not what we know to be true. We "know/can prove" very little. Outside of mathematics, I can't really think of much that we can prove. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything, only disproving. One of the things drummed into me in college was the notion that a scientific hypothesis is never proven, only that many hypotheses have yet to be disproved, or as one of the principal scientific texts puts it, ". . . hypotheses can be tested and be shown to be probably true or probably false."² Scientific hypotheses are always predictions, never proofs. Modern science works because the visible universe is orderly and predictable, not because science proves things.³

This business about truth and proof can be tricky, but just stop to think about all the things you "know." I think you'll soon come to realize that nearly everything in your "knowledge" category is really in a "belief" category. It is just that there are many beliefs for which the evidence is so strong that we take the beliefs to be proven -- and we use the word "knowledge" when speaking of such beliefs. We then go on to organize our worldview around those beliefs until such time that we learn something that causes us to modify our beliefs and, subsequently, our worldview.

To illustrate, perhaps you've seen the movie, *The Truman Show*. In this movie, the hero, Truman, was born and raised in a completely controlled "artificial" world that was really nothing more than a large movie set. Truman had no reason to believe that there was anything artificial or contrived about his world, even though his wife and all his friends were actors hired to play the roles. Truman was the only person not in on the secret. In *The Matrix*, the world is an artificial mental "reality" induced in the minds of humans so that they can be kept alive in large farms and used as batteries. The hero was one of a small group of rebels who discovered the secret, even though they could never be sure what was truly real and what was the computer-created artificial reality.

There are substantial theological issues embedded in both of these films because we cannot transcend our senses, thereby throwing into doubt all that we hold to be true. To put it simply, we are stuck with our five senses and we can't get around them! Now, I don't think I'm living in a Matrix, I just don't think I can prove it beyond any doubt. Because everything we know must be mediated by our senses and our senses can be deceived, we have to admit the possibility of being wrong about everything. However, no one lives that way. I know that I married Angee twenty-nine years ago and have been a pastor for thirty-two years. For me to hold otherwise would get me committed - and rightly so! We just need to lose the notion that life can be reduced to Euclidean proofs such as we learned in tenth-grade geometry.

Second, something can be true whether we can prove it or not. For example, a couple of hundred years ago, a mathematician named Cronbach conjectured that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers. This conjecture has never been proved or disproved; perhaps it never will be. But it still could be true and it might be very reasonable to believe it is true until you can find an even number that is not the sum of two primes. *Truth is independent of the evidence for the truth.*

Third, it may be reasonable to believe something that is not true or to disbelieve something that is true. When you were five, it was reasonable to believe in the material existence of Santa Claus. Your parents told you it was so, and you had no reason to doubt your parents. Santa Claus was a reasonably held belief. By the time you were eight and had gathered some contradictory evidence, belief in Santa was no longer so

² This is from a classic textbook on scientific research, Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1986), 20

³ One of the great ironies of modern science is that doing science requires the assumption of an orderly universe while resisting consideration of how that orderliness came to be.

reasonable. Indeed, had you held on to your childhood beliefs in the material existence of Santa, the Easter bunny, and the tooth fairy, your beliefs would have been most unreasonable and, indeed, foolish. At the same time, if you call to check on the arrival of a flight from New York and the airline tells you that the flight will arrive on time, it may be reasonable to disbelieve them based on your experience with the airline, even though it is true that the flight will arrive on time.

In sum, our lives are built on a foundation of countless beliefs about ourselves, others, the world, the very nature of reality. Most of our beliefs do correspond to reality - to what is true - which is a good thing, because we have to make decisions every day on the basis of our beliefs. I did marry Angee in 1993; I was present at my marriage. The American colonies won their independence in 1781. (Or so my books and teachers have told me.) My point is that our beliefs are like a pyramid. When we are children, we begin building our pyramid of beliefs, adding blocks to it, taking blocks away. This pyramid constitutes our worldview. If we are fortunate, our pyramid is built on a wide foundation of many reasonably held beliefs that enable us to build an everhigher pyramid of understanding. Sometimes our most fundamental beliefs are challenged and replaced with beliefs that we believe are closer to the truth - or, to put it another way, our worldview is modified. This is an unending, life-long process - and an inescapable one.

And the most important building block in our pyramid is the knowledge that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected to a newly-embodied life after his resurrection. The Christian worldview/pyramid stands or falls on the objective truthfulness of this claim.

Back to Peter

Peter understood that Jesus' resurrection changed everything, and he was an eyewitness to it. In the ancient world, eyewitness testimony was the gold standard, what every historian was trying to get. And here was Peter, standing in Solomon's Portico in the Temple Courtyard, proclaiming Jesus raised and, further, that the healing of the beggar had been accomplished by the power of Jesus' name -- the name of the living Messiah, not that of a failed, now dead, would-be Messiah.

So it would be for these very first followers of the risen Christ. Jesus had appeared to more than 500 (1 Corinthians 15:6) people, and following the example of Peter, they spread the word of this extraordinary event that had changed the world.