

**What We Believe About Jesus and Why It Matters:
Exploring the Apostles' Creed
Philippians 2:5-11 and John 1:1-5, 14, 16-18
February 5, 2017
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Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and the vast majority of the world's people believe there is a God. What sets Christianity apart from these other faiths is its specific beliefs about Jesus. Some of the world's religions affirm that Jesus was a prophet, an important teacher, or a religious reformer. Even among atheists there is general agreement that Jesus was, as popular atheist Richard Dawkins affirms, a "great moral teacher." Christianity agrees that Jesus was indeed a prophet, religious reformer and great moral teacher, but the Christian faith says far more than this.

Theologians use the term Christology to describe the part of theology focused on the beliefs about Jesus, but how did we come to hold those beliefs? As we know, Jesus didn't leave any written documents, and there are very few Roman documents in existence from the first half of the first century. Even if there were we would not expect to find a record of the crucifixion of a Jewish peasant in what was considered the backwaters of the Roman Empire. Flavius Josephus wrote a comprehensive history of the Jews for the Romans near the end of the first century, and his works contain several references to Jesus. After the turn of the first century, the Roman senator and historian Tacitus mentioned Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome and noted that Christ was crucified under the reign of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem.

The earliest and most extensive information we have about Jesus comes from the 27 documents of the New Testament, nearly all of which were written between A.D. 50 and 95. Of those 27, it is the 4 gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that give us most of the information we know about Jesus. Occasionally a skeptic will try to argue that Jesus could have been a mythical figure, wholly made up by the early church. But the evidence for his existence is overwhelming. Bart Ehrman, an agnostic and professor of religious studies at UNC devoted an entire book to examining the historical evidence for the existence of Jesus. He summarized his research by saying, "Jesus did exist, whether we like it or not."

Unlike with God, the questions surrounding Jesus aren't usually about whether or not he existed. The questions surrounding Jesus are usually centered around who he was—the meaning of his life, his relationship with God, and what

his death and resurrection have to do with our relationship to God. The Apostles' Creed begins by proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. The name Jesus is the Greek form of *Yeshua*, a common name in the first century that is sometimes translated as "deliverer" or "savior." His name was a sign of what he would do, which was a common way to name a child in the ancient world. The angel who appeared to Joseph said, "You will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21)

The Creed goes on to identify Jesus as "God's only Son, our Lord." Scripture says that human beings are God's sons and daughters, so what does the Apostles' Creed mean by saying that Jesus is God's *only* son? To speak of Jesus in this way is to speak of a special and unique relationship that Jesus has with God. Jesus is not just *a* son of God but *the* Son of God. This phrase is shorthand for something much deeper. It will ultimately take us to the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, but for a moment let's consider how his first disciples saw him.

When Jesus called his first disciples, they felt compelled to leave whatever they were doing and follow him. They did not in that moment understand him to be the only Son of God, but they felt a special draw to him. When Jesus taught, he taught with an authority the other religious leaders did not demonstrate. When he spoke, many people felt they were hearing the very words of God. When Jesus touched people, they felt they had been touched by God. When they answered his call, they felt they were answering God's call. And, then there was the fact that Jesus did things that ordinary people did not do. He ministered to the mentally ill and demon-possessed, relieving them of their suffering. He healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind. He commanded the storms to be still and they instantly obeyed. He even raised the dead.

Skeptics dismiss these miracles as stories fabricated by early Christians to win followers to Jesus. But, believers view them as signs that point to the unique identity of Jesus. So much of what Jesus did were things that only God could do, from forgiving sins to commanding the winds and waves to raising the dead. Seeing him do those things, early Christians came to believe that in some sense God had come to the human race in the person of Jesus. The theological term for this is "incarnation," a term that means, literally, to en flesh. Christians believe that God took on flesh and came to be with us in the person of Jesus.

James Steward, one of the great Scottish preachers of the 20th century, was a prolific writer and professor of New Testament in Edinburgh. He put it like this: "It is a tragedy that the Christian religion is in many minds identified merely with

pious ethical behavior and vague theistic beliefs, suffused with aesthetic emotionalism and a mild glow of humanitarian benevolence. This is not the faith which first awakened the world like a thousand trumpets and made people feel it bliss in such a dawn to be alive. Men knew what Christianity really was—the entrance into history of a force of immeasurable range.” Calming violent storms, casting out demons, making the lame to walk and the blind to see, raising the dead—it’s easy to understand how skeptics could question whether these things really happened. But if Jesus of Nazareth was more than a man, if in fact God had come to us in him, walking on our planet, living among us to show us what God is like, would these acts not be the very kinds of things we would expect as he encountered suffering, darkness and death? Still, if you struggle to make sense of the Incarnation or the deity of Christ, you are in good company. Perhaps we should take a cue from Jesus himself who never felt compelled to explain the Incarnation or to articulate the finer points of what have become Christian orthodox belief. He simply told people, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” and he invited them to follow him.

Our sermon series during Lent will give us an in-depth look at the part of the Creed that speaks with Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion and death, so I won’t deal with that here. The next phrase is one that elicits questions for people. In fact, there are two versions of the Apostles’ Creed in use today, the version we have and a version that leaves out the line, “he descended into hell.” This phrase is the early church’s answer to the question of what Jesus was up to between the time of his death on Friday afternoon and his resurrection early Sunday morning. It also points to the early church’s understanding of what happens to us when we die.

Methodist pastor and author Adam Hamilton, points out that in Jewish thought, at death, a person’s soul made its abode in the realm of the dead, sometimes called Sheol or Hades which was understood to be under the earth. Within this underworld were two realms—one for the righteous called Paradise and another for the unrighteous which was often referred to as Gehenna, after the valley in Jerusalem that was continually on fire because that’s where the city’s garbage was burned. Jesus once told a parable about a poor beggar named Lazarus who sat outside the gates of a certain rich man. The rich man refused to help Lazarus. After they both died, the rich man was in Gehenna, in torment, from where he could look across a wide chasm and see Lazarus in Paradise, the same place Jesus spoke of when he turned to one of the thieves beside him on the cross and said, “This day you will be with me in paradise.” Paradise was not heaven but the place in the underworld where the righteous dead were comforted awaiting the final resurrection. It was heaven-like but incomplete.

When the Creed says that Jesus “descended to the dead,” the idea is that Jesus experienced what we experience when we die. But the church also came to believe that Jesus, during the time between his death and resurrection, offered salvation to those in death’s clutches since the beginning of time. Jesus’ actions during this time are sometimes referred to as the “harrowing of hell” and is captured in art and icons that show Jesus triumphantly tearing the gates of hell off their hinges, releasing the righteous dead from Sheol. We can’t be sure of any of this, of course, so the phrase “descended to the dead” represents somewhat speculative theology about which we have limited information in scripture. But, it is consistent with the proclamations of scripture that Jesus defeated sin and death and holds “the keys of Death and the grave” as Revelation 1:18 puts it.

Virtually no one doubts that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate around AD 30. And, it is widely accepted that he was hastily buried in a borrowed tomb and that a large stone was rolled over the mouth of the tomb. The Gospel records of these events are in line with the burial practices of the time. But the earliest Christians made an outrageous claim about what happened next. They said that early on Sunday morning, roughly 36 hours after he was buried, some of Jesus’ followers returned to the tomb where they discovered that the stone was rolled away and the grave was open. His body was gone. In case you’ve ever wondered why the Creed says that Jesus was raised on the third day, when only about 36 hours lapsed between his death and resurrection, the answer is that the Jews count days from sunset to sunset. On Friday afternoon Jesus died and was buried before sunset—day 1. Friday night through sunset Saturday was the second day. Saturday night into Sunday was the third day. Thus, Jesus rose “on the third day.”

It wasn’t long after the discovery of the empty grave that Jesus began appearing to his disciples and others. They did not always recognize him at first. When Mary Magdalene first saw him she thought he was the gardener. Cleopas and others, including the disciples thought he was simply a stranger. For forty days he appeared to them in various times and places, appearing to more than 500 people in all.

The resurrection is a difficult thing for people to believe. Some people have suggested that Jesus wasn’t literally raised from the dead, but that his followers believed he was with God in heaven and they recognized that he lived on in their hearts and minds and through the continuation of his work. But, that’s not what Jesus’ followers said. They pointed to an empty tomb and noted that Jesus’ body was gone. They claimed to have seen him and also to have touched him and eaten with him at various times over the course of several weeks. And, they were

dramatically changed by their experiences with Jesus following the resurrection. The same followers who had fled during Jesus' arrest and who had been hiding behind locked doors after the crucifixion, became bold and courageous, risking their lives to proclaim what they had seen. And based on their testimony, thousands in Jerusalem came to believe in Jesus and found their own lives profoundly changed by their faith.

Jesus did not stay with the disciples, however. After 40 days he left them to return to the Father from which he had come, sitting at God's right hand. That is a figurative way of saying that the honor and glory due to Christ for the successful completion of his mission on earth has already begun. As we saw in the series on Revelation, Christ's obedience, even to the point of death, makes him worthy to break the seal on the scrolls of eternal life, to be the one to make right, that is "judge" all that has gone wrong in our lives and in our world.

As with all of these creedal statements, ultimately we have to make a choice about what and who to believe. I have decided to trust the witness of the first disciples. As with the virginal conception and the miracles of Jesus, it seems to me that the God who is creator of all, maker of heaven and earth could do whatever was necessary to bring Jesus back to life. And, then there is the fact that the Resurrection just makes sense theologically. If Jesus came from God to reveal God and God's will to humanity, and if in some way Jesus was God's response to the existential questions and struggles we face, then his resurrection not only makes sense, it is absolutely essential. If Christ was not raised, then evil, hate, sin and death had the final word on that Friday when Jesus was crucified. Instead, Jesus' resurrection was God's emphatic declaration that none of these have the final say. Jesus' resurrection was not only God's response to human mortality and our fear of death, but also God's response to all that is wrong in the world. It's an ever-present sign of God's victory and the triumph of good over evil, love over hate, and life over death. Without the resurrection, one has to wonder if Christianity would even exist today.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. The story of Jesus is the defining story of Christianity. Jesus demonstrates who God is, what God is like and how we are to live in relationship to God. Ingmar Bergman once said, "You were born without purpose, you live without meaning, living is its own meaning. When you die, you are extinguished. From being you will be transformed into non-being." Faith in Jesus offers a very different perspective. We were born with purpose, our lives have meaning, and when this mortal body dies, we have only just begun to live. Thanks be to God! Amen