

The Case For The Resurrection

I want to welcome you to Vineyard's Easter service. It is a great joy to worship together on this day of Christ's resurrection. I have always particularly enjoyed Easter—not only because as a Christian it is the high point of the Christian calendar, but also for me personally Easter has special memories. See, Easter Sunday was the first church service I ever attended 23 years ago. Before Easter Sunday in 1974, I had never set foot in a church in my entire life. And for those of you who don't regularly attend here at the Vineyard, we have so many guests this weekend, I wasn't raised in a Christian family. I was raised in a Jewish home in New York. So obviously, we never attended church. It was just two days before Easter in 1974 that I made a decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ. So my first church service was on Easter.

Now, our church knows that before I began pastoring here at the Vineyard, I taught Business Law and International Law at Ohio State University for five years full-time and a couple of years part-time. I graduated from the Law School at OSU in 1980.

Four years ago I did a message for Easter that actually has been, by way of our tape sales, the most popular message that I have ever done in my ten years of pastoring called *The Case for the Resurrection*. What I did was to simply use my legal background and my training to examine the resurrection of Christ as if I was presenting it as a legal case before a jury. I tackled the resurrection not from a religious perspective the way a church would or a pastor would look at it, but the way a lawyer would look at it. Sifting through the evidence in a hardheaded way so that we could determine together whether the resurrection, in fact, did occur.

Now in all the years of pastoring, I probably have redone messages maybe 3 or 4 times. And let me share with you why I decided to update this one from four years ago. We

have been blessed in this church. The church has more than doubled. Four years ago we were averaging about 1200 people at our weekend services. We are now averaging 3000 folks. So I know that almost 2 out of 3 people here have not had a chance to be exposed to the legal case for the resurrection.

I also am planning to do a series that I hope will help many of you and, perhaps, be an opportunity for you to invite friends or family—a series starting next Sunday called “Tough Questions the Critics Ask.” I want to explore the true claims of Christianity in a very upfront way doing messages like: Why Should I Believe the Bible; What About All the Other Religions; How Can Christianity Claim to be the Only True Religion; Why Does God Allow Innocent People to Suffer; Could a Loving God Really Send People to Hell, etc. So many people would like to believe, but they have some intellectual problems. So, if you or a friend or family member is wrestling with some of the tougher intellectual questions concerning Christianity, this might be a good series to check out. But because I am doing this series, I thought what could be a better introduction to “Tough Questions That the Critics Ask” than a message called *A Case For the Resurrection*.

I know that a lot of folks have really lost their taste for truth. If you asked people who attend church why they go to church regularly, some would say that they go out of habit. That it is just simply the way they were raised. Some go because they have an aesthetic experience at church. They enjoy the pageantry and the choir and the stained glass windows, the arched ceilings, the color coordinated robes. I trust that if you are here at the Vineyard, your motivation for going to church is not aesthetic at all, unless your tastes run to gymnasiums with basketball hoops and a building that could easily double as a warehouse. You are not coming to this church for the aesthetics. You know that our philosophy in buildings was simply to get really good functional space for our programming, but to put as little money as possible into the aesthetics and as much money as possible into people and ministry outreaches like our food pantry and medical clinic, ministry to people who have AIDS and so on.

Some people go to church because church works for them. They say that when they go they gain a sense of peace or a better perspective on life, some helpful information to assist them in the marriages or child raising or employment. That is not an entirely bad reason to go to church – because church helps you, because Christianity works for you. But it is really not a sufficient reason to continue with Christianity. Because if the reason why you are a Christian or go to church is because it works for you, how do you distinguish your practice from all the other practices in the world that work for other people? Maybe you find peace at church and another person finds peace at the bottom of a martini glass. Or they find their peace through a walk in the woods or by worshipping a little wooden statue that their wife brought back from the Caribbean. Why, then, would you suggest that your Christianity is superior if it is simply judged on the basis of what works?

And if you measure everything on the basis of what works, what provides you with peace, what helps you in the moment, what will you do when Christianity doesn't work in the moment? What will you do when one of your prayers doesn't get answered or someone who is sick that you know doesn't get better even though you have prayed with them? Or your financial situation doesn't turn around? Or you don't seem to have a great deal of peace and you are anxious? Or you, yourself, experience an accident or tragedy?

Friends, we have to go beyond aesthetic and even mere pragmatism – what works, to have a solid foundation for faith. The only solid foundation for believing something is because it is true. Not because I prefer it, because it feels good, because it works for me, because that is the way I was raised, because that is my religion or my tradition. The only reason why you ought to believe something or not is because it is true, because what you believe accurately describes reality.

See, the message that flashed across the ancient world that set hearts on fire, that changed lives and turned the ancient world upside down was not “Love your neighbor.” Moral people around the world already knew that. That was not new news. The news, the

new news, was that a man who claimed to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world had risen from the dead.

A reasonable challenge to a skeptic would be this: If it can be proven that Jesus really rose from the dead, will you believe in Him? If I can prove to you by evidence that would be admissible in a court of law and that would sway reasonably minded jurors regarding the truth that I am presenting, if I could prove that Christ was risen by the standards of proof in a courtroom, the same standards that we would use to convict a man of a crime or send a man to jail; if I could prove that Christ was raised from the dead, will you follow Him? Because if He really rose, then Christ is not a mere man. If He really rose from the dead, then He is divine since resurrection is beyond any human power.

What I would like you to do today is to engage in a little bit of imagination. I would like you to imagine this Easter that you are a jury, that you are in a courtroom and have been selected because you are not biased for or against the issues being presented. I would like you for a half an hour to put away your biases. You may be biased because of your background or your experiences or your education to be against Christianity. Or you may have had positive experiences that bias you in favor of Christianity.

Here is what I would like to ask you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, to do. I would like you to raise your right hand and promise me to decide this case not based on your biases or your past experience, but based on the evidence presented. Will you do that? I am going to remind you of your promise later. But I would like you for the next half an hour to listen to the evidence in an unbiased way and to sit on the jury as I present for you *The Case for the Resurrection*.

The resurrection makes Christianity unique among the world religions. In the global village that we live in people are increasingly asking the question: What is the difference between Christianity and all of the other religions of the world? The answer is very simple. Christianity is the only religion in the world that stands or falls on whether its founder was raised from the dead. No Buddhist claims that Buddha rose from the dead. No Muslim

claims that Mohammed rose from the dead. According to tradition, Mohammed died in 632 A.D. at the age of 61 and his tomb is visited annually by thousands of devout Muslims as they make pilgrimages to Medeena. But, down through the ages, the claim of Christianity is that Jesus not only died, but that He rose from the dead and is alive today changing people's lives. If this is true, that Jesus rose from the dead, then Christianity stands apart from the world's religions. So, I present you with a case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

How does a lawyer begin a case? Contrary to popular opinion, the first thing that the lawyer looks at is not what his or her legal fee will be. The first thing that a lawyer does in examining a case is he or she considers the facts. And as you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, attempt to evaluate in an unbiased way the case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I am going to present for your consideration, evidence to prove four simple facts.

Fact number one: Jesus was a real person in history. He is not a myth or legend.

Fact number two: Jesus, who was a real person in history, was crucified on a cross and died.

Fact number three: The tomb that Jesus was buried in is empty.

Fact number four: The reason the tomb that Jesus was buried in is empty is because Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Four facts. Jesus was a real person. Jesus died on a cross. Jesus' tomb was empty. Jesus was raised from the dead.

The fact is that Jesus was a real person and not a mythological figure like Zeus or Hercules. That Jesus is not a legend, but a real person living in history is indisputable. It can be demonstrated by a simple examination of the historical record of the time in which Jesus lived.

There are several historians outside of the New Testament who wrote about the Israel of Jesus' day. One of the historians is a man named Josephus. Josephus helped to lead Jewish forces in Galilee in a rebellion against Rome in the year 64 A.D. He devoted the second half of his life to writing a complete history of the Jews. (Now listen, this is not from

the New Testament. This is from a Jewish writer of history living very close to the time of Jesus) Josephus writes:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and he was known to be virtuous. Many people from among the Jews became his disciples. Pilot condemned him to be crucified and to die. And, those who became his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, that he was alive. Accordingly, he was, perhaps, the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets recounted wonders."

He mentions the time in which Jesus lived. He mentions that Jesus was called the Messiah by some. Josephus mentions that Jesus was known as a wise and good man; that he had many disciples; that Pilate condemned him to be crucified; that the disciples reported that Jesus to be risen from the dead and appearing to them of the third day after his crucifixion; and, as a result the disciples' continued to proclaim his teachings.

In the Jewish Talmud, Rabbis who were in opposition to Jesus wrote in the Talmud that Jesus was crucified, hung on a cross, because he taught things that were against Judaism. It also mentioned that Jesus was crucified on the eve of the Passover.

If we turn to Roman historians, there are very clear references to the life of Jesus from the Roman historian Tacitus, who has been called the greatest historian of ancient Rome. Tacitus, like Josephus, lived just a few years after Jesus. He makes at least three references in his history of the Roman Empire to Christ. In the first, he explains how Nero blamed the Christians for the fire that burned Rome. Here is what Tacitus says:

"Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations called Christians by the populace. Christ, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate."

Several other Roman historians report about the life of Jesus and his teachings. And then, of course, we have the New Testament documents, which have been independently

corroborated by all sorts of archeological evidence, and, in fact, I am actually going to talk about the archeological and historical evidence for the Bible's reliability next week. There are great reasons why Christians believe the Bible. But one of the best reasons to believe the Bible is because it is historically accurate. The events described in the Bible actually happened. They are not just myths or fairy tales. The bottom line is that almost all serious historians today have no doubt whatever that there was such a person in history named Jesus who taught and did many of the things recorded in the New Testament.

FACT #1: Jesus was a real person and not a myth or a legend.

FACT #2: This Jesus, who was a real person, was crucified on a cross and he died.

Now, you need to understand that Jesus was not unique in being crucified on a cross and dying. History tells us that crucifixion was a very common form of execution in Jesus' day. One historical account talks about the Romans crucifying six thousand people in one day—taking prisoners out and one-by-one nailing them to a cross. Was Jesus crucified by being nailed on a cross? Again, the historians are uniform in giving one answer. That answer is *yes*.

Josephus says he was crucified on a cross. Tacitus says he was crucified on a cross. Another Roman historian, Pliny, says he was crucified on a cross. The Jewish Talmud says Jesus was crucified on a cross. The New Testament writers who claim to be eyewitnesses, are unanimous in saying that, yes, he was crucified. I would call them to the stand one by one and have them testify that they saw Jesus being nailed to the cross. Peter, did you see Jesus nailed to the cross? Yes. I saw him hanging on a cross. John, did you see Jesus on the cross? Yes. I saw him on the cross. Mary Magdeline, Salome, did you see Jesus on the cross? Yes. We saw him hanging on a cross.

Did he die? If he hung on a cross, did Jesus die from being crucified? I would submit three items of evidence for your consideration. Number one: four Roman guards had to sign a certificate saying that the prisoner was dead before he was allowed to be taken down from the cross. This was the custom at the time of crucifixion. There was a guard

surrounding each person being killed. And, in the case of Jesus, it was particularly important from both the Romans and the Jews that this man die. Jesus was considered to be a political threat. He was a challenge to the state. He was accused of treason. He was accused of blasphemy. He was a threat to the religious establishment. The Roman powers-that-be and the Jewish powers-that-be wanted this man, Jesus, dead. And so, this certificate filled out by Roman guards in the case of every crucifixion was particularly important in the case of Jesus Christ. Was he dead? I would submit for your consideration the evidence of these certificates that were filled out for each crucified prisoner and would have had to be filled out in the case of Jesus. Did he really die on that cross?

Along with the death certificate, I would submit evidence from eyewitnesses that when Jesus was hanging on the cross, his side was pierced with a spear and water and blood flowed out. The best evidence suggests that this was a thrust given by a Roman soldier to insure death. This spear entered through his rib cage and pierced his right lung, the sack around the heart and the heart itself, releasing both blood and other fluids. The wounds in both his wrists and feet would have severed the major nerves. The final wound to his side would have been fatal in itself.

The next bit of evidence that I would submit is from *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Eleven years ago a prominent American physician wrote an article that was considered by one of the leading medical journals of this country, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, to be of sufficient quality to be published in their scholarly periodical. The article was titled, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ." Here is how the article concluded:

"Clearly the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear thrust between his right ribs probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured his death. Accordingly, interpretations based on

the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.”

The author of this article is a man by the name of Dr. Edwards, who was a chief pathologist at the Mayo Clinic. The bottom line of this 8-page article in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* is this: The idea that Jesus was crucified, but didn't die from his wounds and his ordeal is a medical impossibility.

FACT #1: Jesus was a real person.

FACT #2: Jesus was crucified on a cross and died.

FACT #3: The tomb where he was buried was empty.

What evidence is there that the tomb was empty? Again, we have eyewitnesses who will tell you that they went to the tomb and it was empty. Some women carefully watched from a distance and saw the tomb that Jesus was buried in. They came back to that tomb two days later. To their utter astonishment, the stone that was placed in front of the tomb was rolled away and the body was gone.

Peter and John ran to the tomb. When they looked inside, they found it to be amazingly empty. The guards who were assigned to watch the tomb went back into Jerusalem and reported that the tomb was empty. We are going to talk more about the guards in a moment. Finally, the Sanhedrin – the Jewish Council who pronounced judgment in the case of Jesus had to fabricate a story to account for the fact that the tomb where Jesus was laid was empty. We have four bits of direct evidence. The testimony of the women, the disciples, the guards and the Jewish High Court. All of whom say the tomb where Jesus was laid was empty.

Then we have the circumstantial evidence of the empty tomb. First, in Judaism of Jesus' day, the tombs of the prophets were always venerated. Now, this is a custom that exists to this day. We have communists who made pilgrimages from all over Russia to visit Lenin's tomb. People still go to the grave of John F. Kennedy and to The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I mentioned before Mohammed's tomb. But, there is not a scintilla of

evidence that anyone ever venerated the tomb of Jesus believing his body to still be there. In the whole history of Christianity, in all of the historical records, no one ever suggested that the body of Jesus was still in that tomb. And you have this religion spreading like wildfire, converting thousands of Jews based on the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Think about it for a moment. If the body of Jesus was still in the tomb, if the tomb was not empty, why didn't the religious leaders of Jesus' day simply go to the tomb simply take Jesus' body out and display it in public, saying: Look here, there is your risen Savior! Dead, a corpse, wrapped in grave clothes. As Christianity began to threaten the very foundations of the Roman Empire, why didn't some Roman General or Roman Governor go to the tomb where Jesus was laid, take him out, hang him up again on a cross and say: There is your risen Savior. There is your Messiah, risen from the dead. Not only do we have direct evidence from the testimony of four disparate sources that they saw the tomb empty, but we have the circumstantial evidence of no one ever producing a body. No one ever suggested that the tomb was anything but empty.

So what are the explanations for the empty tomb? Let's assume that you are an unbiased jury and you are listening to the evidence not only put on by me, but I have an opposing counsel. He is representing the Atheist League of America, joined by the Society of Agnostics for Freedom From Christianity. Several prominent, liberal ministers have donated funds – a couple of musicians and actors – the opposition is putting on some alternative theories about how the tomb became empty, because it is indisputable that the tomb where Jesus was buried is empty. The opposition suggests, first of all, that the disciples stole the body. This theory that one of the disciples stole the body of Jesus was popularized in 1965 by Dr. Hugh Schonfield in a best-selling book called *The Passover Plot*. In *The Passover Plot*, Schonfield claimed that Jesus had instructed one of his disciples to steal his body so that he could appear to be the Messiah.

Well, if I had Dr. Schonfield, or any one else who holds this perspective, on the stand saying that the disciples stole the body, I would ask: Were the disciples ever charged under Roman law for stealing the body?

Answer: They were never charged.

According to Roman law, the body of a condemned criminal belongs to the state. That is why, in the New Testament, Joseph of Arimathea had to go to Pilate and *ask* him for the body of Jesus. To steal the body of a criminal was a capital offense under Roman law. So, if you suggest that the disciples stole the body, why weren't they charged with this crime?

I would also point out that after the death of Jesus, the disciples were in no state of mind to commit a theft of a body. Their number had dwindled down to just a handful of men. Only two of them, apparently, were in Jerusalem at the time – Peter and John. Peter had just denied Jesus. John was charged with looking after Jesus' mother. These disciples were leaderless, confused and afraid. It is inconceivable that they would have overpowered a Roman guard consisting of sixteen men, moved a stone away and stolen the body. If you say that they did it anyway, they overpowered 16 trained Roman guards and stole the body; I would ask what is their motive for stealing the body?

As every lawyer knows, behind nearly every crime, there is a motive. What possible motive did the disciples have? You know, nearly every one of the early disciples died for his or her faith. Why did they do it? They had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Now, you think about this for a moment. Peter was crucified upside down. Paul was beheaded. Several of the other disciples were set on fire. Some were fed to animals. Every one of them claimed they saw Christ risen from the dead. Now, people will sometimes die for what they sincerely believe is true. But no sane person will die for what they know to be a lie. If the disciples stole the body, then they pushed this lie to the point of being willing to be tortured and die for what they knew as a falsehood.

In addition, there is the simple historical fact that no one, weak or strong, saint or sinner, Christian or heretic, ever confessed freely under pressure, bribe or torture, that the

whole story of the resurrection was a fake, a lie or a deliberate deception. See, in the early church a number of people broke under torture. In the early church a number of people under torture denied Christ and did worship Caesar, but they never dragged the cat out of the bag that the resurrection was a made-up conspiratorial hoax. The reason that cat was never let out of the bag was because it never was in the bag to begin with. No Christian believed that the resurrection was a conspiracy.

And one point on the disciples stealing the body and then covering it up, which would require a conspiracy involving all 12 of the disciples as well as hundreds of other people who claimed to be eyewitnesses to the resurrection, it is simply inconceivable that sooner or later one of them would not have spilled the beans.

Chuck Colson, who was arrested in the Watergate scandal, said that one of the lessons of Watergate is that a lie cannot live forever. Here is what Colson wrote:

“We had the most powerful office in the world at stake – the most powerful office in history, the Presidency of the United States. And a small group of extremely loyal people, hand-picked, no more than ten of us and we couldn’t hold the conspiracy together for two weeks.”

You see it in the Whitewater investigation that is going on right now. There is always someone who is willing to cut a deal. But in all of the early church history no one, not one single man, woman or child, who claimed to be an eyewitness to the resurrection ever recanted saying, “I know this is a hoax; I’m willing to cut a deal.”

But, there never was a deathbed confession; and, there never was a leak, because people of impeccable integrity – followers of Jesus Christ, who called upon the world to speak the truth and to deal in complete honesty – went to their deaths saying that they saw Jesus Christ alive. No, they didn't steal the body.

Well, perhaps they all hallucinated when they said they saw Jesus alive. I can imagine the opposition, The Atheist League of America, bringing to the witness stand a well-known psychiatrist. The psychiatrist suggests that this whole story of Jesus being alive was the

product of a delusion in the minds of the disciples of Jesus. They were not deliberately telling a lie, they were simply deluded, hallucinating. And so, I would ask: Tell me a little bit about hallucinations. The psychiatrist might say: Well, you know a hallucination occurs when somebody longs for something to happen so much so that they eventually believe that it actually happens.

[Rich] Well, do you have an illustration of this, Doctor?

[Doctor] Yes. Imagine a wife who has just lost her husband, someone she loves. For years that man has come home at 6:00 every evening. Each evening at this time, she thinks about him and longs to see him again. One evening, at 6:00, she believes her husband has actually walked in and spoken to her.

[Rich] Doctor, what kinds of people are likely to suffer from hallucinations?

[Doctor] Well, highly emotional people. Very imaginative people often suffer from these kinds of delusions.

[Rich] Doctor, would you classify the lawyer, Paul, as a highly emotional, imaginative person of the kind that would be given to hallucinations? What about Matthew who is a hardheaded tax collector? Or Thomas who doubted the whole thing and demanded physical proof?

[Doctor] No. They are not the type of people to suffer hallucinations.

[Rich] Tell me this, Doctor; in your experience are hallucinations common in a group setting?

[Doctor] The answer is psychiatrically, absolutely not. Hallucinations are highly individualistic and very subjective. They are linked to an individual's past and his subconscious.

[Rich] Is it likely that two people walking would have the same hallucination at the same time?

[Doctor] No.

[Rich] How about eleven people sitting in the same room?

[Doctor] No.

[Rich] How about five hundred people at once?

[Doctor] No.

[Rich] And, yet, that was the situation of people who had claimed to see the risen Christ. Doctor, how long do hallucinations last?

[Doctor] Hallucinations last over a very long period of time.

[Rich] Do they tend to get more intense as they go on or less intense?

[Doctor] Well, if we are talking about hallucinations of the obsessive variety, they tend to get more intense and they occur regularly to the point that they can result in insanity.

[Rich] Well, if this was a psychiatric delusion, why did these hallucinations suddenly stop after forty days and never occur again? Do hallucinations normally eat?

[Doctor] No, what do you mean?

[Rich] Well, the resurrected Christ is reported to have eaten on at least two occasions. Last question, Doctor, can you touch a hallucination?

[Doctor] Well, of course not.

[Rich] We have reports here of a number of people who touched or held the risen Christ.

The explanation that the disciples were suffering from hallucinations is contrary to the almost unanimous pattern for cases of this nature. Now, above all, any explanation for how the tomb of Jesus became empty has to cover all of the facts. This one doesn't. If the disciples had simply imagined that Jesus had raised from the dead, but he didn't, well, then all the Jews of the day had to do was produce the body of Christ. They weren't able to produce the body of Christ, because there was no body to be produced. The tomb was empty. And so, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, my question remains: What happened to Jesus? Why was Jesus' body never found in the tomb?

In determining what happened to Jesus I want to finish up my case by presenting two lines of argument, two types of evidence, to prove to you that the reason why the tomb was

empty was because Jesus Christ, in fact, was raised from the dead. The first line of evidence is direct evidence. In any court of law, the best evidence that exists is what lawyers call direct evidence. Direct evidence deals with the fact in issue. In this case the fact in issue is whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead or not. The best direct evidence would be eyewitnesses who actually saw him after his resurrection. That is what we have recorded in the pages of the New Testament.

Here is what I would do in presenting the case. One by one, I would call to the witness stand those people in the New Testament who claimed to have seen Jesus with their own eyes. And the New Testament writers are very careful to say that they do not simply believe this on the basis of what was told to them from others. They believed Christ rose from the dead because with their own eyes they saw him and with their own hands they touched him. And so, one by one, I would call to the witness stand those who claimed to have seen him after he died and was placed in the tomb, raised from the dead.

[Rich] Mary Magdelene, will you come to the stand? Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?

[Mary] I do.

[Rich] Where were you Sunday Easter morning?

[Mary] I went to the tomb where they laid the body of Jesus.

[Rich] What happened at the tomb?

[Mary] I saw that it was empty.

[Rich] Did you expect it to be empty?

[Mary] Of course not.

[Rich] What did you think at that time?

[Mary] I thought that someone had stolen Jesus' body.

[Rich] Then what happened?

[Mary] I heard something.

[Rich] What did you hear?

[Mary] I heard someone speak my name. Someone was standing in back of me and said, “Mary.”

[Rich] Then what happened?

[Mary] When I heard my name, I knew exactly who it was. I knew it was Jesus and I turned around. It was him.

[Rich] Then what did you do?

[Mary] Well, I grabbed hold of him.

[Rich] You mean you could touch him?

[Mary] Well, yes, he had a real body. I could touch him.

[Rich] Mary, are you sure it wasn't some spirit or ghost?

[Mary] No, no. I grabbed hold of him. I was holding him.

[Rich] Mary, I would like you to look at the jury and answer one question. Are you absolutely sure, so far as God is your witness that you saw Jesus raised from the dead? Take your time now.

[Mary] I can say, as far as God is my witness, that I personally saw Jesus Christ raised from the dead.

[Rich] Thank you for your testimony.

And then, one by one, I would lead to the witness stand other eyewitnesses. More than 500 in all from the New Testament. I would present to them the same questions I presented to Mary.

[Rich] Paul, you are a lawyer. You are analytical. You are a hardheaded person, a thinker. Can you look the jury in the eye and so far as God is your witness, say with absolute certainty, without a shadow of a doubt in your mind, that with your own eyes you personally saw Jesus Christ raised from the dead?

We would hear Paul with his own mouth say:

[Paul] I can testify with absolute certainty, with no doubt, that I personally saw Jesus Christ and I heard his voice. He was raised from the dead.

Peter, likewise. James, likewise. Two disciples on the road to Emmaeus.

[Rich] Thomas, were you predisposed to believe that Christ was raised from the dead?

[Thomas] Absolutely not. I thought it was total malarkey. But now I am more sure that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead than I am of my own existence.

[Rich] Why did you change your mind, Thomas?

[Thomas] Because he stood in front of me and he asked me to put my hand in the side where he was stabbed. He told me to put my finger into the nail prints. I saw him.

And so what you would be hearing, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is not hearsay evidence, not what somebody else told these people. You would be hearing first-hand, eyewitness accounts. The New Testament is full of statements where the eyewitness says: And, I am a witness of this. That was the power that spread Christianity like wild fire throughout the Roman Empire. It was the power of an eyewitness account.

The evidence was not based on theory or on a philosophy that they had bought. It was empirical, based on their own observation, the very same kind of evidence that we buy in the world – sense data. Things that the human eye sees and the human ear hears and the hand touches. Each of these people would be tested in regard to their character and their knowledge of the facts; their disinterestedness in the outcome of the case; their integrity; their veracity and they would stand up under the closest cross-examination.

Some of these people were enemies of Christianity. Paul, for example, had an interest in this not being true. Paul hated this story that Jesus was raised from the dead. And the only reason he changed his mind was because he personally saw Christ raised from the dead.

And so, we have direct evidence and then we have circumstantial evidence. Circumstantial evidence is not eyewitness testimony, but it deals with other facts from which the issue that we are trying to decide can be inferred. In a murder case, direct evidence would be an eyewitness who said: “I saw John pick up the gun and shoot Mary.”

But then there are other kinds of evidence. The fact that John purchased a gun. His fingerprints were found on the gun. The bullet, which caused Mary's death, was fired from that gun. That is all circumstantial evidence.

The direct evidence from the testimony of people that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead is strong. The circumstantial evidence surrounding this case makes it even stronger. What is the circumstantial evidence?

#1. You see an amazing change in the disciples immediately after the death of Christ. When Jesus was crucified it was a shattering event to the disciples. It left them stunned and leaderless and in complete despair. All their hopes were ended.

Suddenly something happened that turned them completely around. You have Peter who denied Jesus three times, walked away and said: "It's over. Christ is crucified. There is no more sense in following this silly religion." Then something happened which made Peter stand up in public and say: "He is raised from the dead."

The same thing happened to Thomas. The same thing happened to James. What changed these disciples? What turned them around? What event? If not seeing the resurrected Christ, then what?

#2. Then you have the shift, immediately, from worshipping on Saturday as Jews – for 1500 years Jews worshipped on Saturday – then within a few weeks these particular Jews broke with 1500 years of history and started worshipping on Sunday. Why has the church always worshipped on Sunday? What even occurred on Sunday, on Easter, that made the church shift its day of worship?

Finally, from that first Easter Sunday until today, there is an unbroken succession of millions upon millions of people who will say that their lives have been revolutionized by contact with the living Christ. Rich people, poor people, black people, white people, Asian, Jews, Gentiles, women, men, children, old people – from every country on the face of the earth – hundreds of these normal people are sitting in this room right now and they will tell you without blinking that they can personally testify to their own personal experience of

contact with the living Christ. They aren't crazy. They aren't delusional. They did not want to simply believe something. In their own experience, they met someone who is alive named Jesus, and Jesus changed their lives and they are better for it.

You have heard the evidence. It is a fact that Jesus was a real person.

It is a fact of history that Jesus was crucified on a cross and he died.

It is a fact that the tomb where Jesus was laid is empty. There is no body to be discovered in the tomb.

It is a fact that with no reasonable alternative, Jesus was raised from the dead.

Having heard the evidence, I submit the case to your verdict. The case for the resurrection rests.

In a court case that means the legal argument has ended and it is time for you to render a verdict. You might remember that a jury has two responsibilities. The first is to be unbiased. That is not as easy as it seems. I have talked with people who have told me, yes, they saw that there was excellent evidence and it was the most reasonable thing in the world to believe the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It made sense.

I said, "Well, do you want to believe in Christ?"

They said, "No."

At times, people's unbelief remains not because of the evidence, but in spite of it.

I asked you at the beginning to promise me you would be unbiased and go with the evidence. Now I want to remind you of your promise and as people of integrity decide based on the evidence.

The second duty of the jury is to render a verdict. The implications of your verdict are staggering. Because if you decide that Christ rose from the dead, then He is alive today. Then the words that He spoke in the New Testament are true. Then you will one day meet Him. In rendering a verdict, in your own heart and mind today you are not simply rendering that verdict on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To a certain extent, you are rendering a verdict on yourself.

It is a funny thing. In a court of law, the one thing a judge doesn't do when he has a jury is to judge. It is the one thing that a judge doesn't do. A judge decides what evidence is admissible. A judge instructs the jury in the law that is applicable to the case at hand. But it is up to the jury to render the verdict. The judge, then, pronounces the sentence.

As you render the verdict on the resurrection of Jesus, you are rendering a verdict on your own life and your own truthfulness, and ultimately, on where you stand with God. You see, on the Day of Judgment, the Lord will simply read back to you, as a judge does, the verdict that you have already pronounced on yourself and on your own life. As judge, he will simply pronounce the sentence. But you render the verdict. If your verdict is: I choose to stand with the evidence of the truth, Christ was raised from the dead and I, therefore, want to commit myself to follow Him as Lord, then God will say: "Based on that, stand with Christ."

And if your verdict is in spite of the evidence, I choose to stand against Christ and against his resurrection from the dead, then God will say: "That is fine. Stand over there against Christ."

But it is your verdict. Did Christ rise from the dead or not? If He did, then become His follower.

This Easter, right this moment, I want to invite many of you to render a verdict on your own commitment to Jesus Christ. Some of you may have drifted away from Christ. Maybe when you were younger, you used to attend church and you used to believe. Over the years, as you have gotten older, you have drifted from church and drifted from Christ. Today is the time to restart your relationship with Christ.

Some of you have never heard an intelligent presentation of the evidence. You have heard the evidence. Today is an opportunity for you to begin a relationship with Christ.

There are people who have been attending the Vineyard that are not grounded in the evidence. You need to make a verdict with your mind, your will and your heart to commit yourself or to recommit yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ.

If it is your desire to begin a relationship with Christ or restart your relationship with Christ, then I would ask you to pray with me and at the end of the prayer, when your heads are bowed, I would like to ask you to raise your hand indicating, “Rich, I just rendered a verdict in favor of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and a verdict on my own life. I want to be a follower of Jesus Christ.”

Let’s pray.