

Sermon for Zion, September 23, 2018 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 373 - Jesus Loves Me; 375 – Fairest Lord Jesus; 252 – He Is Lord;
363 – All hail the power of Jesus’ name

Scripture: Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 3:20-22; Luke 7:31-35; John 10:31-33

Sermon Title: “Who Is Jesus?”

Matthew 13:53-58 (NIV)

When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.” And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Mark 3:20-22

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”

Luke 7:31-35

Jesus went on to say, “To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: “‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”

John 10:31-33

Again his opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”

“We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

Who is Jesus? Is he, as Reza Aslan proposed in his bestseller, “Zealot,” a failed political agitator, primarily focussed on getting the Romans out of Israel? “Zealot” was, shortly after publication a few years ago, the top selling book on Amazon. Lots of people bought the idea of Jesus as political rebel. Is that who Jesus is?

Who is Jesus? Is he, as Dan Brown pictured him in the preposterous global best-seller “The DaVinci Code,” not divine at all, but together with Mary Magdalene, the founder of a royal bloodline of French kings, and of a secret society with people like Leonardo Da Vinci, who were in on the secret? Dan brown sold over 100 million copies of his book, which he outrageously proclaimed to be based upon historical fact. Is that who Jesus is?

Or is he, as Bart Ehrman claims in “Misquoting Jesus,” badly misrepresented by the New Testament, not the Messiah, never thought of himself as such, and certainly never divine? Ehrman’s sold more than 2 million books saying so. Is that who Jesus is?

Or is Jesus, as Canadian columnist Tom Harper wrote in his book “The Pagan Christ,” an amalgamation of other religious figures, boiled down hundreds of years after the fact into a single invented character, a political religious device to unite a divided Roman empire? Harper was front page news when this book came out. Is that who Jesus is?

Or, as Richard Carrier proposed, is there only a 1/2000 chance that Jesus existed at all? He sold a lot of copies of his book “On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt,” saying that very thing. Is that who Jesus is, or, as Carrier proposes, never was? Who is Jesus?

It probably doesn’t surprise you that this question comes up quite a bit in today’s world, where Christianity, particularly traditional Christianity, is under intense and often hostile scrutiny and pressure, even in our own land. What might surprise you is how often the question “Who Is Jesus” comes up in the New Testament; here’s a small sample:

- Luke 5:21 - The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”
- Luke 8:25 - (Jesus, said, “Be Still!” and the wind and the waves grew calm.) In fear and amazement the disciples asked one another, “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.”

- John 5:12 - The religious officials asked the man who had been healed, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick up your mat and walk?”
- John 12:34 - The crowd spoke up... “Who is this ‘Son of Man’?”
- Matthew 21:10 - When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The New Testament not only asks questions, but produces some surprising answers. As we heard in our readings, the people of Nazareth reached their conclusion: “*Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?*” they asked. “*Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?*” He’s the carpenter’s son, and that’s all he is. Is that who Jesus is?

Or in our reading from Mark, when even his own family wondered if he was “*out of his mind?*” Or the Temple officials, who presumed he was an agent of “*Beelzebul, the prince of demons.*” Is that who Jesus is?

Or in Luke, where the people call Jesus “*a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.*” Is that Jesus?

Or in John, where people are prepared to stone Jesus for blasphemy, *but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” “We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”* Is that who Jesus is? A charlatan, a mere man claiming to be God?

I could go on. The New Testament isn’t afraid to. It even injects a bit of dark humour; Jesus has healed a man born blind, and as you can imagine, it has caused quite a stir, so much so that the man is brought before the religious authorities. Threatened by Jesus’ increasing popularity, the last thing they want is to credit Jesus with an apparently undeniable miracle. In an attempt to discredit him, they’re interrogating the “now seeing” man; John records the scene (John 9:24-25)

A second time the religious officials summoned the man who had been blind, but whom Jesus had healed. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.” He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

The crown laughs, and the officials pull their beards in anger. To them, Jesus is a danger, an agitator, a sinner, a blasphemer, a possible agent of the Devil, a fraud. Is that who Jesus is?

Finally succeeding in their plot to have Jesus removed from the scene in the most final of ways, the religious officials are still not content. With Jesus crucified, dead and buried, they hatch a further scheme; this time, Matthew fills us in (Matthew 27:62-66):

The next day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver (that’s who Jesus was to them) said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”

“Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

We know what happened next – the fears of the officials came to pass, but in a way much different than they could imagine. Rather than stolen away in the night, Jesus was, by the power of God, resurrected, defeating not only the efforts of the religious officials but defeating death itself. The guards who were assigned to the tomb return to the city and report a confused and muddled version of the event. Yet even faced with this, the authorities refuse to relent; Matthew again (28:11-15):

...some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jewish people to this very day.

Is that who Jesus is? Is Jesus a rumour, a false hope, concocted by overzealous disciples who can’t let their leader’s death destroy their movement, and so steal his body? Was it not he, but ultimately his disciples who are the deceivers? Are we the ones now deceived? Is that who Jesus is?

“And this story has been widely circulated among the Jewish people to this very day,” writes Matthew, some many years later, and so it has, and not only among the Jewish people, but among many, many others. The majority of our society will admit to the historical existence of Jesus, but only of Jesus the philosopher, Jesus the moral teacher, Jesus on a par with the Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Ghandi. Start talking “resurrection,” or “Son of God,” and people back away.

But the story doesn’t end with the death of Jesus. The story doesn’t end with some sort of body-snatching plot. The story of Jesus, the answer to Who Jesus Is, is just beginning. It is just warming up.

Because despite the suspicions of the religious officials, the disciples weren’t planning to steal the body after all. Why? They were hiding! The disciples were terrified that the same gang who made sure Jesus was dead and gone, were going to make sure that they were next. The disciples were pretty sure that the Temple Officials, in league with the famously brutal Romans, were going to tidy up the loose ends, and the loose ends had names, like Peter, like Matthew, like Mary, like John. And so, we read, they were laying low. Hiding. Behind closed windows. Behind locked doors.

And so it was a few days before a few of the women felt it was both religiously permissible and physically safe to venture out of hiding, to complete the burial rites for the one they loved, who had been so cruelly killed before their very eyes, hastily stuffed into a nearby borrowed tomb. There were things that needed to be done. The women, under cover of early dawn, intended to do them.

But of course, they discovered something quite different than what they expected. They discovered a burst and empty tomb. They discovered what seemed to be an angel, who wondered why on earth they were looking for the living among the dead. *“Trembling and bewildered,”* we read, *“the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (Mark 16:8).”*

And then the next thing they didn’t expect, couldn’t possibly expect. The next thing they ran into was Jesus. And he was alive. *“Greetings,”* he said. *They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me (Matthew 28:9-10).”* And soon enough he appeared to the disciples as well, locked room or not; and over the next forty days, we are told, he appeared to over 500 others, 500 eyewitnesses, and (writes Paul to the sceptics in Corinth), “If you don’t believe me, you can go ask them yourself.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, my paraphrase).

And all of this means more than simply “Jesus was dead and was now very much alive.” It means that what Jesus said about himself was true. For he said it would happen; he said he would be killed, and would rise again, and then people would know, once and for all, who he was. That he wasn’t a deceiver, wasn’t a blasphemer, wasn’t a sinner, wasn’t working for the devil. He was – he is – the Saviour, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Who is Jesus? That’s who Jesus is. That’s what the Resurrection means. That’s what the Resurrection proves.

The disciples saw him, and they believed. And his brothers saw him, and they believed. And his mother. And his friends. Even those, like Paul, whose job was to hunt down and stamp out these followers of the deceiver Jesus, even Paul saw him – risen, alive – and he too, believed. And told others how they could believe and know that Jesus is who Jesus said he was, and that because of it, they could join their life to the life of Jesus, could be adopted into the very family of God, could know forgiveness, could know new life, and life everlasting.

Were there doubters? Of course. Because some things are not very easy to believe. When you see a man killed as thoroughly as Jesus was killed, it is not easy to believe they live again. Initially, the disciples didn’t believe. When the women came bursting into the room with the news of the Risen Lord, the disciples, we read, “*did not believe them, for they thought it was an idle tale.*” Until they too met him. Alive. As did professional sceptic Thomas, a week later. And his reaction upon seeing Jesus? “*My Lord and my God,*” he said (John 20). Because he finally knew the answer. “My Lord and my God.” That’s who Jesus is.

Who is Jesus? Zealot? Misrepresentation? Myth? No. Not if you ask those who knew him. Not if you ask Peter, or Matthew, or Mary, or John, or Martha, or James, or Paul. Not if you ask those who knew him. And isn’t that the best way to really find out who someone is? To ask those who knew him best? The New Testament is nothing other than their answer to that very question – “Who is Jesus?” If we ask Jesus’ closest friend, John, well, he ends the discussion this way (John 20:30-31):

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

That is who Jesus is. The Saviour. The Messiah. The Son of God. Believe, and have life in His name. Amen.