

The New Temple

John 2: 12 - 22

Why should we take the resurrection of Jesus any more seriously than let's say we take the arrival of a UFO behind a comet that appears in our galaxy? Or another way to ask the question would be:

What's the basic difference between the Christian Church and a cult like Heaven's Gate in which a large number of people committed suicide together?

Remember that incident that happened 20 years ago in a wealthy San Diego neighborhood when a cult leader convinced 39 people to mix poison with applesauce and wash it down with vodka to get ready for the UFO that was coming to take them away before the destruction of the world? At least they got one thing right, they did leave before the world ended.

We believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, is alive today, and is coming again to save his people and to rule the world; and we build our lives around this reality.

The cult evidently believed that apocalyptic circumstances were developing around the Hale-Bopp comet and they built their lives - and their deaths - around that belief. What's the difference? Pick your myth, right? }

There are numerous differences between cults and historic Christianity. Let me mention a few before I try to answer the question, "Why should we take seriously the claim that Jesus rose from the dead."

1. Christianity is rooted in several thousand years of God's acts in history, not merely in the speculations of a charismatic leader.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob experience a covenant with God which leads to the establishment of the people of Israel. This people escaped from Egypt by God's mighty deeds, and received a law, a land and prophets.

Two thousand years of recorded history dealing with God's word and work leads to the fulfillment of prophecies in the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God, into a particular historical place at a particular time connected to secular, historical people like Herod and Pontius Pilate.

This fulfillment is not narrated in the New Testament by one leader in a trance, but by nine reluctant and, at first skeptical, men who were surrounded by people who were so close to the events recorded that they could have never falsified wild and crazy claims, because it was all so public. Christianity is rooted in real history.

2. Because of this connection with history, Christianity has produced 2,000 years of schools and scholarship that are accessible to secular scrutiny and debate.

Christianity is not private knowledge. It is public knowledge. Our documents are public and open to a natural reading for anyone. We do not claim to have a holy man somewhere who dispenses impossible meanings to certain texts. The book is rooted in real history, not mythology. And therefore it has unleashed real scholarship and has held its own for 2,000 years of public controversy in the marketplace of ideas.

3. The most historical of all religious movements - Christianity - has universal validity and relevance across all cultures. It is not attached to any place or people. It has found an indigenous home in every country of the world, and in thousands of ethnic groups.

4. Christianity has endured the test of time. Again and again people have predicted that Christianity will vanish with the vanishing of a particular era. But again and again it has shown that it is as relevant and powerful in each new time period as the ones before, even the radically modern ones that many thought would banish all religion.

5. At the center of historic Christianity is the absolutely unique Person Jesus Christ. There is no one comparable at the center of any other cult or religion. He is unique in his teaching about God and life. He is unique in his love and his mingling of mercy and justice. He is unique in his wisdom and his miracles and his death and resurrection and appearances to hundreds of people to show that he was alive. Jesus is simply in a class by himself among all movements.

6. Interestingly, among the thousands of cults in America, the cults that seem to last the longest (say, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons) do so by piggybacking on biblical Christianity and keeping their unbiblical views of Christ hidden at the beginning of their inroads.

So when I ask the question about the difference between believing in the resurrection of Jesus and in a UFO behind a particular comet, it's not as though a cult and historic Christianity stand on level ground when they lay claim to our belief.

There are good reasons for believing that historic Christianity should be given far more serious consideration. But the sad thing is, in many secular minds today, cults and Christianity are on level ground with one another.

In their view, Marshall Applewhite, the leader of Heaven's Gate, and Jesus Christ were both deluded apocalyptic fanatics who were out of touch with reality, because there simply is no God.

We have moved beyond that. The universe is the product of time, matter, and chance. So any claim to speak for God, or lead a people to God, much less to be God, is impossible. They are all in the same category. There is no God.

Take, for example, Norwood Russell Hanson, a philosopher of science at Yale until his premature death. He wrote a well-known essay entitled "What I do Not Believe," about why he was an atheist.

"Suppose . . . that on next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world are knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls; leaves drop from trees; the earth heaves and buckles; buildings topple and towers tumble; the sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light.

Just then, as all the people of the earth look up, the heavens open - the clouds pull apart - revealing an unbelievably immense and radiant Zeus-like figure, towering above us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lightening plays across the features of his Michelangeloid face.

He then points down - at me! - and exclaims for every man, woman, and child to hear, "I have had quite enough of your too-clever logic-chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured Norwood Russell Hanson, that I do most certainly exist!"

*Then he remarks, "The conceptual point is that if such a remarkable event were to transpire, I, for one, would certainly be convinced that God does exist."**

Now here's the connection with our text: Jesus says, as it were to all the Norwood Russell Hansons of the modern world, that this great sky-scraping demonstration of God's reality is in fact going to happen, much like you have described.

Look at the second half of verse 64: *"In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

This means that in the future the sky is going to split, as it were, and Jesus is going to appear, alive and real, at the right hand of God - above us like a hundred Everests."

But this indescribable revelation of Jesus and the reality of God that will persuade every person on this planet, is future and not present.

Which puts Norwood Hanson, and all of us, in a predicament doesn't it? If we wait to see it before we believe it, it will be too late (Matt 25: 11-13).

But what if we act now? What is the basis of our belief?

Well, let's stay right here in our text and ask, Why did Jesus say what he said about this great future appearance of the Son of Man?

He said it because in verse 63 the High Priest, at Jesus' trial, said, *"I charge you under oath by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."* To which Jesus responded, *"Yes, it is as you say, but I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

In other words, Jesus says, Yes, you put it that way; I put it this way:

In other words, I am not only the Messiah, the Son of God as you understand him to be, but I am more: I am going to die and then afterwards there will come a time when the whole universe will see me sitting at the right hand of God in glory.

But what prompted the High Priest to ask this man Jesus such an outrageous question:

Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?

We must move back another step in the text. In this midnight sham-trial, false witnesses were brought in and said, (in verse 61), "This fellow said, *'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'*"

This is what triggered the High Priest's question. He said (in verse 62), *"Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"*

What is this? Do you intend to destroy the temple of God? And do you think you can build it in three days? What kind of talk is this? What kind of person are you? Are you crazy?" But verse 63 says, *"But Jesus remained silent."*

What were these false witnesses referring to?

The rumor was out that Jesus aimed to destroy the temple of the Jews and rebuild it in three days. At the cross, for example, Mark tells us that as he hung there, *"Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!'" (Mk 15: 29-30).*

It was ludicrous. What did it mean? Where did this idea come from?

Does it tell us anything about why we should believe in this man Jesus and his resurrection **before he comes in glory at the right hand of God?**

The answer is found in :

Jesus comes to Jerusalem and finds the temple filled with money changers and merchants turning the house of God into a market. He weaves a whip and drives them out, saying, *"How dare you turn my father's house into a market!"*

The people demand of him (in verse 18), *"What miraculous sign can you show to us, to prove your authority to do all this?"*

In other words, they want some evidence that he has authority to act like this, calling God his Father in some special sense and taking charge of the temple which is the place where God's people meet.

What's your authority?

What's your evidence that we should yield to you and not kill you?

Then comes the answer in verse 19: *"Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.'"*

The people are flabbergasted by such an outrageous response. Verse 20: *"The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it again in three days?'"* Then the writer, John, comments in verse 21, *"But the temple he had spoken of was his body."*

Please don't miss the point of shifting from the temple in Jerusalem to the temple of his body.

He had just purged the temple in Jerusalem with a whip. He had called it his Father's house. The disciples recalled *Psalms 69: 9*, *"Zeal for your house will consume me."*

They want a sign for this behavior.

Jesus does not say, "I have nothing to say about your temple. I have only a word about my body. No. He does have something to say about their temple. He says, Destroy this temple – the temple I just purged, the one you have turned into a market place. The one for which I am consumed with zeal.

But how? How will *they* destroy it?

How will they bring the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament, centered in the temple, to an end?

How will they bring the entire Old Testament priesthood ministering in the temple to an end?

How will they destroy the meeting place with their God?

The answer is clear: **by rejecting Jesus, the Messiah, and putting him to death.**

When Christ died, Judaism - as it was enshrined in the Temple - died.

The final sacrifice was made.

The sacrifice of Jesus ended all sacrifices.

The final High Priest offered himself for the sin of his people.

The Jewish priesthood came to an end.

Forty years after Jesus said those famous words, the Romans did destroy the Temple in Jerusalem, but the decisive end came at Calvary when Jesus was put to death.

Then, and only then - when that point has been made - does Jesus say in verse 19, *"In three days I will raise it again."*

Now he himself speaks only of his body:

From that day on – from the day of that destruction - my death - Jesus says, **I will be the temple.**

No building and no place will ever be the focus again of where and how to meet God.

I will be the place and the way to meet God.

I am the Sacrifice needed to cover sin.

I am the Priest, the only Mediator between God and man.

I am the dwelling place of God.

From now on, whenever and wherever men and women and little children want to meet God they may come to me - anywhere, anytime.

The forgiveness they need, they find in me.

The intercession they need, they find in me.

The God they need, they find in me.

I am the new Temple, and there will be no other.

So, to all atheists and agnostics and skeptics we offer this sign, this evidence. It has three parts:

First, the temple was destroyed. Jesus was killed, just like he said.

Second, Jesus did build the temple again in three days. He rose from the dead, and for forty days appeared to many varied witnesses, even five hundred at one time, many of whom were still living, according to the apostle Paul (/ Cor. 15:6) - a claim that could have been easily falsified in those days so soon after the event. But it was not, nor could the adversaries ever produce the dead body of Jesus. He had raised up the new temple.

Third, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed (in A.D. 70), the sacrificial system of the Old Testament did come to an end. The Old Testament priesthood did pass away.

These things happened. They happened in history. They are not the delusions of a cultic leader. They took place over 2,000 years of history, both Christian and Jewish.

So, I say to every Norwood Russell Hanson on the one side, and every cultic dreamer on the other:

Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God. He is alive and reigning at God's right hand in heaven. He will come one day in power and great glory and everyone will bow and admit that he is God.

But, in mercy, Jesus has given us a sign before that day, that we may get ready, by believing in him:

He has died, He was raised from the dead, and He has replaced the Old Testament system of meeting God in the temple.

He is the temple. And he is the place - the only place - where human beings can meet God.

He is the sacrifice we need.

He is the priest we need.

He is the God we long for.

Now you might ask, why would I preach a sermon like this when we're in the midst of going to graduation parties and celebrating the accomplishments of recent graduates either from high school or from university?

Why couldn't I preach on something that would encourage the graduates, and challenge them to do their best in the next stage of their life?

Well, for one reason: In very real sense, the university where many of our new high school graduates will be enrolling, is the new modern - day temple!

Sure, the university certainly isn't trying to appease God with its sacrifices, but academia is in many ways the supposed center of modern thinking and culture, just as the temple was in Jesus' time.

And for the most part, the high priests of academia (aka professors) are out to establish their own faith, which nine times out of ten, has nothing to do with a biblical God and everything to do with secular humanism – a worldview that unapologetically flies in the face of the God of the Bible.

And Jesus says to this new temple what he says to the old one: It will be destroyed.

In other words, enjoy it while you have it.

Go to your temple, enroll in their classes, learn lots - there are Jewish temples and synagogues still operating in many places in the world today, and there are certainly no shortages of secular universities and colleges all over the world.

Go to them, learn from them, get a degree from one or more of their departments, - be proud of your accomplishments, as you learn from the many experts in the field - but remember this:

They will not last because ultimately their systems are broken and far from perfect, because like the Jewish temple they've made a conscious choice to forsake the Lord!

Do they still offer some good to society? Of course!

We get new doctors and nurses and teachers and engineers and all sorts of other professions that do wonderful things for society, but as the scriptures say the rain falls on the just and the unjust. It is only by God's mercy and patience that Jewish temples, synagogues, and secular universities continue operations.

The world still benefits from public university education because the echoes of a Christian foundation still reverberate if only ever so faintly, and when these echoes finally become silenced, universities as we know them will also breathe their last.

So, here's my challenge to all of us, and especially to new high school graduates: Go to the university and learn lots, but never ever let them convince you that Jesus isn't real and that he's not coming back to set up his kingdom, because Christianity ...

is Rooted in history.

Survived centuries of scrutiny and debate.

is valid and relevant in all cultures.

Has Endured the test of time.

Has an absolutely unique person in Jesus Christ who has no beginning nor end, is the image of the invisible God, and became a man to be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

"The grass withers and the flowers fail, but the word of God stands forever." Is. 40:8

Amen.