

Today we are continuing our sermon series based on this question: What makes Christianity unique? What makes it different from other religions? What makes it more worthy of your time than other religions? Last week, we talked about how the book we believe, the Bible, makes Christianity unique. This week, our focus is on history. The history we believe makes Christianity unique.

So, as Christians, what history do we believe? Well, there's a whole book of it. We believe very specific things about the history of the creation of the world and where mankind came from. We believe very specific things about the history of the Israelites and how they became a nation. But, if we had to point to only one thing as our history, as the piece of history that defines Christianity, what would you pick? I think it would have to be this: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the history that defines us. Without it, our faith is nothing.

So, because our goal is to talk about what makes Christianity unique, what I'm going to do next is compare our foundational piece of history with the foundational pieces of history that define two other religions, and we'll see how they stack up.

The first religion we'll look at is popular in many areas of the world, and is even gaining popularity in the United States: Islam. The holy book of Islam is called the Quran. Do you know how the Quran came to be? The story goes that it all came from one man named Muhammed. An angel appeared to him in the form of a man and gave him messages from God. Sometimes divine revelation even struck him "like the ringing of a bell," as he put it. Muhammed then spoke what he had received to his friends, and eventually it all got written down and compiled into what we now call the Quran.

Now, many Muslims believe that something else amazing happened to Muhammed. They believe that, one night, an angel appeared to him, transferred him from Mecca in Saudi Arabia to Jerusalem in Israel, almost 1000 miles, and, when he was in Jerusalem, he ascended into heaven and met God. There's even a special building in modern-day Jerusalem commemorating this event called the Dome of the Rock. It's built over the rock where Muhammed supposedly started his ascent into heaven.

Okay, put a pin in those two important events for the Muslim faith, and let's talk about a different religion, one that is very widespread in the state of Utah. Let's talk about Mormonism. Do you know how Mormonism started? To put it briefly, the story goes that an angel named Moroni appeared to a man named Joseph Smith and showed him where some golden plates were buried on a hillside. Joseph Smith then translated the writing on the golden plates and, *voilà*, you have the Book of Mormon and the start of a new religion.

Now, all these important events of these other religions that I've mentioned, did they happen? Did God speak to Muhammed through an angel? Did Muhammed get transported from Mecca to Jerusalem and ascend into heaven? Did Joseph Smith receive golden plates from an angel named Moroni? I don't know, because I wasn't there to see it. And that's just the thing; nobody else was there to see it, either. These important religious revelations also happened to be very private religious revelations. No one saw the angel who supposedly spoke to Muhammed; no one could confirm that he was receiving private revelation from God. No one was with Joseph Smith when the angel showed him where to dig.

How different is that, brothers and sisters, to the historical foundation of Christianity? How different is that to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Let me show you how different it is.

First of all, let's talk witnesses. The resurrection of Jesus wasn't something that only one or two or three people were privileged to see. Hundreds, literally hundreds of people saw it. Do you remember what we heard in today's Second Reading from 1 Corinthians? The Apostle Paul wrote about how Jesus rose from death and appeared to Peter, and then to all of the disciples, and then to more than five-hundred people at once, and then to James, and then to all of the apostles, and then to Paul himself. How different is that to the other religions we just looked at? We don't have just one man saying, "God spoke to me." We don't have just one man saying, "An angel appeared to me." We don't have just one

man saying, "Jesus is risen from death." We have many witnesses saying, "Jesus was dead, but now he's alive!" History relies on testimony, and that's powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And there's even more testimony to hear. Consider the Apostle Paul. What do you know about him? He was a lifelong Christian, right? He was baptized as an infant and he sang in the children's choir and he became a pastor as soon as he could, right? Wrong. Paul hated Christianity. He was a Pharisee who felt it was his personal mission to root out and destroy Christianity. Listen to what Paul said in Acts 26. This is what Paul said to a king named Agrippa and Roman governor named Festus:

"The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee...I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them." (Acts 26:4,5,9-11)

So, Paul himself says that he was a man obsessed with destroying Christianity. So, what changed? What changed him into the man who would write thirteen books of the Christian Bible? Paul explains that in the next verses:

"On one of these journeys [to persecute Christians] I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon...as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" (Acts 26:12-15)

So, what caused Paul to give up being a Pharisee, to give up his obsessive hatred of Christianity? What caused Paul to take on instead the hardship of imprisonment and trials and beatings and hatred? One thing and one thing only: He saw a dead man living. He met the risen and alive Jesus Christ. History relies on testimony, and the change from Pharisee Paul to Pastor Paul is powerful testimony for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There's just one more bit of testimony I'd like to share with you, and this has to do with something else that happened while Paul was standing before King Agrippa and Governor Festus. Paul spoke about how Jesus rose from the dead, and Festus interrupted him:

"'You are out of your mind, Paul!' he shouted. 'Your great learning is driving you insane.'

'I am not insane, most excellent Festus,' Paul replied. 'What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things...I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.'" (Acts 26:24-26)

I love two lines from Paul's response: "What I am saying is true and reasonable" and, "It was not done in a corner." Paul is saying that the death and resurrection of Jesus wasn't some hidden thing. His death was a pretty public affair, and the fact that his tomb was empty three days later was available for anyone to see. And many people in the ancient world did hear of this. A Roman historian named Tacitus wrote about a "mischievous superstition" spreading from Israel to Rome. A Jewish historian named Josephus wrote about how there were reports of a man named Jesus being crucified and then coming back to life; Josephus even pondered whether this Jesus could be the Messiah. So, you can see that even sources outside the Bible testify to something incredible happening in Jerusalem.

Brothers, sisters, the goal today is not to tear down other religions. The goal is to see that the historical foundation of Christianity, the resurrection of a dead man to life, is supported by compelling testimony. There were hundreds of eyewitnesses to it. It changed the lives of its most passionate

enemies. Even non-Christians were speaking of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Thus, when compared with other religions, the history we believe makes Christianity truly unique.

So, it's time to ask a question that I asked last week: What should we do with this information? Should we use it to bludgeon people into believing what we do? No. I think you'll agree that arguing with someone won't make them a believer.

Instead, perhaps the best way to use this information is to offer real hope in real life. And what comes to mind immediately for me is what happened recently in Pearl City. If you haven't heard, a man named Ed was out walking along the road with his daughter this past Monday morning, and he was struck and killed by a car. Ed was a teacher at River Ridge High School, beloved by many, many students, and he was going to become a grandfather soon. A very tragic story.

"Tell me something good." That's what someone said to me about this situation. "Tell me something good." And it doesn't seem like there's much good to say. It seems like there's only death and pain and a piece of this world lost that can't be replaced.

But the history we believe says otherwise. The historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ says, "No, there is something good here. Death doesn't win today. Pain and loss aren't forever. There is hope."

See, I'm told that Ed was a Christian. This means that he believed in the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This means that Ed isn't gone. This means that he's just waiting for his makeover. Yeah, you heard that right. He's waiting for his makeover. Here's what I mean:

God says that, when Jesus returns, Ed will receive a new, better body. He will be raised in glory and power (1 Corinthians 15:35-44). He will have a body like Christ's glorious body (Philippians 3:21). What exactly that means, I don't know, but I know it's good.

God also says that, when Jesus returns, Ed will get new clothes to wear. He'll get a crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8) and a white robe of salvation (Revelation 6:11). These clothes will show that Ed isn't like he used to be, he isn't stained by sin anymore. No more will Satan and sinful nature torment him. He will be dressed as God's child for eternity.

New body. New clothes. Ed's not gone; he's just waiting for his makeover. And that's what we, who also believe in the historical fact of the resurrection have to look forward to, as well. We're all waiting for makeovers, new bodies and pure souls.

Brothers, sisters, this means that the resurrection isn't just history. It's hope, a hope that overpowers death, a hope that is stronger than anything this life can throw at you, a hope founded in history that guarantees our future. That's what we believe, and that makes Christianity truly unique. Amen.