

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 16, 2017  
Easter Sunday**

**IS EASTER FAKE NEWS?**

**Matthew 28:1-15**

As most of you know, our 23-member Haiti Mission Team has just returned from Haiti. We arrived at Reagan National Airport shortly before midnight Friday night. If you had had the opportunity to see this team in action in Haiti as I did, I have no doubt that you would be proud of them.

From music ministry and worship leadership to children's ministry, from our day of service to the ex-pat missionary community in the Gressier area, which included not only a worship service and children's church program, but preparing and serving an American-style Easter dinner complete with honey-baked hams for the missionary families, to the construction and renovation projects at the mission house known as the Haitian Queen, it was a week (or for some of us, nine days) of coming together to serve the Lord and to serve others in Jesus' name.

God graciously provided us with opportunities to build relationships with the ReachGlobal ministry team (of which our own Stephanie Fry is an integral and valued member), with other missionaries in the area, with Haitians, and with one another on our team. Relationships can be messy. They can be frustrating. They can be challenging. But they can also be a thing of beauty, especially when they are the vehicles through which God-like qualities such as compassion, kindness, grace, and love are given expression.

I had the great privilege of preaching to the ex-pat missionary community last Sunday, as well as leading our team devotional time most evenings. When I look at what other members of our team accomplished, I honestly feel like my contribution was pretty small in comparison. I couldn't do what many of them did. But I know what the Bible says about every member having a role to play in the healthy, effective functioning of the body (or, in this case, the team), and I am grateful I could have a role on this remarkable team of Christian servants.

One of the most meaningful experiences in Haiti for me was our Community Prayer Walk on Thursday afternoon. We divided the team into five groups, each with a Haitian guide, and each group walked around a prescribed area, stopping to pray at designated locations for specific ministries and their needs. We were given a prayer guide with prayer requests from each of the ministries, so we could pray specifically for their needs and requests. We prayed at Haiti Health Ministries (HHM) with its medical clinic only about 200 yards from the Haitian Queen mission house. We walked in the neighborhood where some of Reach Global's Haitian employees and their families live, and we stopped to pray for all of them. We prayed for the ReachGlobal team, for their vision, their partnerships with Haitians and other ministries, and the effectiveness of their ministry. We stopped to pray in front of the church in an area called Christianville, about a 10-minute walk from the Haitian Queen. I was struck by the particular requests for which they asked us to pray and how applicable they are

to our ministry context and life together as followers of the Lord Jesus right here in northern Virginia. Here are some of their prayer requests:

- That we would have unity amid diversity, loving those with whom we have nothing in common but the gospel. Amen.
- That we would develop a culture of discipling in which making disciples is viewed as an ordinary part of the Christian life. Amen.
- That transparent, meaningful relationships would become normal and remaining anonymous, strange. Amen.
- That the preaching of God's Word would be biblically careful and Holy Spirit inspired. Amen.
- That the church's prayers would be infused with biblical ambitions, honesty, and humility. Amen.
- That the church's teachers and leaders would grow in dedication to God's Word, even when no one's watching. Amen.
- That the church would grow in being distinct from the world in love and holiness, even as we engage outsiders who have not yet embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord. Amen and amen

Haiti is a very different world, and yet we have pretty much the same needs as our Haitian brothers and sisters in Christ.

You will hear more about the trip from the Haiti Team at some point in the future. But I encourage you to talk with team members about their experiences, to find out what they learned, how they served, and how they saw the Lord at work during our time in Haiti.

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Now, this Easter Sunday morning, I invite you to open your Bible to the account of the first Easter in the Gospel of Matthew as we look together at Matthew 28:1-15. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

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Fake news is all the rage these days. A fake news story is one that purports to tell the truth but knowingly distorts the truth with the intent to mislead people for the purpose of some personal, financial, or political gain. "Alternative facts" is another way of describing fake news. The problem, of course, is that facts are facts. As any philosopher grounded in reality can tell you, a thing cannot *be* and *not be* at the same time and in the same relationship. There is no such thing as a "false fact." To say that a fact is false is just nonsense. It is a contradiction in terms. Which, unfortunately, does not seem to matter to a lot of people today, including some in high-profile positions of power and influence in government, politics, and the news media.

Fake news stories may have elements of truth in them. You'd think they would have to, in order to have some degree of believability, right? But they either intentionally leave out related facts that would give the story a proper context, or they twist facts out of context and intentionally add in a dose of misinformation (aka falsehoods or lies) in order to benefit a particular cause, or to damage an opponent or competitor.

Accusations of fake news were prominent throughout the 2016 presidential election and continue to dominate the news cycle. At least it seems that way. Depending on one's political views, it is easy to point fingers at this or that news outlet or some other. As a Christian, as a pastor, and as an American, it distresses me that so many Americans, and so many American Christians are so quick to believe news stories that simply reinforce our own views without seriously examining the truth claims of those stories.

One place where you are sure to find fake news is in the supermarket tabloids you encounter in the checkout line every time you do your grocery shopping. At least the stories you find there are so bizarre that few people take them seriously.

There is a difference, though, between "fake news" sources or outlets that want you to believe they are actually reporting the news, and other sources, like *The Onion* and, for Christians, *The Babylon Bee*, that offer a satirical look at the world and are simply in the business of entertaining people with their creative spin on the craziness of our world. If you're not familiar with *The Onion*, be warned that the stories are not always in good taste. And you may find yourself feeling tweaked by *The Babylon Bee* at times.

I don't know how long fake news has been around, but it has been around at least since the time of Jesus. We see a deliberate attempt to plant a fake news story by the religious leaders of Jerusalem in the aftermath of the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus on Good Friday. It is recorded for us in the Gospel of Matthew. Following the death of Jesus on the cross, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, gave permission to a man named Joseph (who was actually a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of religious leaders in Jerusalem, but also a secret disciple of Jesus) to take the body of Jesus and give it a proper burial. Joseph placed the body in a new, unused tomb, and covered the entrance with a huge stone (Matthew 27:57-61).

Not satisfied with the situation, the religious leaders went to Pilate and made an unusual request. Ironically, they took the words of Jesus about His rising again from the dead more seriously than the disciples of Jesus. So they asked Pilate to post a guard of soldiers at the tomb in order to prevent any nefarious attempt by the followers of Jesus to come and steal His body, and then claim that He had risen from the dead. Pilate gave his assent, telling them to "take a guard" and to "make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they posted the guard, and, for good measure, they put an official Roman seal on the tomb that would have to be broken if anyone were to try to either enter or exit the tomb. They were determined to take every precaution, to do everything in their power to make sure a) that Jesus stayed dead; and b) that His body remained in the tomb (27:62-66).

When Easter morning came, there was no doubt that Jesus had really died on the cross and that His body had been placed in Joseph's tomb. But then Easter happened. Matthew says there was a violent earthquake at the tomb. An angel sent by God rolled back the stone at the entrance to the tomb, and then sat down on it. The soldiers on duty were so frightened, they froze right where they were (28:2-4).

The soldiers didn't see Jesus come back to life and come out of the tomb. Nor did the women who had come to the tomb early that morning. The angel didn't roll the stone away to let Jesus out. No! Jesus was already up and out. The angel rolled the stone away so that the women who came to the tomb, the dispirited disciples of Jesus, and the soldiers could look and see for themselves that the tomb was empty. Well, almost empty. The strips of linen in which Joseph wrapped the body of Jesus were still there. And the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head was by itself, neatly folded up (John 20:6-7).

The angel proceeded to tell the women that Jesus had risen from the dead, that He had been dead and buried, but now He was alive again (28:5-7). As the women hurried off to tell the disciples, they were suddenly met by Jesus Himself. "They fell to their knees, embraced His feet, and worshiped Him" (28:8-9, *MSG*). And Jesus told them to tell the disciples to meet Him in Galilee (28:10).

But now the guards and the opponents of Jesus, who had a vested interest in keeping Him dead, had a problem. The tomb was empty. The body of Jesus was gone. Some of the guards went to the temple leaders and told them what had happened. And, rather than accept the testimony of the guards, the religious leaders came up with the story that the guards had fallen asleep on duty – which could get them in heap big trouble with Pilate, if he found out about it – and that the disciples of Jesus had come in the night and taken the body of Jesus. The temple leaders bribed the guards – we don't know how much money they got, only that it was a large payoff – to stick to this story, and assured them that they (the temple leaders) would make things OK with Pilate. And so, says Matthew, "this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day" (28:15) – meaning, of course, up to the time in which Matthew wrote his Gospel, some 30 or 40 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here we have the genesis of a fake news story. As Deep Throat, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's mysterious source during the Watergate conspiracy, said: "Follow the money." The million-dollar question, of course, is: Is this fake news? Is Easter itself fake news? Is the church's proclamation that Christ is risen fake news?

Given that the resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of the Christian faith (Lee Strobel, *The Case for Easter*, 8), it is not an insignificant or irrelevant question. Though different theories have been advanced down through the centuries, no reputable scholar seriously believes that Jesus could have faked His own death. He really did die on that Roman cross. He really was dead when they took Him down from the cross, when Joseph of Arimathea laid His body in the tomb. And the tomb really was empty on Easter morning. If the body of Jesus had still been there, or if anyone who wanted people to be convinced that Jesus was still dead as a door nail had been able to produce the body of Jesus, it would have put to rest all the talk about Jesus' resurrection and true identity as the Son of God.

It is true that the empty tomb by itself does not prove that Jesus rose from the dead. There could be other reasons why the tomb was empty. Someone *could have* moved the body of Jesus. The earliest Jewish argument against the resurrection presupposes that the tomb was empty. Nobody was claiming that the tomb still contained the body of Jesus. Even the opponents of Jesus started with the assumption that the tomb was empty. Why? Because they know it was (William Lane Craig, in Strobel, *The Case for Easter*, 54).

It is also true that no one actually saw the resurrection of Jesus. There was no one sitting inside the tomb when the body of Jesus returned to life with resurrection power, laid aside the burial cloths, and left the tomb in what Hebrews 7:16 calls “the power of an indestructible life.”

But when you couple the fact of the empty tomb with the record of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, first to the women who came to the tomb, then to Peter and the other disciples (both without and later with Thomas the Doubter), to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, and, on one occasion, to more than 500 followers at one time, the weight of the evidence becomes overwhelming. When the Gospels were written and when Paul wrote of the resurrection appearances of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, there were still people around who had seen Jesus after His resurrection, people who could say: “We have seen the Lord with our own eyes.” In other words, there were still living witnesses who could corroborate the truth of the resurrection.

There was – and is – no way the fake news story of the stolen body could ever stand up against the evidence supporting the historic claim of the Christian faith that Jesus rose from the dead with a real physical body, giving proof of His identity as the true Son of God and Savior of sinners, and of His victory over sin and death. His resurrection is the foreshadowing and assurance of the resurrection of all who believe in Him. It is, as Lee Strobel says, “the miracle of all miracles” (Strobel, 32).

Let me share with you the conclusion of a philosopher named J. P. Moreland about the resurrection of Jesus and its impact on the followers of Jesus: “When Jesus was crucified, His followers were discouraged and depressed. So they dispersed. The Jesus movement was all but stopped in its tracks. Then after a short time, we see them abandoning their occupations, regathering, and committing themselves to spreading a very specific message – that Jesus Christ was the Messiah of God who died on a cross, returned to life, and was seen alive by them.

And they were willing to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming this, without any payoff from a human point of view. They faced a life of hardship. They often went without food, slept exposed to the elements, were ridiculed, beaten, imprisoned” (as some of Jesus’ followers are to this day). “And finally, most of them were executed in torturous ways. For what? For good intentions? No, because they were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had seen Jesus Christ alive from the dead” (Quoted in Strobel, 87).

As Lee Strobel points out, it is true that people will die for their religious convictions if they sincerely believe they are true. But, in the case of other religions, they don’t know for a fact

whether what they believe is the truth. They simply cannot know for sure. They can only believe.

The disciples of Jesus, in stark contrast, were in a unique position to know for a fact whether Jesus had returned from the dead. They saw Him. They touched Him. They ate with Him. They knew He was not a hallucination or a myth. And knowing the truth, they were willing to die for Him.

Think about it: The followers of Jesus did not merely *believe* in the resurrection. They *knew* whether it was fact or fiction. If they had known it was a lie, none of them in their right mind would ever have been willing to sacrifice their lives for it. Nobody willingly dies for something they know is false. They proclaimed the resurrection to their deaths for one reason alone: they *knew* it was true (Strobel, 87-88).

If the resurrection is not fake news (it is not); if the resurrection of Jesus is a true, historical fact (it is); then the implications for your life and mine are enormous. If Jesus overcame the power of death, then He is alive today. He is able, more than able, to save you and me from the power of sin and death. He desires to have a personal relationship with you and me. He is able to change your life and mine. If He conquered death (He did), then He can open the door of eternal life for you and me, too. If He is truly God in the flesh (He is), then He has the supernatural power to guide us and transform us as we follow Him, so that His character is increasingly formed in us.

But, you know what? As true as it is, simply believing in your head that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead on Easter isn't enough. John, one of the original disciples of Jesus, understood this. He wrote in his Gospel: "To all who received Him (that is, Jesus), to those who believed in His name, He (Jesus) gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

So the formula for becoming a follower of Jesus and a member of God's family is this:

*Believe + Receive = Become*

*Believe* that Jesus is who He says He is, the true Son of God and Savior of sinners. *Believe* that you are a sinner who needs a Savior, because you are helpless to do what is necessary to save yourself. *Believe* that Jesus is the Savior you need, and is the only One who can save you from the penalty and power of your sin. *Believe* that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again on Easter.

*Receive* the free gift of forgiveness, the free gift of salvation, the free gift of eternal life in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. *Receive* this gift of grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like me. And you. *Receive* Jesus as the Savior and Lord of your life and let His life – *resurrection life* – flow through you.

*Believe and receive*, and you will *become* a follower of Jesus. A child of God. A forgiven sinner. A new creature through the power of the Son of God who died for you but now lives forever.

Have you taken this step? Are you ready to take it today? Understand, this is not a matter to trifle with. If Jesus really is the Son of God who rose from the dead, then your eternity hinges on how you respond to Him. As Jesus said in John 8:24: “If you do not believe that I am the One I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.” But you don’t have to die in your sins. The door is open to anyone who will believe in Him and receive Him (Strobel, 88-90).

There is one more implication of Jesus’ resurrection that I have to mention very briefly. The resurrection means that death is not the end for us. Death is not the final chapter in your story or mine. It does not have the last word. This gives us the assurance that we will see God on the other side of death, in the land of the living, and we will be with Him forever. There we will be reunited with all of God’s people who have gone before us and with those who come after us, including those we have loved who died trusting in the Lord Jesus for salvation and eternal life.

The separation from loved ones that death brings is painful for all of us who are left behind. It is a pain that will never go away in this life. But, if our hope and our hearts are set on Jesus, we have the assurance of God that we will be together again in the presence of our Savior. As hard as it is to let go of a loved one at death’s door, do not ever believe that death has the last word. It does not. Jesus does. Because He lives, we too shall live (John 14:19).

The resurrection of Jesus. Fake news? No way. May the truth of it transform our lives. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.