

Every so often you can find an explosive editorial in the newspaper or in a blog online. Christians, pastors, secular theological experts, and skeptics alike are debating what Easter is all about. Quickly the flood of questions and comments pour in. Are there many meanings of Easter? Did pious, but mistaken believers later make up the resurrection? What does Jesus' resurrection signify if science has flatly disproven it? Even many Christians and pastors wonder if Easter is really a myth or a true historical event. One adult Bible study published for a large Christian church explained Easter this way: "The Gospels include only a small portion of what we know was a large collection of Easter *stories*." It continued by saying we don't have to feel bad about that however, or try to cover up the discrepancies. "The problems need not pose a threat to faith, however." Most everyone in our culture has an opinion about Jesus, and is willing to share if asked. The opinions of Jesus are almost as many as the people you ask. Why can't we get by with a Jesus who was a nice teacher? One who is compatible with science? One who will provide us with an easy life or let us fit seamlessly into society? Most have given up on any certain confidence of what actually happened to Jesus on Easter. Today the question requires an answer from us, **"What kind of Jesus are you hoping for?"**

This question is not new to our time. The Emmaus disciples had to answer it on the road home on that first Easter afternoon. Thirty years later, Paul had to answer it when he was on trial. After many missionary trips, Paul was finally arrested for causing a supposed uprising at the Temple in Jerusalem. Some had seen Paul with a Gentile in the city streets. They assumed Paul brought him into the inner courts of the Temple reserved only for Jews. Anyone who broke this could face the death penalty at that time. The Romans in charge of crowd control looked very suspiciously on anyone who started to stir up a crowd. After his quick arrest in Jerusalem, Paul met with the Sanhedrin, the powerful group of Jewish leaders. Some believed in the resurrection and some not. Paul started a dispute among them when he asserted his hope in the resurrection of the dead. In order to protect Paul, the Roman commander sent him to Caesarea to meet with the governor. Here at his first hearing, Paul is now defending himself a few days later. The governor needs to determine if Christianity is a sect, as the Jewish leaders claim it is.

At the crux of the matter is the question, "What kind of Jesus are you hoping for?" Paul gives his testimony to that question, ***"I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."*** This resurrection of Jesus is not some recent divergence from the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, it's the heart and core. In fact, this question is the very reason Paul is on trial. The Jewish leaders give their testimony: you must hope for a Jesus who can be explained by modern realities. People just don't rise from the dead. Just like them, the Emmaus disciples were hoping for a Jesus who could conform to the culture of that day: a prophet, but nothing more, who could redeem Israel. Were they looking for a dead Jesus, or a resurrected one? One that fits their cultural expectations about Jesus? One that the whole Bible proclaims, or one that a pick-and-choose type of Bible proclaims?

What kind of Jesus are you hoping for? I'm reminded of an experiment eight years ago conducted near Boston. With \$2.4 million in funding, the question was asked, "Does praying for sick people improve their health?" Prayers were given by three congregations across the country for specific patients in hospitals. Believers prayed for a successful surgery, a quick recovery,

and no complications. The results were clear: there was no difference between those who got prayers and those who didn't. The implications were obvious. What kind of a Jesus are you hoping for? Certainly you can throw out that part about his supernatural intervention in your life, especially his power over death. Certainly you can throw out that part about him caring for your struggles and needs. Certainly you can throw out that part about him actually delivering on his promises. The only hope you can have is shaky at best.

Before you want to protest against such thinking, are you really sure that you're not influenced by our society more than you maybe want to admit? If you only had Moses and the Prophets like Paul did – no New Testament, no Gospels about Jesus, could you still show that Jesus had to rise from the dead? Could you refer to any passages from the Old Testament which show we have to hope for a risen Jesus? Could you stand all alone with confidence?

The question comes to us, "What kind of Jesus are you hoping for?" Intelligent people can't possibly believe a Jesus that actually, bodily rose. Sure, we can take spiritual meaning from it. But an actual risen Jesus is a sectarian view. Crazy, fringe view. Only for fundamentalists. What harm does it do to simply emphasize other parts of the Bible? Jesus, you don't understand that if I openly profess to a dead man actually, bodily rising from the dead on the clock I might be in danger of losing my job! I'd be in danger of getting the distain of my co-workers or getting passed over for a promotion! No one can believe this anymore. Suddenly I'm looking for a Jesus that fits our society and culture. A Jesus who fulfills the parts of the Bible I like. A Jesus who makes my life easy but never corrects my slowness to believe. We let our subtle distrust of all the Scriptures discredit our certain hope. We let Satan convince us that the Bible no longer applies to our wants and expectations today. We convince ourselves we can write a better Bible than God can.

The Lord does not just sit idly by when the hope of Jesus is doubted and lost. He refuses to let the sure foundation of hope get slowly eroded away. From the very first promise of a Savior to crush Satan's head, the Lord gave the sure and certain confidence of what kind of a Jesus we can hope for. Even though we leave behind the Lord's promises, he never did. For every time we don't want to hold ourselves to all the Scriptures, he did. Jesus never picked and chose which parts of God's plan of salvation would work for him. He never left the assignment to conquer death on a cross behind because it required too much effort or wasn't culturally acceptable. He never left behind his Father's will simply because it wouldn't benefit him. Jesus forgives you for all those times you struggle to find a Bible passage which shows that Jesus had to rise from the dead. He forgives you for all those times where you wanted to emphasize more culturally acceptable things on the job, instead of making the bodily resurrection the most important part of the Jesus you're hoping for. He forgives you for all your impatience and doubt with God's Word and comes back to you to restore your certain hope. When Jesus sees you, he only sees forgiven, forgiven, forgiven.

Is hope in the resurrection like hoping for good weather? "I hope the Brewers keep their winning streak going. I hope my kids will make me proud someday. I hope I'll finally get some personal time this week." But we don't know for sure. It might, it might not. Is Jesus' resurrection a hope like that? Hope in the Bible is always confidence. Certain, unshaking hope. Hope for a future reality. When your own sinful self whispers, "It'd be far easier to just entertain a doubt than all this Jesus nonsense," stand on the rock solid promises of Jesus! When your neighbors and co-workers whisper, "Stop hoping for a Jesus who has any power to care for you, protect you, and deliver you from death," stand on the rock solid promises of Jesus! When Satan himself whispers, "Stop hoping for a Jesus who will meet your needs today," stand on the rock

solid promises of Jesus! Jesus had to be a Jesus who rose. The Scriptures said it, and Jesus can't and won't ever lie to you. Because of that, there will be a resurrection for you. One just like Jesus'. An actual, bodily one. The Scriptures say it, and Jesus can't and won't ever lie to you. No problem in your failing relationships, struggle at work, or stress to make ends meet can ever take that hope away. Never let go of that sure confidence that you will rise because the Bible confidently proclaims it.

What kind of a Jesus are you hoping for? A personal Bible study I once did makes an impression on me. I asked the question, "How can you be sure you'll be with Jesus in heaven one day?" Time and again came the reply, "He says so." So simple, yet so profound. Faith looks to Jesus' promises and that's all it needs. No Scripture, no hope. With Scripture, certain hope. What kind of a Jesus are you hoping for? One who *had to* rise from the dead. One who still today *has to* deliver on his promises of care and comfort. Why? "He says so." Amen.