

“Who Was Jesus?”

(Part 1 of 2)

a sermon by

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Text: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him” (Mark 6:3).

Maybe my kids are different from all other children; then again, maybe they aren’t.

It begins early in the morning, when the first child opens his eyes. To me, that event is absolutely silent. But to my children, the opening of the first eye sounds like a starting gun.

From that moment, the race is on. Each child races to be the first...

- The first to get out of bed
- The first to be dressed
- The first to get to the breakfast table
- The first to finish breakfast
- The first to finish brushing teeth
- The first to choose the first toy of the day

On and on and on it goes. I can’t help but wonder, ‘when will it stop?’ Please someone tell me that the competition will eventually come to an end.

In truth, we must acknowledge that this competitive spirit – the desire to be the first, the best, the most at something – is woven into the fabric of our human nature. This competitive spirit is even found within the field of Biblical studies.

Now, at the outset of this sermon, I would like to tell you that Biblical scholars, as a whole, are a group of men and women dedicated to seeking out the divine wisdom included within the texts of the Old and New Testaments. I would like to tell you that, but it simply is not true.

Like many academic fields, Biblical scholarship compels people to seek out new and different ideas – to be the *first* to publish a particular thought or concept. Popular today are books and articles that are searching for the ‘Jesus of history.’ These writers want you to believe that they themselves are the first to engage in this search.

They are not.

The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Since the birth of Christ, there has been an ongoing search for the authentic person of Jesus. Within the field of Biblical scholarship, this is known as *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Over the past 2000 years, this quest has seen at least three distinct eras.

From the time of Jesus until the late 18th century, most writings on this subject began with the text of the Gospels and then offered little, if any, critical analysis of the text. Then, in 1778, the work of Hermann Reimarus was published posthumously. Reimarus is often credited as the first person attempting to distinguish between the *Jesus of History* and the *Christ of Faith*.

“What,” you may ask, “is the difference?”

The Jesus of History is the person who lived on this earth, who walked and talked among the people of his day. The Christ of Faith is the one who we proclaim to have been resurrected from the grave on the third day of his death. Yesterday, as we gathered together for the funeral service for Estelle Greenwalt, I spoke of the Christian hope of eternal life. In doing so, I was speaking of the Christ of faith.

By separating out the element of faith, scholars are free to reconsider the whole idea of Jesus as a person. For example, each of the New Testament Gospels tells of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. To a certain extent, the resurrection is the very point of these writings. But, when the resurrection is no longer relevant to your quest for Jesus, your depiction of Jesus will necessarily differ from the New Testament Gospels.

Consider, for example, the writings of Hermann Reimarus. Reimarus believed the Jesus of History to be “a Jewish revolutionary who attempted unsuccessfully to establish a messianic kingdom on earth, while [the Christ of faith] was the fictional projection of those who stole his body and pretended he had risen from the dead.”

The traditional teachings of the Christian church profess that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, that he was fully human and fully God, that he lived his life free from sin, that he was crucified, and that he was resurrected from the dead. When you take all of this away and continue to speak of Jesus, your portrayal of Jesus will necessarily be quite different.

From the 1780s, the ongoing quest for the historic Jesus changed little for 200 years. Then, in 1985, a new and innovative trend began. John Dominic Crossan invited 200 scholars to participate in an event that he titled “The Jesus Seminar.” One scholar who was in attendance described the scene this way:

“As a group we were to consider certain ideas and then to cast a vote using colored marbles, with colors indicating whether we strongly agreed to strongly disagreed. Well, I looked around the table and knew from the outset that the votes were stacked. Most of those people didn’t believe in the resurrection.”

Many of the invited scholars refused to participate. Today many of these meetings include only about 75 invited participants. They are not the leading scholars in their field. Not one of them is from a top-tier institution like the divinity schools at Harvard, Yale, or Duke, or the Seminaries at Princeton or Union (Virginia).

Despite its shortcomings, the Jesus Seminar has successfully shifted the study and discussions regarding the quest for the Historical Jesus. They have shifted the discussion through a very effective media campaign.

“Claiming that scholarly views appearing in books and scientific journals do not reach the general public, the leading scholars in the Jesus Seminar have turned to newspapers and TV talk shows, attracting attention in Sunday

supplements and even in periodicals like *GQ*. Part of the piquancy is attributable to a proclaimed intention to liberate Jesus from the tyranny of the 'religious establishment,' represented in the church or doctrinal tradition and Christian worship. Thus, after almost every seminar session bombshell announcements are released to catch the public's eye.... An impression has been created that these scandalous sound bytes represent where scholars now stand."

With the declared intention of liberating Jesus from the church, there must be no surprise in the fact that the writings and teachings of John Dominic Crossan are different from the traditional Christian Church. For example, the traditional teaching of the Christian church is that Jesus was raised from the dead, and that Jesus' body eventually ascended into heaven. By contrast, Crossan believes that there was no resurrection and that Jesus' body was probably eaten by dogs.

The quest for the historical Jesus began many years ago. For some 1700 years there was little critical assessment of the text of the New Testament. Then in the 1780, scholars began to divide their attention between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. Today, with the discussions being shaped by the Jesus Seminar, there is very little – if any – attention given to the Christ of faith.

The Original Quest for Jesus

The Quest for the historical Jesus is interesting, and also a bit ironic. I say that it's ironic because the publisher's press kits and the touring authors all speak as if they single-handedly came up with the idea of seeking-out the true, original person of Jesus. The text that we have before us demonstrates quite clearly that the quest is, at best, old news.

This morning the New Testament reading came from the Gospel of Mark. We pick up the story with Jesus entering into the region of his childhood home. As was his custom for the Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and began teaching. The reaction of the gathered crowd tells us something important about the people of their community.

"...many who heard him were astonished [literally "stunned" as if they had been hit with a stick], saying, 'Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him."

These people were astonished and offended by Jesus

To have this reaction, the people (1) ignored what Jesus was saying; and, (2) ignored what Jesus had done. Quite simply, they did not understand who Jesus was.

From its very beginning, the Gospel of Mark tells of Jesus teaching at the synagogue and casting out demons. Mark is very clear in letting the reader know the words and work of Jesus. Mark is also very clear that Jesus has developed a reputation for healing those who are sick.

And he [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean."

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean."

And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people."

But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter."

The Gospel of Mark also tells that Jesus continued to perform these amazing acts of God. Immediately before Jesus enters into his hometown, the Gospel of Mark tells of Jesus going into a home where a child had died.

And he [Jesus] allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. When they came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, he saw a tumult, and people weeping and wailing loudly.

And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a tumult and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."

And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi"; which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise."

And immediately the girl got up and walked (she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Throughout the region, Jesus was gaining in his popularity. This was happening everywhere that Jesus went – everywhere, that is, except for his home town.

“Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”

And they took offense at him.

The Earliest Response to the Doubter

In truth, even those who lived at the same time as Jesus – those who were able to see Jesus himself walking and talking – had difficulty in knowing his true identity. Jesus had developed a reputation throughout the region. Wherever he went, the crowds followed after him and crowds continued to grow.

Yes, the quest for the true Jesus is nothing new.

Jesus was well known and well respected throughout the land – except, that is, in his hometown. Even Jesus' family's neighbors were skeptical about the life and work of this man. Even after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, many skeptics remained.

One place that many skeptics remained was the city of Corinth. This was a city with a large sea port and a very diverse population. The Christians within Corinth struggled to keep their own identity. To this end, they received instructions from the Apostle Paul.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

This search for the original, authentic Jesus is not new.

If the Jesus that you seek is not capable of performing miracles and could not possibly have been raised from the dead, then the Jesus that you find will be, at most, a hollow shell, much less the Christ of faith. But, if you do have faith, if you believe in a God of infinite and eternal hope, then you must allow for the possibility of the miraculous. Because we profess our faith to be a gift from God, there is much reason for hope.

As you go about your life, the Church's belief in and proclamation of the Christ of faith is no cause for fear of shame. Yes, some will doubt. They may even mock us for our faith. They most certainly are not the first people to be skeptical of the work of Jesus.

Let us respond with confidence and always with love: He is risen. He is risen indeed.