

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Mourning, Mystery, Mission: Conspiracy Theory”
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Psalms 4, Matthew 28:11-15

It was all a hoax. The iconic planting of the American flag on lunar soil was filmed in Hollywood and distributed by the U.S. Government to convince the world of American superiority in space during the Cold War. At least, that’s what some Americans still believe. Evidence supporting this claim ranges from photographic analysis to hidden messages in Stanley Kubrick’s movie “The Shining.”

Conspiracy theories – from JFK’s assassination to revisionist histories of the Holocaust – allow us to dispel difficult realities and give us a simpler, more comfortable explanation of things that are hard to comprehend.

But, says Dan Kahan of Yale University, conspiracy theories also help us to know where we belong. While conspiracy theorists may develop all kinds of evidence to prove their point, belief matters more than proof, and beliefs are based more in identity than reason. Studies have shown that even among the highly educated, scientific knowledge is used to reinforce the beliefs we already have, and those beliefs are shaped and reinforced by our social connections.

For example, the majority of the world’s scientists agree that human activity is contributing to global climate change, but those who seek out dissenting opinions are tied to groups who are like-minded in their skepticism. Scientific opinion won’t sway their views as strongly as their personal connections will. When we say what we believe about climate change or lunar landings, or any belief, scientific or otherwise, we’re telling people who we are and to which tribe we belong.

This is the reality we face with the resurrection as well. We have accounts of the empty tomb, attested to by women and soldiers alike. Among the disciples, the story that comes to be believed, as unlikely as it may be, is that God raised Jesus from the dead, destroying the power of death and giving us hope for eternal life. Among other groups, the story that comes to be believed is this expensive and seemingly dangerous cover-up perpetrated by the leaders of the synagogue. When Matthew refers here to “the Jews,” it is the first time he is distancing Jesus and his followers from their community of origin. He is placing people in two camps: those who believe in the resurrection and those who believe the conspiracy theory.

We could wish for scientific evidence, desiring, like Thomas, to see the holes in Jesus’ hands and touch the wound in his side. But the truth is, scientific evidence would not necessarily change our beliefs. Because our beliefs are so strongly tied to our belonging. Facts don’t change our beliefs. Relationships do.

The women confronted with the empty tomb and the risen Christ could look to one another and say, “people like us believe that God can do this miraculous thing. People like us believe that Jesus is the Son of God with the power to overcome even humanity’s greatest enemy: death itself.” And so they believe. Together. And they go, together, to tell the disciples what they have seen.

Meanwhile, the soldiers confronted with the empty tomb and perhaps even a sighting of the man walking out of it look at one another and say, “we aren’t people who believe in this sort of thing. What are we going to do with what we just saw?”

Now, earlier in the gospel of Matthew, there is this odd little scene where the chief priests and elders go to Pilate and say, “this Jesus guy has been talking about dying and being raised up in three days. We don’t want his disciples coming in after he’s dead and stealing the body and making people believe this actually happened.” So they ask Pilate for some additional security measures around Jesus’ tomb. Pilate gives them a contingent of soldiers and orders an extra-large rock to seal the entrance to the tomb.

So now these soldiers, who belong to the Roman government, are working for the chief priests. These are men with no authority of their own. They know how to take orders. They believe in hierarchy. So they take their story to the bosses and report to the chief priests what they have seen. And when the money dangles in front of them, they are more than happy to continue belonging to that group of people who don’t believe in the Son of God and a resurrection.

Finally we have the chief priests themselves. They hear the report of the guards and look at one another and say, “people like us believe those disciples planned to steal the body from the tomb all along.” So they discredit the story. Together. They create a vehicle for their version of events to get disseminated.

Everyone in this story has the same set of facts, more or less. And they all make different decisions about how to handle those facts based on their sense of belonging. If one of the Marys had said, “I think we’re all hallucinating,” she would have certainly been left behind as the rest of the women and later the disciples went about celebrating and preaching the good news. If one of the soldiers had publicly declared faith in Jesus as the Son of God risen from the dead, he most certainly would have lost his job, his social standing, and possibly his life. If one of the chief priests had been inclined to believe the story the soldiers told, his days of power in the community would be over. Believing differently from your tribe has consequences and more often than not leads to social isolation.

Someone who has struggled with this personally is Dr. Francis Collins, the geneticist behind the Human Genome Project, an international research project working to map the entire sequence of human DNA. He holds what some would call the most prestigious job in science, and he is also a professing Christian. Though he was raised in a Christian home, when Collins entered college, his peers, his tribe, held the attitude that all religion was a useless superstition, and so that is what he decided to believe as well. This view continued to be reinforced by the scientific community he was immersed in through graduate studies and medical school. But when he finally concluded that he needed to apply the same method of inquiry to the knowledge of God as he did to the knowledge of science, he discovered the writings of C.S. Lewis, which led him to conclude, as Lewis did, that the existence of God was not only a rational possibility but a plausibility. Collins experienced both an intellectual and emotional conversion to Christianity and has since founded the BioLogos Foundation for fostering discussion about Christianity and science. But at the beginning, he was hesitant to share his beliefs with those in the scientific community, fearing his tribe would not accept him. With BioLogos, Collins has created a tribe of his own, a tribe of people interested in fruitful and vibrant discussion of the intersection of the natural and supernatural, the measurable and the inexplicable.

Our text today leaves us with a difficult decision. To which tribe will we belong? Because that, more than any amount of physical evidence, will determine what we believe about the empty tomb. Are we those people who

believe that there is a God who is capable of conquering death and who desires to love us and give us eternal life? Or are we those people who rely on authority to tell us what to do and believe, even if it means deceiving others and betraying our own truth? Or are we those people who are set on discrediting what we can't explain or covering up truths that challenge our worldview?

If we are looking for proof of the resurrection, we won't find it in the empty tomb.

What we know from sources outside the Bible is that the followers of Jesus proclaimed a message that was hopeful and dangerous, a message of self-sacrificing love. They endured hardships and were excluded from their tribes of family and friends, and society in general, in order to believe and proclaim the love and forgiveness and hope of their risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

In the weeks before his death, Jesus' disciples were clearly hoping Jesus would be a military king, a zealot who would overthrow the Roman government and restore the kingdom of God through any means necessary, including violence. The disciples who emerge after the crucifixion are men of a different stripe. They preach and heal and encourage. They pray together and live together and care for the poor together. And they create a movement that has lasted far longer than it ever should have. They created a tribe that exists to this day, here in this place.

So the greatest proof of the resurrection is you and I, all of us gathered here. Something transformed those disciples and gave them the strength and courage to leave their tribes of origin and, like Francis Collins, establish a new tribe. This tribe that we are now a part of shapes and reinforces our belief in the risen Christ, in the hope and joy of the resurrection.

This belief is sometimes difficult and dangerous. There are explanations that are simpler and less costly. But this belief shapes us into people of hope and compassion. This belief connects us to one another and to a deeper and truer reality than what we can measure and explain. This belief is a rational possibility and an enormous leap of faith. But this belief is part of who we are, as individuals and as a community. We are those people. Thanks be to God. Amen.