



The American freedom of religion has been a blessing for the church; but it certainly also has its downsides. One downside is this: it encourages people to think of Christianity as just a religion among other religions. And as a result, many people (and perhaps many Christians) treat Christianity as another religion among other religions. Christianity is just another religion with religious ideas. Tell me your religious ideas; and I will tell you mine; and we can affirm each other's religious ideas. Christianity is just one of many flavors of ice cream behind the sliding glass door. Have a small spoon; try a sample. If you don't like it, you can try another one.

The freedom of religion, which you and I so ardently cherish, does have its drawbacks. But Christianity is not a religion with interesting religious ideas. Christianity makes historical claims. These are not claims, ready and willing to be debated alongside others. The confession of Christianity makes exclusive claims that are incompatible with other religious ideas. Not really surprising, since they are just ideas. We are talking about the truth. Truth cannot be debated or graded or challenged. Accepted or rejected, the truth remains unchanged, unfazed (and most importantly) unapologetic.

The central truth of Christianity is the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Some 2000 years ago, he was born. He lived. He did some stuff. He said some stuff. He suffered. He died. He was buried. He rose again from the dead. The tomb was heavily guarded; but it was discovered open and empty. His followers did not steal the body; they could not. These are historical claims, made by Christianity and confessed as the foremost certain and unwavering truth.

Knowing anything about the ancient past relies on the testimonies of the ancient eye witnesses. We have no photographs or video surveillance of the angel rolling back the stone; we cannot interview the women who met the angel at the empty tomb and Jesus in the garden. You and I were not around to witness these historical events; so, we are left with trusting those who were. This is the other central truth of Christianity – that the bible, Holy Scripture, is true. Its authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, making their written word inerrant (without error) and infallible (without mistakes). Without the testimony of these ancient witnesses, we would not know the truth.

If this is the foremost truth of Christianity, then the foremost question is how do we know that these eyewitness testimonies are true? How do we know that the bible is true? By faith we confess the authenticity of scripture. By fellowship with others, we bolster that confession. But if we were to actually entertain the question, just for a moment, we might be surprised by the supporting evidence. Ancient people were no more gullible than we are today. Actually, ancient people were probably more grounded in reality than many of our modern and self-acclaimed enlightened neighbors. They knew that a dead man, a corpse, does not rise. The notion of the Jesus' resurrection was considered incredible and unbelievable even by his disciples. What finally convinced them was the visible, tangible, physical Jesus standing before them. How he talked to them, how he walked with them, even how he ate food with them... convinced them of the truth.

If the disciples wanted to create a false religion, with interesting religious ideas, they would not have built it on the resurrection. No body would believe that! If I am going to lie about the fish I caught, I wouldn't say that I caught a whale. If I am going to ask for a loan from the bank, I wouldn't ask for \$900 trillion. If me and my 11 friends wanted to start a religion, we wouldn't say that our master was crucified on a Roman cross, was buried, was resurrected back from the dead, that his physical flesh was reanimated back to life, and that he has (in bodily form) ascended into heaven, is now seated at the right of hand of God, and will come again. That crosses the line from religion to ridiculous. That wouldn't be our choice of interesting religious ideas, as we would want people to believe us.

So, this is a fascinating thought, the unbelievability of the resurrection actually lends to its believability. As Jesus says in Luke, see my hands, my feet and my side. Touch me and feel. See that I have flesh and bone. A spirit has no such thing. Neither wishful thinking, nor an active imagination created the resurrection story. The empty tomb, the angelic announcement and the resurrected appearance of Jesus of Nazareth created the disciples' faith in the resurrection. And the church is built on their eyewitness testimony. As the Apostle Paul proclaims in Acts, Jesus appeared to many of his followers after the resurrection and now they are his witnesses to the people.

One of those followers and witnesses was the man named Matthias. His addition to the 11 disciples returned their count to 12. Just as Israel had twelve tribes, so the new Israel has 12 eyewitnesses. Together, the original 11 plus Matthias, are the foundation of the church, with Christ himself as the corner stone. Their faith, created and sustained by the words and deeds of Christ – is our faith, still created and still very much sustained by the words and deeds of Jesus.

How is the absurd confessed as absolute? How is the fascinating confessed as faith? Just as the early church was guided by the Holy Spirit in the selection of Matthias, the modern church is guided by the same. In Acts 1, we see God at work even after the ascension. Jesus is no longer in bodily form, present with his church; however, his leadership still leads and his guidance still guides with the Holy Spirit. This is the same Holy Spirit that still leads and still guides the church – this church – this day.

Without the Holy Spirit, we would be a lost people, stumbling around and juggling all the other interesting ideas of the world's religions. But we have Holy Spirit. By virtue of Holy Baptism, you and I have been endowed with every blessing – namely the belief and confession of Jesus of Nazareth, true God, true man, truly risen from the dead, truly returning someday soon. The Spirit believes. The Spirit confesses. We are saved. Thanks to Matthias and the host of eyewitnesses who have testified to the truth, may we always confess and believe this truth; may we never debate, grade or challenge this truth; may this truth always remain unchanged, unfazed (and most importantly) unapologetic