

A Sermon for Dayspring

by Christina Gibson

Convincing Proofs

Acts 1:1-11

May 16, 2021

What does Jesus have in common with Jim Morrison, Amelia Earhart, and Elvis Presley? Lots of rumors and death conspiracy theories, according to my late-night limited internet research. Apparently, there are several dead celebrities who some believe are actually alive.

Due to limited internet access, Luke speaks to Jesus's aliveness in a letter to Theophilus. In Acts 1, he offers a summary of Jesus' time with his disciples post resurrection as a way to reiterate that Jesus isn't dead.

Acts 1 says that, "After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom."

Interestingly, in the cases of Jim, Amelia, and Elvis, it's others who try to convince the world these famous people are still alive. But, in our texts, it's Jesus himself who argues that he's alive. Jesus shows that he is alive with many convincing proofs. Jesus can one up Jimmy Hoffa, because there is a body, and Jesus is still using it.

I love that phrase "convincing proofs." Infallible evidences, perfect courtroom explanations and unquestionable demonstrations. Jesus is alive.

Through the post-resurrection gospel accounts, we can piece together how the evidence may have been presented during those 40 days: being face to face (probably not 6 feet apart), talking, continued instruction, letting Thomas touch the scars... eating together (turns out, after descending into hell, Jesus still eats fish),

But what I find striking about the phrase is that it initially seems to stand in contrast to Jesus' normal mode of operation.

When we think of the main way in which Jesus taught, maybe we think of parables. Or sermons on a mount or a plain, respectively. Or acts of healing and mic dropping showdowns with the Pharisees.

But rarely do we think of Jesus' teachings associated with blatantly trying to prove anything. Isn't he the one who says he won't jump or dance just

because his audience wants proof? Doesn't he chastise them for demanding proof? "Give us a sign. Persuade us."

"If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread."

Yet, He was not willing to prove anything on their terms.

This amazed Pilate: you're offering no evidence? No proof against the charges? When he is mocked, and spat on, he doesn't try to convince anyone when they taunt him, saying, "Prove you are a prophet and tell us which one hit you." In other words, "give us convincing proofs."

Why was it now that Jesus is compelled to establish the validity of his life? Why does He spend 40 days teaching and showing his apostles that he lives with many convincing proofs?

Why not let the cynics just roll their eyes and walk away?

There are plenty of obvious reasons why this would be a sticking point— why it would be something so important to Jesus and to us. Jesus' death alone was not enough to save. Jesus' resurrection could have been chalked up to a weird ghost story. But Jesus alive? That changes everything.

It's not just the reality for which Jesus was providing evidence. The convincing proofs also had to do with Jesus' audience. In other words, it wasn't just the message, it was also about those receiving the message.

These were the people who would, through the Holy Spirit, bear witness to the life of Jesus in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

But the convincing proofs weren't just offered for the work the disciples would do: for their own lives and mental well-being, the disciples needed to know that Jesus is alive.

It's safe to say that the disciples' last 44 days had been an emotional roller coaster.

Jesus was not aloof or disinterested. He didn't show back up with an attitude of "If you don't believe me, forget you." His ministry was characterized by love for the world, for the harvest, for the hurting, for the grieving, and for those who walked most closely with him. Jesus' work and his teachings were not for the end goal of self-promotion or protecting his reputation. His was not a needy self-proving or a vain self-promotion. His convincing proofs were

theophanies. They were encounters between Jesus and his followers, offering a deeper revealing of God's nature.

And this was what the disciples most needed.

Normally, when someone has something to prove, they have a desperate need for others to be convinced of some idea.

In the case of Jesus, however, it was not Jesus who needed the apostles to believe he was alive, it was the apostles who needed to know that Jesus was alive. Jesus knew they had been tired and unmoored by the events of the previous 44 days. And Jesus offered solid evidence for what they most needed to know—that Jesus was alive.

When Jesus tells them the Holy Spirit will soon come, the apostles respond by asking, "Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responds that it is not for you to know the times or seasons the Father has set by his own authority."

Now THAT sounds more like Jesus.

More than this "convincing proofs" business, anyway. Jesus redirects them to the present and offers the broader picture: the holy spirit will come and you will be my witnesses everywhere.

Even if Jesus' answers sometimes sound vague or seem to bypass our initial questions, Jesus is the attentive, compassionate shepherd.

When we feel desperate to hear from God, we might focus on our prayers, or try extra hard to listen. Perhaps we deal with our anxiety by trying to show God how much we want to receive God's guidance. Maybe, by daily 20 minute meditative or centering prayer, we can manipulate God into speaking to us in our place of need.

And, hear me say, it matters that we put ourselves in a position to listen. But it also seems that the shepherd is far more concerned about the sheep hearing his voice than the sheep are.

God wants fullness of life for us and will be present to us because that's what God does. It's not about how good we are at listening, it's about God's willingness to speak.

And in moments where we are too tired to listen, maybe that's when Jesus offers compelling proof that he is alive...

This is not about a belief for the sake of a belief. I believe in rainbows. They're pretty and they may make my morning, but they don't necessarily impact my life.

But, Jesus is alive, and that literally affects everything.

Think about it: what in our world is not impacted by the truth that Jesus is alive? What is so outlying personally or globally that the truth of God can't reach it?

Jesus is alive.

It is the theological touchstone, the foundation, the deep truth that brings guidance, comfort, healing, hope, and purpose. It sets the stage for all that is to come.

The life and calling for the people of God are predicated by this truth: Jesus is alive.

When we feel abandoned, disappointed, forced to hide, or shut in the dark, Jesus is alive.

When we feel like the bottom has fallen out from under us. When we are overwhelmed or drowning in anxiety and loss. Jesus is alive.

"Jesus is alive" is not a pithy statement meant to answer the unanswerable: It isn't a "you're too blessed to be stressed" or "everything happens for a reason" or "When God shuts a door, he opens a window. No. Jesus' aliveness it is not meant to shut down questions or silence concerns, doubts, or desperate questions. In fact, it can be our starting place. It gives us a landing spot and a place in which we are free to ask the questions and express our concerns and doubts. If Jesus is alive, then our relationship with God is still viable. And God is with us. The creative God who created the universe still creates and recreates daily. Jesus being alive gives us the confidence to move forward in a life where we don't know the answers

And this is what the disciples had experienced through convincing proofs before Jesus ascended into the heavens.

If they had not experienced the “aliveness” of Jesus, his appearance could have been chalked up to hallucination or, at best, a weird ghost visit.

Sure, Jesus appearing in a vision to the apostles would have been a gift, but not as path-shaping as Jesus being alive.

No, there’s something about Jesus being alive that weaves all the pieces together from the past, fulfilling prophecies, restoring hope, and making way for the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit.

If Jesus is alive, then what he said is true, and if what he said is true, then forgiveness is real, and if forgiveness is real, then faith connects us to God and salvation has come and the poor are valued and neighbors are called to love and those who mourn will be comforted and eternal life is gifted to us. If Jesus is alive, then the kingdom is here and God is for us and we are beloved daughters and sons.

And neither death, nor life, nor present, nor future, nor depth, nor height can keep us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

No wonder Jesus shows that he is alive with many convincing proofs. Jesus says and drives home what is most critical to them, for their present lives and future hope: Jesus is alive

ASCENSION

After a crazy 43 days, the apostles watch as Jesus is lifted up on a cloud toward the heavens. They gaze, looking for him like someone trying to follow a balloon released into the air. They squint and keep looking, even when it’s clear they’re only seeing sky.

Then two men in robes appear and give voice to the question, “Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven?”

Jesus has been taken away from you and toward heaven.

The preposition “away” is strongly connected to “from.” Jesus has not simply been taken to heaven, but has been taken *away from* the disciples. He’s taken away from those who knew him most closely. And there are now in a position of flux.

I’m not sure why there is a period of time where the Holy Spirit has not yet come, but neither is Jesus on earth.

Seems like it would have been good to have a baton handoff set up between Jesus and the Spirit.

Instead, here the disciples are again, with questions and a period of waiting. Why are you looking at the sky?

“Ok, guys... raise your hand if this is your first ascension...”

“Everybody? Yeah, that’s why we are staring.”

But the question was more a pull back to the present moment. Yes, Jesus ascended. Yes, Jesus will return in the same way. But, Jesus' ascension holds power because Jesus is alive. And that reality is not simply for what's happening in the sky. It is a reality for what is happening now. Here. Eye level. Right in front of you.

The ascension of Jesus is the expression of God's immanence and transcendence.

Do we sometimes think Jesus is not present here and now? Do we stare at the sky because we, too, still have expectations of how God will speak and act? Sometimes, like the apostles, we have questions and we're not quite sure what happens next.

The truth that Jesus is alive will mean different things to us at different times. In moments of despair, Jesus' aliveness means that our circumstances don't have the last word. In the midst of our brokenness and the broken systems around us, Jesus is alive means the abuse, exploitation, pain, racism, and oppression can't stop God's restorative work.

In your place of need, in your insecure moments, the times where you need to be reminded that you are loved, valued, and cared for, Jesus is alive. Now. Always. And that changes everything. And as long as Jesus is alive, the story is never, never over.