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Fearless Q: Why Jesus? Finding Truth in a Postmodern World John 18:28-40a

So I went to St. Andrews in June. I checked in at Boston where they told me I was good to go and would pick up the boarding pass for the last leg of my trip in England. Six hours later I landed in Manchester, ready for the home stretch. The airport people escorted us off the plane and stopped us at customs where we were told to present our boarding passes as proof of travel. (As if them escorting us off of the airplane wasn't enough proof of travel.)

I explained to the customs official that I didn't have a boarding pass; that I was supposed to pick it up here. He told me that was ridiculous, I told him he was ridiculous. And after several minutes of badgering, he grudgingly let me through and told me to pick it up at the gate. So as my flight was boarding, I dashed down the hall to my gate and in a very calm, Christ-like manner, asked for my boarding pass. The woman looked at me with a blank stare and said, "You can't get that here. Go down the hall to the ticket office." So with my flight about to leave, off I ran. Bursting into the office in a very frenzied, un-Christlike manner, I said, "I need a boarding pass, and I need it right now!!!" A sweet, mild-mannered British man tottered over to me and said, "Oh, you can't get that here. The woman who prints them is out for lunch." At which point, it took every ounce of my willpower not to scream, "Does **anybody** have **any idea** what they are talking about?"

Tell me, have you ever felt that way about Christianity? Ever wondered if someone is just making stuff up? How do we know what is true? Or if there is Truth? We are in the midst of a sermon series called "Fearless Q" and I want you to listen to some of these fearless questions:

"Why must God be objectively true and knowable in this postmodern world?"
"How could Jesus be so arrogant to limit the path to heaven to just himself?"
"Why is Christianity the only right way? Isn't this intolerant?"

These are hard questions. But here's the good news: we are not the first ones to ask these questions. Turn with me to John 18, and let's see what God's Word has to say to us today.

²⁸Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor...³³Pilate... summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" ³⁴"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

³⁵“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” ³⁶Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” ³⁷“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth hears my voice.”
³⁸“What is truth?” retorted Pilate.

What is truth? Sound familiar? Pilate was asking this same question 2,000 years ago at Jesus’ trial. It’s a cliffhanger, isn’t it? So, what does Jesus say? How does he answer Pilate? Let’s take a look.

³⁸“What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.

What does Jesus say? Nothing! Pilate doesn’t give him the chance; he turns around and walks away. How frustrating is that? So what gives? Why doesn’t Jesus answer?

Here’s the beauty of John’s writing: Jesus doesn’t respond directly to the question, because the rest of the Gospel is his answer. Jesus doesn’t just testify to the truth, he embodies it, which is what John has been telling us all along. Way back in chapter one he told us that the Word who “became flesh and dwelt among us” is “full of grace and truth.” Then Jesus tells us himself point blank, in chapter 14: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” But from chapter 18 onwards he shows us what that means. The cross and empty tomb are where the one called Truth gave us his own definition—Jesus testifies to the truth that he has served justice, poured out grace, conquered sin, redeemed humanity, and allowed us to enter into his abundant life.

But there’s something else we learn from this moment. Sometimes it’s hard to see the Truth. Again, back in chapter one John tells us that even though Jesus “was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” Here Pilate, literally, stares Truth in the face and completely misses him. Which brings us back to our original question: How do we know? How can we know that Jesus is true?

In some way, Pilate’s question is even more challenging today because of our dominant worldview known as Post-modernism. For those of you who haven’t suffered through a philosophy class yet, here’s a lightning definition for you.

Of the many cool things I’ve been able to visit in Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts, is one of my favorites. Art is a funny thing; some of it you see and go [DAVID] “mmmmm... that’s fiiiiine art!” But then you walk through the contemporary art section of Boston’s MFA and see this. This is Blanco y Verde; it’s a contemporary

masterpiece. Now, do I know anything about art? Absolutely not. I can't even draw straight lines when I try to underline my textbooks. But supposedly, the idea behind contemporary art is that it allows the viewer to interpret/provide meaning for the piece. So, in theory, each person can look at Blanco y Verde and see something different.

This is the message of postmodernism—the dominant worldview of western society. Reality, meaning, truth—they are all based on our own experience, feelings, opinions and culture. Truth is relative and always changing, which means, according to postmodernism, there is no such thing as absolute truth. How, then, can one religion claim to be right and say everybody else is wrong? Isn't that intolerant and arrogant? Who are we to say that Jesus is the only way? Aren't all religions true in their own way?

Here's the deal: to claim that all religions of the world are true is simply a logical contradiction. We are not all claiming the same thing about who God is and what the world's problem is, and we are fooling ourselves if we think that everybody can somehow be right. Islam is the "just do it" religion. It believes that at their core, people aren't bad—they're just forgetful. You just have to try hard enough and if your good deeds are enough to tip the heavenly scale, then God (who you'd never address as Father) will allow you into heaven. Hinduism is the "you asked for it" religion—it claims you get exactly what you deserve. So that little girl starving in the gutter committed some sin in a previous life and needs to do her time so she can move another rung up the ladder towards the ultimate goal, which is non-existence. Nihilism is a philosophy claiming "nothing really matters"—everything is meaningless. Our whole existence is just one giant accident, and when we die we are eaten by worms and that's it. We're annihilated. There is no meaning in life, no purpose to our being on this planet.

And then there's Christianity, which claims that "He did it all." Christianity says we are not just forgetful, in fact, we're a train wreck. Because even though we were created good, we disobeyed God and have all inherited what Pastor Megan called a 'sin-orientation,' so we can never be good enough to earn our way back into heaven. God doesn't grade on the curve—this is pass/fail, and we have all failed. And yet, Christianity also says that we don't get what we deserve—death and permanent separation from God—because of God's grace. This world is not an accident. You are not a mistake or a biological phenomenon; you have purpose and meaning in this life because you are made in the image of God and he loves you. He loved you enough to die, taking the punishment we had coming so we could enter into abundant life with God. It is all about what Jesus did for us, not what we can do for ourselves.

We are talking about polar opposite claims. The fact is, based on what each religion claims, someone has to be right and someone has to be wrong. And for the last 2,000 years, billions of people have bet everything on Jesus. But why should we believe Jesus is the Truth? How do we know?

And just like that, we're back with Pilate interrogating Jesus. Jesus is still on trial. And to demonstrate the trustworthiness of Jesus, I'd like to call two witnesses.

First of all, I call the witness of the Word. Anybody still wondering if I ever got my boarding pass for that flight? I was standing in the ticket office, feeling completely desperate, when that sweet little British man said, "Come with me. I'll bring you to your gate and we'll take care of it there." So he brought me back to my gate, where he told the woman there to hand write me a boarding pass. I didn't even know they could do that. I swear the woman pulled out a grocery list and wrote a seat number on it. But that was all I needed.

We know Jesus is true, because someone wrote something down for us. And that something is God's Word recorded in Scripture. If you want to know who Jesus is, if you need proof, read his book. It has been carefully copied and passed down through the centuries, and its authenticity is reliable. Let me show you what I mean. When scholars determine the reliability of an historical document, one of the important questions they ask is 'how many ancient copies are there'? For example, some of you may have heard of Caesar's Gallic War, which scholars consider reliable. Did you know we only have 10 ancient copies of this book? Wanna know how many copies we have of the New Testament? 14,000. But this is no boring history textbook. It is living and active, and if you're not careful it will transform your life. One of my best friends in seminary grew up in Korea, and became a Christian just by reading the Gospels. Have you read them? If you haven't tried this already, I encourage you to grab a friend and jump into the 90-day challenge, reading one chapter of the Gospels a day for 90 days (everything is more fun with a buddy!). As you read, pray this simple prayer: Holy Spirit, will you reveal to me the truth of Jesus? You see, you aren't just reading this on your own; the Bible tells us that the Spirit of Jesus—the Holy Spirit—will help you to read and to understand the Truth. Don't take somebody else's word for what the Bible says about Jesus. I dare you to find out for yourself.

So we've called our first witness: the Bible. But there's another important way we know Jesus is the Truth. I would never have gotten my boarding pass without the guidance of that funny little British man. And most of the time we need someone to grab us by the hand and say, "Come with me. There's somebody I want you to meet." That someone is the witness of the Church. And not just Chapel Hill—the whole body of Christ across the globe and throughout the centuries. You only know who Jesus is because the apostles planted churches across the Mediterranean, because the martyrs died for him in the coliseum, because 50 years ago a group a faithful people decided to start a church called Chapel Hill. Because of [name] and [name] and [name].

Now, Dad always says it takes a lot of courage to study church history, and this is because there's people in it, and the story of the Church is really our own stories writ large—a great big mix of sin and grace, ugly and beautiful. The same

institution that launched the crusades and inquisition also invented hospitals, universities, and adoption. But the Church is called the body of Christ because it is the most prominent way Jesus has chosen to be present in and work through history. This is why you can't be a Christian by yourself. And if you are having a hard time believing Jesus is the Truth, maybe you need to take a big risk by getting to know his physical presence on this planet—and that is his Church. If you have not thrown yourself into a Church community, you will stay on the sidelines of God's current action in the world. If you want to know Jesus, maybe the place for you to start is by getting to know his big, messy, faithful family.

These are two witnesses: Scripture as revealed by the Holy Spirit and the Church. Two ways God reveals the Truth of Jesus to us. We read about his life and teaching, through which the Holy Spirit transforms us. We humbly place ourselves in the line of 2,000 years of faithful witnesses who were willing to die to pass on the most important message they had ever received. If you are really open to the truth, these two witnesses are powerful and compelling. And if you are doubting whether Jesus can really be the Truth or not, don't just dabble. Jump in with both feet, and see for yourself. Read his Gospel, pray for his Spirit, invest in his Church.

But what if you live in a place where there is no Bible? Where the Holy Spirit isn't spoken of? Where it's illegal to visit a Church? There are lots of places like that in the world. Is God stymied? Is it hopeless? Has he abandoned all those people? No, absolutely not! Never underestimate the power and love of God. Let me call up one more witness, a friend of mine, to our Truth-revealing, self-revealing God.

I have a friend who's a member of the royal family in an African nation; we'll call him Adam (we can't use his real name for his own safety). Adam's family actually brought Islam to his own country centuries ago. He grew up with extravagant wealth, the best education money can buy, and had the Koran memorized by age 12. He eventually became one of the world's leading scholars in Sharia law (Islamic religious law). If there was anybody you would bet money on never becoming a Christian, it would be Adam. One afternoon, Adam was working in his office when Jesus walked in and said, "Stop confusing my people. You think you know who I am, but you don't. Let me explain." Just like that. I asked him if he meant he had a vision. He said, "No. It was not a vision. Jesus himself walked into my office." He became a Christian at that moment, and now Adam's family has not only disowned him, but placed a price on his head. They want him dead. He mentioned that he loves visiting the United States, because for the first time in years, he doesn't have to go to bed worried that someone will come and kill him in the night. He's lost everything because of Jesus. And you know something? Adam is one of the most kind, humble, joyful people I know, because he believes that Jesus is worth it. That Jesus is true, and the only source of real life. That anything apart from Jesus is a mirage that will fade away. Adam is living proof that Jesus is the only way, and that there is no one outside of Jesus' reach.

So is Christianity intolerant? If by intolerant you mean exclusive, then absolutely. But when we say that the Gospel is true 100% of the time for 100% of the human population, it is actually the most loving, grace-filled claim we can make. Because what we are saying is that the young girl in the slums of India is beloved by the king of the universe. We are saying that the world is not always as it appears; it has tremendous purpose and does not end in annihilation, but re-creation. God's faithfulness to you is based on his love for you, not your obedience to him. We are saying that your life apart from Jesus is really no life at all, and that life in Jesus is more wonderful and more real than anything you can imagine. It's also the most humble thing you can claim, because when you speak Gospel truth you're admitting that you, yourself, are a hot mess and that Jesus had to do everything for you because you couldn't get your act together. You're admitting that you have no right to judge anybody and the only one who does died for us, forgives us, and lavishes love on anybody who wants it.

So here's my challenge for you. Pilate walked away from his own question. Will you? Will you dare to give Jesus the chance to answer? Will you read his Gospel, pray for his Spirit, invest in his Church? And if you already love Jesus, will you dare to tell your neighbors, co-workers, and family members why? Because if he really is the Truth, it's the best news you could possibly share.