

5.25.2025 Rogation Sunday (The Reliability of the Gospels)

Behind every word we read is an author, and every author has a purpose, a reason or a goal they're trying to achieve in writing a particular text. Authors may write to entertain, persuade, inform, or to present their reader with a particular point of view. For example, an author like Agatha Christie wrote to entertain people by providing them with a way to escape the routine of everyday life and immerse themselves in a world of intrigue and mystery, while the author of a textbook on science or mathematics wouldn't normally write to entertain, but to provide facts and information on these subjects.

Every author has a purpose that impels them to write, and St. John, the inspired human author of our Gospel lessons through the Easter season, is no exception to that rule. Near the end of his Gospel account, as he describes miracles surrounding the Resurrection, John clearly states his purpose in writing, telling his reader that *"Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name"* (John 20:30-31). Some authors write to entertain, persuade, inform, or present a point of view, but St. John writes *so that you may believe... and that by believing you may have life in Jesus' name*.

By clearly stating his reason for writing, St. John helps us engage with the text of his Gospel account, and more fully comprehend the meaning contained in these inspired words. We know that the purpose of this Gospel is *belief and life*, and therefore we view the text not only as an accurate, historical account of the life and ministry of Jesus, but also as a carefully constructed, theological document written to lead us, by the grace of God, to faith in Christ. I can think of no greater purpose for the written word than that we may believe and live, and this morning I'd ask you to consider three reasons why we can trust the words of St. John, the Apostle, beloved disciple, and eyewitness of the Risen Christ.

Speaking to Christians about reasons to believe the inspired words of St. John may seem as if I'm just preaching to the choir, and while that could be true, this certainly won't be time wasted if we leave here this morning better

equipped to explain and defend the Christian faith. Remember, St. Peter calls us to *“Always be prepared to give a defense to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you”* (1 Peter 3:15). So, to that end, consider these reasons to believe, and live:

Reason #1: St. John had nothing to gain by writing his Gospel account. There was nothing in it for him. At different times in the history of Christianity, there has been much to gain in this world by being a leader in the Church, but this was certainly not the case in the first century. At the time St. John wrote this Gospel, Christians were being persecuted, tortured, mutilated, and massacred throughout the Roman Empire, and as a leader in the early Church, John was an easy target. In fact, in the book of Revelation we learn that it was because of his faith, his proclamation of God’s word and testimony of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:9), that St. John was exiled to Patmos, a remote island where the Romans sent banished criminals, and those who, like John, refused to worship the emperor as God.

From a worldly point of view, St. John actually had every reason to remain silent, or even to deny the Resurrection, because he had nothing to gain by telling this story - not money, not power, not women, just persecution and Patmos. This side of heaven there was nothing in it for him, just as there was no earthly gain, only the loss of all things, for those eyewitnesses who were martyred because of their faith. There is early and consistent evidence that other eyewitnesses, such as Peter, James the brother of John, Thomas, and Andrew all died not because they believed and proclaimed what someone told them was the truth, no, instead, they died for what they themselves claim to have seen with their own eyes - our crucified Lord risen from the dead. As Jesus said to Thomas, *“Because you have seen Me, you have believed...”* (John 20:29). These, and other eyewitnesses, saw the risen Lord, and willingly suffered and died to proclaim that truth, and the record isn’t written for their benefit, St. John didn’t write for himself, he wrote *so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*”

Reason #2: We can believe St. John because his words are embarrassing. They often make him, and the other disciples, look foolish. You may remember on Easter Day we read about saints Peter and John arriving at the

empty tomb, and that when St. John entered the tomb, at last “*he saw and believed; for as yet (until then NLT) they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise from the dead*” (John 20:9). St. John, writing about himself, tells his reader that even after three years of walking, talking, and living with our Lord... Even after Jesus publicly (John 2:18-22; Mt. 12:39-40), and privately (Mt. 16:21), declared the truth that He would suffer, die, and rise again... Even after “*all that the prophets have spoken*” (Luke 24:25), the signs and wonders and repeated claims of Divinity... Even after all this and so much more, it wasn’t until he entered the empty tomb, that St. John tells us *he saw, and believed*.

If you were making up a story would you cast yourself in that light, so incredibly foolish and slow to believe, or to give another example, would you want the Gospel authors to record the night Jesus was praying in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, a night when He asked His closest friends and disciples, Peter, James, and John to pray, and they all fell asleep (Matthew 26:40). If you were the human author of a Gospel, how difficult would it be to write about the fact that the disciples abandoned Jesus when He was arrested, that St. Peter denied Him, and that Judas, after he’d lived with the Lord for three years and witnessed all of these things, decided to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. If a person views the Gospels as nothing more than fabricated stories, they’re going to have a difficult time explaining all of the embarrassing details we find in them, because people just don’t write such things about themselves, unless of course, it’s the truth.

Reason #3: History confirms the story. We can trust St. John, and the other Gospel writers because their central claim, that Jesus was crucified, dead, buried, and rose on the third day, is the historical event that explains all we see happening in the early days of the Church. These things are documented primarily in an early book of Church history we call the Acts of the Apostles, but they’re confirmed by many non-biblical sources as well, such as the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus, or Romans like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger.

History confirms the story. Consider that thought by using the same logic Gamaliel employed when he advised the members of the Sanhedrin to leave the disciples alone. The Apostles were sharing the message of the Gospel, and

Gamaliel's advice was... let them. He said, "*if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it...*" (Acts 5:38). Gamaliel's thinking was based on the historical fact that past messianic movements, led by men like Theudas or Judas of Galilee, quickly came to an end when the leader of the movement was killed, but that wasn't the case when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, dead, and buried, and therefore we're left to ask, why did Christianity grow so rapidly in Jerusalem, the very place our Lord was crucified, and to mention once more the embarrassment of it all, why would the Apostles, quote, "*preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*" (1 Corinthians 1:23). These men didn't hide embarrassing details about themselves, nor did they hide the fact that the Man they worshipped as God was nailed to a Roman cross. If you were trying to organize, and draw people into a messianic movement, is that the story you'd tell?

This morning I'd ask you to consider the fact that behind every word we read is an author, and every author has a purpose, a reason or a goal they're trying to achieve in writing a particular text. St. John wrote "*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name,*" and we find great comfort in the blessed assurance that we can trust his words, and those of the other eyewitness, because they had nothing to gain by telling this story, and everything to lose, including their lives. We can trust them because they didn't try to hide embarrassing facts about themselves, but simply told the truth, and now we stand here as part of the 2,000 years of history that confirms the truth of the Gospel.

Every author has a purpose, and remember, God is the Divine Author of Scripture. Every holy word is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), and He inspired these human authors for the reason St. John stated, that you may believe and live. This is a testament to God's love, "*So God loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). Belief and life are the Author's purpose for the world. May His purpose be ours as well.