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Psalms 102:25–27, ESV.

- ²⁵ *Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*
- ²⁶ *They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,*
- ²⁷ *but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

No end.

When it comes to Christianity, there is a misconception that Christmas is by far the biggest holiday. Yes, it's a holiday that many non-believers still celebrate, and it holds a powerful place in our culture, but that's because it's been commercialized. Christmas has become a marketing holiday. While millions of non-believers celebrate Christmas by buying each other gifts and putting up trees and taking time off from work, they don't celebrate Easter. The most they might do is leave baskets of candy for their kids. And while people are willing to admit that Jesus was a real historic figure, and that he certainly was born as a human at some point, what they do not agree with is that he rose from the dead. They don't accept this - because of all that the resurrection implies. Indeed, from the perspective of our faith, the big holiday is Easter. It's Easter that celebrates the

heart of what is to be a believer. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. This means that Jesus wasn't just a crazy guy who thought he was the Jewish Messiah. Easter says that Jesus was God. In fact, Easter says that Jesus IS God. There's more. With Jesus returning to his eternal life as God, we are reminded that we, too, have the promise of an eternal life. There is more than that. While his physical, human body is gone from Earth, Jesus, because he is God, is still with us. Jesus is present in our lives. As we walk through our daily lives, we walk through the Kingdom of God - because of Jesus. We don't have to wait until we die to experience the eternity of our lives and our faith.

I recently sat with someone who was looking forward to passing away, to leaving this Earth and being with God for all of eternity. She was in the latter stages of a degenerative disease. She had been through several major surgeries and had been debilitated for much of her life. She was in her thirties. Let's call her Susan. Susan wasn't delighted that she was dying. Susan wasn't excitedly looking forward to being with God for eternity. She was a believer, and she knew where she was headed, but mostly, she was worn out. Susan told me that she was just plain tired. She was at the end of the war and had fought the last battle. Then she said that she felt guilty about not feeling happy at the opportunity to be with God for all of eternity. She felt as if she were disrespecting God by not

warmly welcoming the opportunity to cast her pain aside and live in peace while the never-ending future unfolded. I'll get back to Susan.

But let's me step back and look at Easter and how non-believers sometimes interpret the resurrection of Jesus. We all know the traditional Easter passages from the Gospels. Here is Luke's version, starting with the end of Chapter 23, and continuing in Chapter 24, and I have edited this down somewhat:

*⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. **24** But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.*

During the time of Jesus, only very wealthy people were buried in tombs cut from Rock. Jesus would certainly not normally have been a man who would have been honored in this way. But a man named Joseph from a town called

Arimathea donated a tomb. This was no temporary gift, as many people have thought. A person was typically left in the tomb for about a year, laid out on a ledge cut from the rock inside the tomb. Then when all that was left were the bones, they were placed in a box called an ossuary. This box was then placed deeper back in the tomb so that the ledge could be used for someone else. The point is that once a member of one family had used a tomb, only members of that family could ever use the tomb again. Remember what was said about this tomb cut in stone: *where no one had ever yet been laid*. So, it was an expensive, permanent gift. No other family could ever use that tomb. After Jesus had been in the tomb for some days, with a huge, circular stone rolled through a trench and placed blocking the entrance, a handful of women visit the tomb. It is Mary Magdalene, a woman named Joanna who is a follower of Jesus, and another woman named Mary, who is the mother of some follower of Jesus named James. They discover two angels who tell them that Jesus is no longer among the dead. He has risen, they tell the women. Later, Peter verifies these facts.

Because of the dramatic significance of the resurrection of Jesus, this miraculous event is one of those Bible stories, perhaps the most significant one, that pits faith against science – at least in the minds of unbelievers. People use reason and logic to argue against the resurrection. They tell us that the dead do

not rise up. They try to make the biblical stories jibe with science. People have come up with all kinds of theories to explain the resurrection and have it fit in with modern science. One theory is that the three women who went to the tomb, along with Peter, had terrible senses of direction, so bad that we would assume that they couldn't possibly have found their way out of an outhouse: after all, they must have gone to the wrong tomb. That's why Jesus wasn't there. They had entombed him around the corner on Maple Street, but because they got lost, they went looking for him in a tomb on Pleasant Hill Road. Another theory is that Jesus was never dead, that he had just passed out or fainted. That would strongly suggest that people today are radically smarter than people were back then. It would seem that a pile of Roman soldiers, along with all of Jesus' associates weren't able to tell a dead guy from a living guy, even after handling the body for a significant period of time. Keep in mind that the authorities really wanted Jesus to go away, so they would have been careful to make sure he was very dead. And don't forget that he wasn't just crucified: they stuck a sword in his side, too.

Another theory is that the Apostles stole Jesus' body so that it would look like he had been resurrected, then they sent the women, who were dupes and weren't in on the stunt, to the tomb so that they could put up a ruckus. But also keep in mind that people like Peter, along with other of Jesus' disciples went on after this

and preached the Word for decades, in fact, for the rest of their lives, and many got themselves martyred. Peter was crucified upside down. Would they have done all this for a religion that they were faking? My favorite theory is the “hallucination” theory. It says that the people who found the open tomb, and more importantly, all the people who saw Jesus after he was resurrected all suffered from some delusion. This includes all the Apostles, his family, folks who knew him well, and in fact, approximately 500 people. They all would have had to have been hallucinating to think they had seen him risen and alive.

But we, as believers, know the correct response to all these theories: they sidestep the real point. People who read the biblical stories of the resurrection and then try to make it all mesh with their agnostic or atheist beliefs aren't addressing the real issue. The point is we have faith. We do believe in things that cannot be proven. We also know that if science was the final arbitrator of whether Jesus truly rose from the dead, we'd be in big trouble. Science is not very reliable – and in fact, it's designed to be mistake prone because of its iterative nature. The way science works is that we witness a bunch of related phenomena. Then we create a theory that fits them all. We believe that theory until we encounter some phenomenon that cannot be accounted for with the theory. We then ditch the theory and invent a new one that can account for the

new piece of information, along with all previously observed data points. In other words, science is by its very nature never fully finalized. Very long periods of time go by where we accept a theory as fact, but in the backs of our minds we know that someday, we may have to abandon it. There are lots of theories that, over the course of history, have been believed until something contradicted them. People once thought that we were all born with blank minds and that all knowledge was learned. This is not true. We know now that we inherit basic instincts and knowledge. We used to think that the universe was static; even Einstein believed this. But it's not true. The universe is in constant motion. Early astronomers thought they saw canals of water on Mars. They aren't there.

Here is my point. The next time someone tells you that science does not back up the tenets of your faith, in particular the resurrection of Jesus, tell them this. First, the scientific method has a record that is extremely far from perfect, and in fact, by its very nature it is highly error prone. And second – and this is far more important - it doesn't make sense to pit science against faith. The reason is that faith is far beyond what is encountered with science. The resurrection of Jesus is outside the imaginable, the expected, the possible. Science is limited by the human senses of sight, touch, etc. Science is limited by accepted formal models of reason, of taking accepted facts and inferring new ones or proposing

ones that might be true. Faith allows us to use a gift given to us by God, and that is the ability to feel God's presence without having to prove it with limited, earthly conventional methods. We all have this ability. God created us in God's image – and that means that we can indeed do things that seem beyond the normal abilities of humans. That's what faith is: trusting that indeed your intuition is right. You recognize the risen Christ in your life – and you acknowledge God's presence.

I'd like to get back to Susan. She said that she was growing tired and needed to rest. I stood up to leave. But she asked me to stay just a bit longer and pray with her. I sat back down and took her hand. I asked God to fill her with calm, to free her from anxiety, to let Susan feel God's presence like never before. I asked God to make her transition to eternity calm and joyful. I told God that a dedicated believer who had gone through great suffering in her life was on her way – and that I was thankful for the opportunity to meet her. Susan mouthed the words "Thank you," and then she closed her eyes and leaned back on her pillow. I walked away as quietly as I could.

There are things in the Bible that were not meant to be literally true. God commanding Adam and Eve to not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is intended to teach us to not rely on ourselves for spiritual

guidance in life – we need God in order to walk through the world safely. There are some minor inconsistencies in the Bible, where one passage seems to conflict with another, such as the exact final words of Christ on the cross; many or most of these inconsistencies can be explained away. There are also some apparent historical conflicts; for example, it is difficult to make the birth narrative of Jesus align with dates of the censuses that were taken by Roman authorities. But the Bible is a spiritual story. It tells us about our faith. The authors of the Bible did their best, using human reason and human logic, to tell us why we should believe and what we should do with our lives once we do believe. And the biggest reason to believe is what we feel inside ourselves. And the biggest thing we feel within our hearts and minds is the risen Christ. Let's finish with a little science.

Scientists vary on how much longer they think the universe will survive. Some estimate 22 billion years. Here is a bit of Psalm 102:

*²⁵ Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

*²⁶ They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,*

²⁷ but you are the same, and your years have no end.

The Bible has one scientific fact right: the earth and the heavens will perish someday. But God and the risen Christ – their years will have no end. Amen!