
Do Not Fear!

**Rich Nathan
April 20, 2014
Easter Weekend
Matthew 28**

The Atlantic Magazine had a great cover photo on this past month's issue. The lead article was titled "The Over-Protected Kid."

Photo of the Atlantic Magazine Cover

In the photo there is a child wearing a bicycle helmet, knee protectors, and a giant pillow wrapped around his body while he holds his mother's hand. The over-protected child. The article discusses a vast amount of social science research which indicates that children today experience a great deal more adult supervision than children did 40-50 years ago. For example, even though mothers work way more hours outside the home than they did in the 1970's, mothers and fathers spend much more time with their children than they used to.

Now, that seems counter-intuitive. How could that be? When I think about my own life, my mother didn't work when I was younger, but she didn't drive me to play dates either. She didn't arrange my social calendar. She didn't drive me to swimming lessons, or hang out at the playground while I played. Most of the time my mother didn't have a clue regarding what I was doing. And neither did any of my friends' moms and dads have a clue what their kids were doing.

But when we were raising our children, Marlene and I would spend sometimes every waking hour on the weekends watching my son play baseball, or my daughter play softball or volleyball. My granddaughter is 11 and she doesn't spend a half an hour a week where an adult supervisor is not somewhere in the vicinity.

In 1971 80% of 3rd graders walked to school alone. By 1990 that number dropped to 9%. Today, if your 3rd grader walks to school alone, you would be considered the most negligent parent in America. Now almost all of us adults would say that we're just taking reasonable precautions because the world is a much more dangerous place than when we were kids. Yet, the reality is that just as the crime rate has substantially fallen over the last 30 years, so have crimes against children. Children today have the same very low chance of being abducted by a stranger, as children did a generation ago. But our perception of stranger-abduction is that the risk to our children is enormous, and our kids should not walk around the corner without calling us the moment they arrive at their friends.

Failure to supervise our kids all the time is synonymous today with a failure to be a good parent. We live at such a fearful time.

Beginning in the 1980's virtually every park and school in the country began ripping out its playground equipment because of lawsuits from kids falling off of slides, or getting hit with a teeter-totter or falling on the hard surface of dirt and asphalt. Now every playground in the country has rubberized surfaces, really boring equipment like a giant duck or a little mermaid attached to a stiff spring that a child sits on and tries desperately to rock it back and forth. The interesting thing is that emergency room visits because of injuries due to playground equipment haven't fallen that much in the last 35 years. Kids now stand on their heads on top of the giant duck.

But parents live with an extraordinary level of fear regarding dangers to their kids as the result bullying, school shootings, unsafe school buses, and sports injuries.

Every generation has faced its own set of fears. In the 1950's backyards all over America were dug up as people built fallout shelters that were supposed to protect people in the case of a nuclear war. They were crude cement block storage sheds built underground with a couple of cots and horrible crackers that were supposed to survive nuclear fallout. I still remember tasting one of those crackers as a child in the 1960's. I thought if nuclear war ever comes I'm going to starve.

There is a new book out titled What Should We Be Worried About?: Real Scenarios that Keep Scientists Up at Night.

Book Cover: What Should We Be Worried About?: Real Scenarios that Keep Scientists Up At Night

The author interviewed a couple hundred academics and intellectuals and published 150 of their answers about what the real threats to human beings are these days. One mathematician was concerned about the increasing automation of nuclear weapons; that the control systems made them vulnerable to terrorist attack. Another historian of science worried about cyber-terrorism and the economic damage that could be done by sabotages through the Internet. One scientist worried about the absolute social and economic chaos that will result from global warming as millions of people migrate from coastal areas and financial systems collapse. Of course the media drums up our fears – first, its Y2K; then the end of the world because of the Mayan Calendar, then zombies and killer viruses or zombies with killer viruses.

On and on, so much to worry about. Every generation has had its fears.

I read an article recently by a 26-year old who talked about the fears of 20-somethings. He said as a 26-year old, here are the fears that he and his friends share: Never getting

married. He said, “My top fear is that no one is ever going to love me and I am going to be alone forever.” Now that he is out of college the pool of potential mates has shrunk and he is at home on Saturday nights watching Netflix and eating Ramen noodles.

He said that he and his friends are afraid of never finding a direction in life. In the real world choosing a career seems super hard. 20-somethings fear never really getting their dream career and being stuck in a series of part-time jobs – worst of all, having to move back in with my mom and dad. Mom and Dad fear their 26-year old will move back in with them.

This weekend is Easter weekend. It is the weekend where across the globe Christians of every denomination celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. As I read over the Easter accounts that we find in the New Testament, one phrase jumped off the page this year in which first the angel and then the Risen Christ addresses some of Jesus’ followers and said to them, “Do not be afraid. Do not fear!” In a world in which parents are afraid, and ordinary people are afraid, and academics are afraid, and scientists are afraid, and 20-somethings are afraid, this Easter the Risen Christ speaks to everyone everywhere and says, “Do not fear!” That’s the title of my Easter message. Let’s pray.

Matthew 28:1–10 (NIV)

28 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

We’ll look at the particulars of this story in just a moment. But the basic assertion of all four gospels, and of the entire New Testament, that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified and died on Friday, was buried and then was resurrected from the dead on Sunday morning makes Christianity unique among all the world’s religions. As we live in a more globalized age in which religions can no longer contend that they are the only religion in the whole world, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and indeed, many of our families combine people of varying religions – Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism – what makes Christianity unique among the world’s religions?

The answer is very simple. Christianity is the only religion in the world that stands or falls on whether its founder was raised from the dead. No Buddhist claims that Buddha was raised from the dead. No Jew claims that Abraham was raised from the dead. His bones are still buried in the land of Israel. No Muslim claims that Mohammed was raised from the dead. According to their tradition, Mohammed died in 632AD at the age of 61 and his tomb is visited annually by thousands of devout Muslims as they make their pilgrimage to Medina. The bones of Confucius, Zoroaster, and Lao-Tzu are still here.

Out of every other religion in the entire world, it is only Christians who claim that the founder of their religion, Jesus of Nazareth, rose from the dead, is alive today, and is still changing people's lives.

So why would that claim make any of us fearful? Well, we fear that this whole story is just a fairytale; that if we actually became Christians, becoming a Christian simply means that you trust in Jesus, you trust in his death on the cross and his resurrection to achieve salvation for you, and have decided to become one of his followers – the great fear in trusting in Christ and choosing to become one of his followers is that you might be giving yourself to something that ultimately proves to be false. I call that:

The fear of being deluded

If you look back in history, you will see that many people have given their hearts and minds to various ideas, philosophies, and spiritualities which ultimately prove to be disastrously false. Some of you may remember the cult called Heaven's Gate which was founded by a guy named Marshall Applewhite. He and his partner, a woman named Bonnie Nettles, believed that they were the two witnesses mentioned in the New Testament book of Revelation.

Applewhite taught his followers that the earth was about to be recycled, wiped clean, and the only chance to survive the disaster that was happening was to leave planet earth. He claimed that there was a spaceship that was trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet waiting to pick up his followers. So Applewhite convinced his 38 followers to commit suicide so that their souls would be able to board this spacecraft. After their deaths, the UFO would take their souls to another level of existence. And so in 1997 the cult rented a huge mansion in a gated community in San Diego and the 38 members of the Heaven's Gate cult, plus their leader, Marshall Applewhite, were found dead in this home. They gave themselves to what ultimately proved to be a disaster and a delusion.

Recently, the press has reported about the horrible tragedy involving a woman who killed six of her children. We say, "How can that be? How could mother do that?" But this recent tragedy reminded me of a woman, who did the very same thing, back in 1945 in a bunker in Berlin, Germany. A woman named Magda Goebbels, along with her

husband, Joseph, who was the propaganda minister for the Nazis, gave their entire selves, all their hopes, all their hearts to the delusion that Adolf Hitler was the Fuhrer and that he was going to lead Germany to a 1000-year reign over planet earth.

When the Russians surrounded Berlin and it became evident that all was lost, Magda Goebbels and her husband, Joseph, huddled in a bunker below the streets of Berlin with their Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler. Magda wrote a letter saying:

The world that comes after the Fuhrer and National Socialism, is not worth living in any more. So I've decided to take the lives of my six children along with me because they are too good for the life that would follow and I must be loyal to the Fuhrer, even in death.

Now, you might be listening to this message saying to yourself, "I would never give myself entirely to what ultimately proves to be a delusion. I would never spend my life pursuing some myth, or give my life to a lie like Nazism or Heaven's Gate."

Friend, I would suggest that if we don't give ourselves to Christ, we are guaranteed to live pursuing some myth. Virtually, every single movie that is produced now, every TV show, every Reality Show, every pop song says to us that we ought to load the deepest needs of our hearts for significance, for transcendence into romance and love. If we could just find our soul mate, the one person on planet earth that we were made for, the one the movies say we spy across the room at a friend's party, the one who catches our eye in a busy restaurant, the one who just shows up at your job as a new intern or a part-time consultant – how many of us have lived by the movie and pop song myth that if we could just finally find out soul mate, then everything wrong with us would be healed and every empty place in us would be filled?

I read a story of a beautiful woman named Sally, who went from one abusive relationship with men to another – some physically abusive, some emotionally abusive, some verbally abusive. She said she always felt invisible and insignificant unless she had a man on her arm. So many people fear the pain of being alone more than they hate the pain that an abusive boyfriend or girlfriend, or addiction, or an adulterous husband or wife is causing.

One philosopher named Ernest Becker talked about the myth of romantic love that the modern Western world has given itself to over the last hundred years or so. He said:

The failure of romantic love as a solution to human problems is so much a part of modern man's [woman's] frustration...no human relationship can bear the burden of godhood...however much we may idealize and idolize the love partner, he [she] inevitably reflects earth's decay and imperfection...after all, what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to this position? We want to be rid of our faults, of our feelings of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know

our existence has not been in vain. We want redemption – nothing less. Needless to say, human partners cannot give this.

No human being, other than Jesus, can bear the burden of being God for us. So how do we know that Christianity is not just one of the other myths, the other delusions, that we give ourselves to this and it will ultimately proved to be a disaster for us? How do we know that Christianity is true?

The unusual fact of Mary Magdalene as a chief witness

All four gospels mention Mary Magdalene in particular as the first eyewitness. In Matt. 28.1,

Matthew 28:1 (NIV)

28 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

And then in verses 8-10:

Matthew 28:8–10 (NIV)

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

This is the same Mary Magdalene, who the Bible tells us had seven demons expelled from her, in Luke 8:2:

Luke 8:2 (NIV)

2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;

You know, one of the things that gives credibility to the gospel accounts is that the gospels do not gloss over or whitewash the weaknesses or embarrassing details of the lives of the early church’s leaders. Mary Magdalene has a troubled past. There is no airbrushing of the accounts. We find Peter, an early church leader and hero, denying Jesus three times. We find the apostle John, an early church leader and hero, wanting to call down lightning to destroy people that the church later on was trying to reach. We find the leaders of the early church vying for position. We find them being ambitious. We find them being fearful and faithless. We find things that the critics of Christianity would be able to use against this fledgling faith. “Look at your leaders. How can you follow people like that?” the critics said.

And yet the biographies of Jesus found in the gospels simply tells it like it is. And the reason that this story of women being the first eyewitnesses was included in the gospel accounts is because that's what happened.

And then we have the undeniable fact,

The undeniable fact of the empty tomb

Look with me at Matt 28:5-6:

Matthew 28:5–6 (NIV)

5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

The angel invited the women to look into the inner burial chamber.

Matthew 28:6 (NIV)

6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

The gospel writer, John, records that the linen cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' body was left as if Jesus had passed right through it. The handkerchief was still rolled up in the shape of a head and it was about the right distance from the wrappings that had enveloped the body. Jesus had lain in the place that the angel pointed to, but the body of Jesus was no longer there. The tomb was empty.

One of the towering legal scholars of the 20th century was Cambridge-educated, Sir Norman Anderson. He lectured at Princeton University; he was offered a professorship for life at Harvard University; he served as the Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of London. And after a lifetime of analyzing the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, Sir Norman Anderson said this:

The empty tomb, then, forms a veritable rock on which all rationalistic theories of the resurrection have dashed themselves in vain.

What he is saying is that every alternative to believing in the resurrection has to contend with this one undeniable fact of history – that the tomb of Jesus is empty! The disciples could not have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem if the tomb had not been empty.

You know, one of the most amazing facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection was that it originated in the very city where Jesus was crucified. The Christian faith did not come into existence in some distant city far from where the

eyewitnesses knew about Jesus' death and burial. It came into being in the very city where Jesus was publicly crucified under the very eyes of its enemies. And if the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection was false, then all the Jews would have had to do to nip this Christian heresy in the bud was to have dug up the corpse of Jesus, parade it through the streets for all to see, and say, "Here's your resurrected Messiah – dead – just as the Romans left him on the cross!"

And while pilgrimages are regularly made to visit John Kennedy's grave and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and Mohammed's tomb, no one in history has ever visited the tomb of Jesus believing that his body was still there.

We have the unusual fact of Mary Magdalene as a chief witness; the undeniable fact of the empty tomb.

And there is one more fact that I want to mention. We have

The indisputable fact of the birth of the church

You say, "What's significant about that?" Here is what one scholar said:

We need to remember that in the 1st century there were many other Messianic movements whose would-be messiahs were executed. However, in not one other single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero and leader had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries, whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not a Jewish option. Unless, of course, he was.

What this writer is saying is that history tells us of dozens of other messianic pretenders in ancient Israel whose lives and careers ended the same way Jesus' did. They ended up being killed. And what happened to their followers? They gave up following that leader, or they found some other movement to join.

The only group of people who did not give up following their leader after his death were the followers of Jesus. Why? What would lead the followers of Jesus to keep on following him after his crucifixion unless his crucifixion wasn't the end of the story. They kept following Jesus because they had seen him risen from the dead.

So here is the first fear that this is a fairytale or a delusion. Let me share with you a second fear that Jesus' resurrection addresses:

The fear of changing our minds

Let's read Matthew 28:17

Matthew 28:17 (NIV)

17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

It was not easy for the early followers of Jesus to move from unbelief and fear to faith and worship. Jesus' resurrection was utterly unanticipated by everyone. It wasn't like the people back in the 1st century were super-gullible and believed anything. Far from it. The gospels record that the early disciples were hesitant; that they did not understand or believe Jesus' many predictions – that he was going to be crucified and then raised from the dead. And even when they heard stories that he was raised from the dead, they still found it hard to believe even when they saw, they still struggled.

We think if we saw something that was obviously supernatural, oh well, then we would believe. We have no idea how stubborn our beliefs are and how hard it is to change our minds about anything. We can see this in the history of science, for example. Back in the early 1500s Copernicus argued that the earth and the other planets went around the sun instead of the sun and everything else going around the earth. It was called the Copernican Revolution – the sun is the center of the solar system, not the earth. It took scientists another century and research by people like Galileo, Kepler and Newton before Copernicus' ideas were universally accepted. It is hard to change your mind. And it is always an act of courage when someone does change their mind.

Back in 2007 Antony Flew, who was probably the best-known philosophical atheist of the 20th century, an Englishman trained at Oxford, Antony Flew argued for 50 years that God did not exist. But in 2007 he co-wrote a book titled There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind.

Book Cover: There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind by Antony Flew

He became convinced looking at scientific evidence that life and, indeed, the universe itself, could not exist apart from some great intelligence producing it. And in a debate with a Christian, philosopher Antony Flew conceded that the evidence for the resurrection was the most plausible explanation for what happened to Jesus. He had no credible alternative. Yet, there was no evidence that he became a Christian before he died. It is hard to completely change your mind.

One of the greatest human fears is the fear of changing your mind. Most people make a decision. They have a certain viewpoint and they will not listen to contrary opinions. We don't want to hear other perspectives, especially about things that are important to us – our families, our political leanings, our religious faith. It takes a lot of courage to be

open to adjusting our thinking, to revise prior viewpoints especially if it deals with topics as important as God.

I was raised in a Jewish home in New York City. And even though I attended synagogue and was Bar Mitzvah, from the time I was a child I believed that religion was just a crutch for the weak; that it was outdated and outmoded; that an intelligent, rational person living in the modern world would not believe in such medieval concepts as God, who wanted to have a relationship with people. I was certain that Christ was irrelevant to my life. I was certain there couldn't be any real evidence for Christianity. And that no intelligent person would ever trust their lives to Jesus.

It took a long time in talking with a Christian for me to be open to adjust my thinking, to be open to change my mind about something as radical as my relationship with God. 40 years ago this Good Friday, I changed my mind and I decided to trust my life to Jesus. 40 years ago this Easter Sunday is the first time I ever stepped foot into a church building. It is hard to change your mind.

Let me mention a third and final fear that the resurrection answers. That is:

The fear of death

As I prepared this message I thought that fear of death is such a universal fear. We spend hundreds of billions of dollars on medical treatments to keep our bodies alive, billions more on safety codes regulating every aspect of life. I thought since the fear of death is such a common fear, how do people cope with the fear of death? I decided to go the source of all wisdom and all knowledge in the 21st century – Wikipedia. And, of course it has an article about how to overcome the fear of death.

Sadly, I discovered that Wikipedia didn't offer its readers any great help or hope in overcoming our fear of death. For one example, here is their first bit of advice:

Understand that it is a cycle. People are born, people die, more people are born. Don't fear that you're being singled out, and that you have to fear death.

In other words, stuff happens! Deal with it.

Here is another bit of the deep wisdom found in Wikipedia:

Live life the way you're supposed to. Don't waste your time worrying about death. Instead, fill each day with as much joy as possible, and don't let things get you down. Go outside, play with friends, or take up a new sport.

Which, by the way, is great counsel, if you are in a nursing home – just take up a new sport!

Finally,

Just do anything that will take your mind off dying!

Swing dance, skip rope, go sky diving, get a tattoo, bury your head in the sand. Just do anything to help get your mind off the fact that one day we will die.

Now here's the difference between Wikipedia's answer to our fear of death and the answer Jesus offers. In Jesus we have God who came to earth as a true and perfect King, who chose to die on a cross to pay for my sins and for your sins, but who rose from the dead and who offers eternal life, life in his presence forever and ever to anyone who trusts in who Christ is and what he did for us. In the gospel of John, Jesus put it this way:

John 11:25–26 (NIV)

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Jesus' death means no eternal death for us. His resurrection means that we can be resurrected from the dead.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NIV)

14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

To the extent that you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and therefore, you believe that you will be one day raised from the dead along with Jesus, ushered into a new world. You have a real answer to the universal fear of death. To the extent that the message of Easter has gripped our hearts, to that extent, we can not only overcome the fear of death, but the fear of everything else that keeps us from really living today.

Why is it so hard for us to face the possibility of suffering? Why is it so hard to face the possibility of disability or a disease? Why is it so hard to face our own death, or the death of a loved one? It is so hard because many of us believe that this broken world is the only world we're ever going to have. It is easy to feel like our present possessions are the only possessions we're ever going to have, and that our bodies are the only bodies we're ever going to have. But if Jesus has risen from the dead, then the bodies that we have and the world that we know are not the only bodies and the only world we'll ever live in.

On Good Friday, the day Jesus died, it seemed to everyone looking on, it seemed to Jesus himself, that God was silent. And for many of us who have lost loved ones, or any who are facing their own deaths, it may seem in that moment that God is silent,

absolutely no where to be found. But on Easter Sunday, God broke his silence. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead means that God and not death always has the last word.

Do not fear! Jesus is raised from the dead. And those of us who trust in him get to overcome death and live with him forever.

GOSPEL CALL

I spoke today about the resurrection and how to address our fears – the fear that if we trusted in Christ and gave ourselves to him, we might be following a myth or a delusion; the fear that trusting in Christ might require us to change our mind about something that is very hard for us to do.

I want to mention one other fear because in a moment I'm going to ask some of you to stand and to indicate by standing that you are prepared to trust in Christ and to become one of his followers. The fear that you are going to need to overcome, friends, is the fear of giving up control. As you are listening to me today, you may say that as much as you can, you believe that the message of Easter is true; that Christ was raised from the dead. But you haven't joined up, so to speak. You haven't taken the plunge because you haven't wanted to give up control of your life to Christ. You know it is something you should do, something you need to do, but you've hesitated, you've held back. You are afraid of completely surrendering your life to Christ.

The truth is, friends, we are not big enough or wise enough to fully manage our lives, or the world around us. We're not created to control our little corners of the world. We've been made to live life under God's control. Life goes so much better when we simply say to God, "I'm tired of trying to control all the little details of my life. I'm going to turn my out of control life over to your control. I'm going to surrender."

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Rich Nathan
April 20, 2014
Easter Weekend
Matthew 28

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- C. The indisputable fact of the birth of the church

II. The fear of changing our minds

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