Introduction
Thank you for inviting me to speak here tonight. As some of you know, my wife and I were students here at Lawrence and we were both participants in LCF, which often met right here in this room. It’s good to be here again, and I’m honored to have the opportunity to speak to you.

When Laura and Paris suggested the topic for discussion — “Who is Jesus, and why should we follow him?” — I was immediately both delighted and terrified. I was delighted because it is a topic I had been recently thinking and reading about, and I was terrified because it is certainly “no small potatoes.” So it is with enthusiasm and trepidation that I dive in.

About Jesus
There is very little debate about these facts:
- Jesus was a Jewish man who lived in Palestine in the early first century.
- He had a small group of followers and was sort of a freelance religious leader.
- He was renowned as a teacher and was reported by some to have been a healer and even a miracle worker.
- He ran afoul of the authorities and was executed.
- After his death, his followers made extraordinary claims about him, in particular that he had risen from the dead and had empowered them with his spirit to continue his religious movement. This movement grew into what we call Christianity.

At this point, I’ve told you some facts about who Jesus was. And I suppose we could stop there, except the title of this talk is “Who is Jesus?” not “Who was Jesus?” The word “is” implies a present tense. This present tense is what his followers reported in the days shortly after his death, that Jesus was in fact alive, and appeared to many of them. As Paul noted in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, NASB)

His followers began to understand that Jesus was who he said he was: the Son of God, the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a savior to the world. And shortly thereafter, his followers experienced the pouring out of his spirit, so that he was in some mysterious way living within them. Remarkably, Christians today report the same experience.

My Faith
At this point, let me tell you why I am a Christian. When I was in high school, I went on a retreat aimed at both skeptics and believers. It was sort of a “fact-finding mission” on my part, as I wanted to find out “what this God stuff was all about.” Up to that point, I had gone to church
with my parents, had attended youth group meetings, and had even taken a Bible history class in school. I knew a lot about Christianity, but for the most part, it didn’t have any real impact on my life. And, I have to say, questions about the meaning of life — Why are we on this earth? What is the point of our living? — were disturbingly on my mind.

At the retreat, there were a number of interesting and intelligent talks about Christianity, and I met a number of other high school and college students who were Christians. Much to my surprise, they didn’t seem like religious “nut cases.” In fact, they seemed to be genuine in an unexpected way.

Over the course of the retreat, various aspects of Christianity were explained, with the focus being, like this talk, on the person of Jesus. There’s a passage in Matthew’s gospel where Jesus says:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, NIV)

I was definitely seeking. But over the course of the week, I began to feel that someone was knocking on my door, that I was being gently nudged toward God by a force unseen. After dinner one evening, I asked one of the leaders, “What’s next?” Together we prayed, and essentially, I opened the door to God.

I remember very distinctly, the next day, I knew everything had changed. Somehow, the world looked completely different. Life seemed to have new purpose and meaning. And somehow, I felt God’s spirit was within me. All of a sudden, passages in the Bible seemed to jump off the page with meaning — and not just abstract theological meaning; they seemed to have relevance to my daily life. And strangely enough, prayer didn’t seem like just a reciting of words, but was now a two-way conversation. And this experience has continued for me to this day.

Many of you may have had a similar experience. For others, you may not know a specific point in time when you had an experience of God — it may have just seemed to happen over a period of time. Some of you may not know a time when you haven’t felt God’s presence in your life. And some of you may still be seeking.

**What Do Christians Believe?**

So, what do Christians actually believe? What is the essence of Christianity? Christians believe that:

- There is a God who created all things, including us.
- We humans rebelled against God, choosing to go our own way, throwing the creation out of sorts and leaving us estranged from God.
- In order to restore our relationship with him, God sent prophets and teachers to lead us back toward him; but ultimately, he sent his Son “to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, [and] to reconcile us to [God].” (*The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], p. 362).
This is the essence of Christianity, in a nutshell. There is much more that goes along with it, but it all follows from these elements. Of course, you may have heard things just like this before — as part of a statement of faith, or as part of words recited in a church service. In fact, the last bit that I just said — “to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, [and] to reconcile us to [God]” — is from the prayer book of the Episcopal Church.

It’s interesting to note how this outline of Christianity is repeated in our own lives, and you can see it in my story as well; how I was estranged from God and out of sorts, searching for meaning, and how God reached out and reconciled me to himself through Jesus. And it’s also interesting to note how this pattern is, in some way, repeated each and every day, because it seems to be inherent in our nature to want to go our own way instead of God’s way, even when we have come to understand that God’s way fulfills the deepest desires of our hearts.

**What Christianity Is Not**

Let’s step back a moment. When we are trying to define something, sometimes it helps to clarify what it is not. So, let’s look at some misconceptions that people have about Christianity.

**It’s Not a Political Movement**

In recent years, Christianity has been tied to a number of political issues, and many candidates for office have tied themselves to Christianity in search of votes. I believe it is important for a Christian to be engaged in the political process, but in many cases, the attempt to turn Christian ideals into specific policies creates more diversity of opinion than we would expect. In other words, Christians come down on many sides of a variety of different issues.

If you were going to set out to create a Christian government, what might it be? Would you look to the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles as a guide and form a collective community, with no private ownership? Or, would you create a monarchy, with the king or queen acting as God’s earthly representative? Both these wildly divergent governmental models have been justified as being Christian in the past. And history has shown that power wielded in the name of Christianity is susceptible to all the pitfalls of power wielded for any other reason.

So, Christians should debate political issues in the secular forum and also debate those issues among themselves, yet remember to respect divergent points of view. The fact is, no matter what I think about a particular political issue, there are other sincere, thoughtful, and prayerful Christians coming up with different answers. So, keep debating, but don’t forget what our primary focus is, Jesus. And remember, we are charged with a duty to pray for those with whom we might disagree.

**It’s Not Just a Set of Rules for Behavior (i.e., Moralism)**

Christianity is often viewed from the outside as being a set of rules — a set of “Thou shalt not’s.” And certainly, following Jesus will have far-reaching implications for our behavior. But you don’t need to be a Christian to hold a well-defined set of ethical or moral values. The difference is that Christianity proposes that “doing the right thing” is not simply fulfilling a social contract, or even fulfilling a concept of personal honor. Instead, doing the right thing is ultimately about our relationship with God.
There’s a fascinating story in the Old Testament, in the book of Genesis, that tells how Joseph had been taken as a slave to Egypt and how he became a trusted servant of Potiphar, his Egyptian master. In fact, Joseph had become so trusted that he was essentially left in charge when his master was away. As we pick up the story, it sounds like an episode from “Desperate Housewives”:

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, “Come to bed with me!”

But he refused. “With me in charge,” he told her, “my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. (Genesis 39: 6b-10, NIV)

We can see how Joseph viewed this potential adultery as not primarily a betrayal of his master, but as a betrayal of God. This is what Christians mean when they talk about sin — certainly, a “loaded” word. If I do something to hurt someone else, certainly I’ve hurt that person and I’ve probably hurt myself, though in the short run, the sin may be to my advantage. But Judeo-Christian thought, as shown in the story of Joseph, has always been that an offense against someone else is also an offense against God; in fact, it is first an offense against God. Therefore, to have this offense made right, to have it be forgiven, will require God’s forgiveness. And this is what upset the religious establishment in Jesus’ day, the fact that he forgave sins. How could Jesus forgive sins, unless he was God?

**It’s Not a Social Club**

Although an important part of the Christian life is coming together with other Christians to worship, support each other, pray, do charitable works, etc., the principal business of following Jesus is a relationship between a Christian or group of Christians and God. I still have very good friends who I met through LCF during my time here at Lawrence. At the heart of those friendships was not what we had in common on a normal social basis but rather the way each of us was seeking to follow Jesus individually and collectively. In other words, there was always someone else — namely, God — around which the friendship revolved.

Here’s what Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor…. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12: 27, 12, 21-26, NIV)
It seems to be our natural tendency to socialize with people just like us. But in the church — and by the church, I mean the worldwide community of Christians — those natural distinctions are overridden through the presence of God’s spirit.

**It’s Not a Self-Help Program**

I was once talking to a young man who was considering becoming a Christian, and he said he thought that Christianity might be something that could help him; something that could be a “good addition” to his life. I remember being somewhat taken aback, because he seemed to see Christianity as something to add to his resume, or maybe it would be a good habit to adopt, sort of like eating right and getting exercise. The fact is, Christianity is either true or not true — it can’t be “sort of” true or “sort of” good for you. So, following Jesus isn’t something you do to make yourself better.

That said, if you become a Christian, look out. God is not looking to make a few improvements here or there. He’s going for the extreme makeover. In fact, he wants us to become like his Son — perfect in all things. And let me tell you, the road to perfection can be a bumpy ride. Or let me put it this way, there’s a lot of baggage that needs to be thrown off the bus.

Take a look sometime at the gospel of Matthew, beginning with chapter 5. This passage, known as the Sermon on the Mount, includes some of the most stunning and radical thoughts ever written down. Right in the middle of the sermon, Jesus says:

> You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5: 43-45, NIV)

This is the ideal of perfection to which Jesus calls us. Can you imagine what our world would be like if all of humanity practiced this kind of love? Love so often is a cheap word, not much more than a sentiment. But the kind of love Jesus is talking about is love that comes with a price, and the price is forgiveness; God forgiving us and likewise our forgiveness of others.

**Common Objections to Christianity**

At this point, some of you may be thinking, “This is all well and good, but….” Let’s now talk about some common objections to Christianity.

**“Half-a-Brain”**

A common critique of Christianity, one that is currently in vogue, is one I’ll call the “half-a-brain” critique — in other words, if you have half a brain, there’s no way you’d be a Christian. You can’t be smart and be a Christian at the same time. This critique just won’t fly. Throughout history, there have been countless highly intelligent people who call themselves followers of Jesus, and the same is true today. In fact, there are many very smart people in this room who are Christians. Granted, there are many very intelligent people who aren’t Christians. And it should be said there are plenty of “not-too-smart” people on both sides. The fact is, there are many claims of Christianity that are quite improbable intellectually unless its central claim is true — that Jesus is alive today in the hearts of those who call him Lord.
Fabrications

Another objection to Christianity is an argument that the stories about Jesus were essentially fabrications by early church leaders in support of their various agendas. This approach has been espoused by a number of authors in what has been loosely called the search for the “historical” Jesus. It’s important to remember that the Bible was not written to be journalism, or even what we might call a history. The books of the New Testament were written principally to be instruction and encouragement to those who were already Christians or were considering becoming Christians.

Nonetheless, despite diversity in approach and style as well as diversity in the material presented in each of the books of the New Testament, the central theme is consistent throughout, from the earliest writings to the last — that Jesus came to bring new life to all people through his death and resurrection. This counterargument is made in detail in Luke Timothy Johnson’s The Real Jesus, a book I highly recommend on this topic.

“Jesus Was a Good Teacher”

It’s often said, “Sure, Jesus was a great teacher, but he was simply a good person whose example we should try to follow.” The gospels report that, little by little, Jesus began to reveal his divine identity to his disciples, and his enemies saw his claims to be God as blasphemy. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, Mere Christianity, we have to either take Jesus’ claims seriously or conclude he was psychotic.

Of course, some of his enemies questioned his sanity. In this passage from the gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus says:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life — only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?” But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (John 10: 14-21, NIV)

You can see why some of Jesus’ listeners would be dismayed. This is a complex passage, rich in imagery. Jesus is the shepherd; we are the sheep. And here Jesus predicts not only his death, but also his resurrection, and identifies himself as the Son of God. But clearly, many found that Jesus’ good works, in this case the healing of a blind man, gave his words unique credibility. So, we can’t simply call him a good teacher. And this point would be academic, but for the resurrection. If Jesus is here today, to be experienced in our lives, then we have to take these claims seriously.
The “Crutch” Theory
Another argument goes like this: “God is fine for you, if you need him.” This is what I like to call the “crutch” theory. I have a friend who once said to me, “I don’t really want to become a Christian, because I want to make it on my own.” In other words, he was afraid that relying on God would mean admitting defeat, as if he had failed in life. I don’t think my friend understood that we all have already failed to live up to God’s standards.

Just this past Sunday in church, there was a funny typo in the service program — just before we sang the Agnus Dei (“Lamb of God, have mercy on us”), there was the instruction for us to “All sing” — but the final “g” in “sing” was missing, so it read “All sin.” A typo, but still a true theological statement. We all sin — so let’s get over it!

The other thing my friend didn’t quite understand was that God doesn’t want to override our personalities. Instead, he wants us to become like Jesus, to be fully sons and daughters of God. It’s as if without God, we’re in the shadows, our true personality obscured; but with God, we are fully illuminated by his presence. As Jesus said in the gospel of John, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10: 10b, NIV)

“If God Exists, Why…?”
Finally, an objection that is almost universal: If God exists, why is the world such a mess? I think this is as much an emotional critique as it is an intellectual argument, along the lines of, “If God exists, he or she is doing a pretty lousy job.”

There’s no doubt that our world is a mess. A casual glance at any newspaper on any given day will demonstrate that we humans do horrible things to each other on an appalling scale. And natural calamities and disease demonstrate the fragility of our existence. I realize I am wading into deep waters now — many philosophers and theologians have grappled with these issues. I imagine all of us have pondered these things with less than satisfactory results. There are no easy answers here.

Let’s go back to our list of things that Christians believe. Remember, Christianity states that something IS terribly wrong with the world — that not only does each of us need to be rescued by God, to be made new again, but likewise so does all of creation. This brings us back to Jesus, who has begun this process of renewal, one person at a time.

I have a friend, a youth minister, who likes to say, “Life is pain — anyone who tells you different is trying to sell you something.” Clearly, life is more than pain — it is full of joy and friendship and love, and all manner of good things, but my friend is right in that all of us will suffer heartbreak and loss at one time or another. I can’t tell you why God doesn’t prevent all of this from happening, but I can tell you that the Jesus of the New Testament is not just the teacher, the wise man, the healer, the miracle worker. He is also the suffering Jesus, who knows our agony and distress. And he is the resurrected Jesus, in whom the creation will ultimately be made new.

This gets us back to our central theme: Jesus resurrected. If Jesus is not alive and present to us through his spirit, we might as well pack up the guitars, put away the songbooks, and go home.
Christians have understood this from the very beginning. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, “… if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith.” (I Corinthians 15:14, NIV)

Conclusion

So, who is Jesus? And why should we follow him? Jesus is alive, and he wants us to be alive in him. He is our teacher, he is our healer, he is our companion. He is our forgiveness and our reconciliation. There’s a great gospel/bluegrass song called “Green Pastures,” by H.W. VanHoosen. The lyrics pick up on the theme of Jesus as the good shepherd, and the second verse provides in many ways a summary of our discussion tonight:

Those who have strayed were sought by The Master
He who once gave His life for the sheep
Out on the mountain still He is searching
Bringing them in forever to keep

It is we who have strayed, and it is Jesus who is the “Master,” who sought us and gave his life for us. “Out on the mountain” is where we are — out in the world, lost and in danger — and it is Jesus who is still searching, bringing in those who are lost, “forever to keep.”

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— Stephen McCardell